

The drinking cups of the Civil War era varied in size (and capacity), construction, handle style and method of handle attachment. Dozens of varieties attributed to Civil War use or lineage are displayed in the holdings of many museums and private collections. Many more such cups are pictured in the "posing with eatables" images so popular during the war. These images and artifact cups give us a good cross-section of what were typically a) available and, more importantly, b) actually in use at the time.

Tin cups of the period appear to be uniformly made of a light gauge tinned iron. The thin gauge iron sheeting was first hot-dipped in tin, then the stock rolled between rollers. Cups were made by cutting out patterned pieces from the metal stock and formed by hammering. The rim of the cup was finished with a wired edge (for looks and strength) or simply a hemmed edge. The body of the cup was gently hammered with a mallet around a cylinder of wood of desired diameter called a "mandrel." Once the desired diameter was achieved, the body was closed with a grooved seam. The bottom of the cup was "turned down" by hammer strokes on the edge of a mandrel until a uniform "lip" of about 1/8 to 1/4 inch was formed. The body of the cup was inserted inside the lip of the bottom and soldered. Additional solder was usually added to the outside of the grooved seam. Every original cup examined by this author showed the handle placed over or adjacent to this side seam. Handles could be elaborate affairs with wired edges (which attached to the rim of the cup and finished with tinner's rivets) or simple hemmed edges hammered into a "C" or half-teardrop shape and attached with solder, with or without rivets. In all, a tin cup involved about twenty separate steps in its construction.

The vast majority of tin cups attributed to the Civil War era have similar features: flat bottoms with a lipped portion of 1/8 to 1/4 inch soldered to the body of the cup, hemmed or wired rims, and hemmed or wired handles attached with solder and/or rivets and/or wire. Without being overly dogmatic, the evidence strongly suggests that cups with a "crimped" bottom closure (similar to today's modern tin cans and inexpensive reproduction tin cups) suggest post-war manufacture. Even common tin cans and other containers excavated from Civil War sites bear the lipped end closure typical of the period. [8]

The lowly tin cup was frequently mentioned in letters, diaries, and journals. Such cups, unadulterated by bails, lids, spouts and the like were known as "dippers." Dippers thus improved as indicated became known as "boilers."

The variety of dippers available for issue and issued was diverse. So much so that one must toss off modern notions of uniformity and government "patterns" for this item of issue, and conclude that there really was no such thing as a standard "issue" dipper. The utility of this item was more important than uniformity of issue.

An examination of dippers in both collections and in images suggests a trend towards two general sizes: a large size averaging about 4 1/2 inches high by 4 1/2 inches in diameter (a capacity of between 28 and 30 ounces); and a smaller cup ranging from 2 1/8 inches high by 3 inches in diameter (a capacity of about a gill) to 3 inches high by 4 inches in diameter (holding about 16 ounces). From an examination of the photographic images, one gets the sense that the smaller

cup was prevalent earlier in the war, with the larger cup evident afterwards. Make no mistake—either cup would be correct for nearly any early-late war impression. Every tin cup examined by this author was made from a moderate gauge tinned iron or, which "gave" slightly under pressure from one hand. Handles generally consisted of hemmed or wire-reinforced pieces formed in a graceful half-teardrop or "C" pattern. These observations encompass a general range of commonly issued cups.

Many other variations are known. A few are worthy of note due to their provenance. One dipper, attributed to First Lieutenant Willis P. Clarke, 13th Wisconsin features an unusual "u-bolt" shaped handle of moderate size. This cup is also pictured in an image of soldiers of the 12th Wisconsin, suggesting that this 20 oz. capacity cup may have been available from state sources. Another cup attributed to a Private Garthwaithe in the 13th Wisconsin shows a hemmed handle formed in a complete circle, then attached to the cup body with solder and a single rivet. Examples of this cup in a mess chest pictured in *Echoes of Glory: Uniforms and Equipment of the Union*, p. 225 suggests that if this dipper was indeed issued to Private Garthwaithe, it was obtained through purchases from commercial sources — a common practice during the Civil War. Still another variant included a cup with tapered sides, and a wired handle riveted only at the top, leaving the bottom of the handle open. Much speculation has surrounded this ancient forerunner of the "Sierra Cup"—one maker opined that the handle was constructed in this way to save labor and materials. One such example has been identified to Private R. Smith of Company A, 52nd Massachusetts, who reportedly came into the cup late in his military career. A similar style cup is seen in the hand of the corporal in *Echoes of Glory: Uniforms and Equipment of the Union*, p. 224. During the battle of Resaca, Georgia, Lieutenant Colonel Enos O. Fouratt, 33rd New Jersey lost his cup — one of the same style as Private Smith's. The dipper was later uncovered during an archaeological investigation. [9]

The quest for durability has caused several of today's makers of period reproduction cups to use a gauge of tinplate that is markedly heavier than that seen in the originals. Another departure from artifact cups is the tendency to form the handles in the shape of an enormous "u-bolt" (quite unlike Captain Clarke's cup) or a "] " half-square rather than the graceful half-teardrop or "C" shape that is commonly seen on dozens of dippers of known American Civil War provenance. It is suggested that cups with the crimped style bottom attachment, and cups bearing enameled, be generally avoided by living history enthusiasts. The subject of enameled cups has been covered elsewhere, and need not be repeated here.

"Boilers" described a large category of dippers modified or improved either in the field or at the time of manufacture. One common adaptation was to punch two small holes on either side of the cup, insert the ends of a length of wire from the outside of the vessel into the cup, then bend the ends up to form loops, thereby forming a bail. Bail tabs riveted to the cup were a common improvement; the Peter Keck cup serves as an example. [10] Further improvements such as domed lids were also seen. The most prevalent type seems to be the domed lid without a lift ring, as evidenced by the Daniel Heydan cup. [11]

A very popular cup in the hobby recently was the full rig with bail tabs, wire bail, and domed lid with a "D" lift ring.

Known as a "billie", there is disagreement as to Civil War availability and usage of this particular style of boiler. One possible example appears in an image of William Wyatt of the 117th Illinois, where what looks like a "billie"-style boiler with lid hangs from his haversack. Upon close examination, the vessel appears to lack a bail and might actually have a spout attachment. The lid may be tied closed with some string. [12]

Perhaps a more common type of boiler was one used by Private Edward P. Bridgman, Company G, 37th Massachusetts from 1862 to 1865. Now in the collection of the Wisconsin Veteran's Museum, Madison, this boiler is essentially a huge tinned iron cup of 40 oz. capacity, a large wired and riveted handle, with a wire bail inserted through holes punched on either side of the cup, under the rim.

One piece of army expedient that should not be overlooked was the simple "old tomato can" remembered by Lieutenant Pierson of the 33rd New Jersey. [13] These quiet, unglamorous boilers frequently found their way into soldier accounts. During the Antietam campaign, Lieutenant Matthew J. Graham of the 9th New York appeased his hunger "with a conglomeration of stuff, the chief ingredient of which was green corn--a tomato can nearly full of it..." [14] Private Elisha Stockwell of the 14th Wisconsin stated that "when on the march, each man had his coffee and a little pail made from an oyster can with a wire bail of our own make..." [15] And Lieutenant Seymour Thompson of the 3rd Iowa recorded the habits of "the old soldier on the march" by observing that "outside his haversack hangs all that is left of some merry oyster supper—a small tin can with a wire bail coffee pot." [16]

These accounts and others strongly suggest that far less custom-made, private purchase boilers, and far more tin cans with wire bails should be represented among authentically minded re-enactors. Those condensed milk cans with correct lipped (not crimped) end closures that used to grace supermarkets these days are but a recent memory... so almost no modern "tin" can will suffice for our purposes. Happily, a few purveyors of reproduction tinware also include a limited selection of tin "cans" of about the right size. The purchaser can easily punch his own holes with the point of a bayonet or a cut nail, then add some wire for a bail. One maker, The Village Tinsmith, even provides the punched holes and wire bail attached!

Now don't throw away your dipper if you've decided to use a tin can boiler! The boys poured off, or "strained" their coffee into their dippers, leaving the grounds (most of them, anyway!) behind in the cans. [17] Certainly you can continue boiling your coffee directly in your plain dipper--until it is of such sable hue as to perhaps earn the scorn of civilians, just like it did 135 years ago! It seems there was a "Quaker-dressed gray haired matron" who, with her two daughters, was handing out water to thirsty New York soldiers out of "wonderfully bright, clean pails." One soldier darted towards them and "was in the act of dipping a cup of water from one of the pails; when the old lady with a horrified scream, sprang forward and caught hold of his arm, saying... "Lizzie! Lizzie! Don't let that man spoil your pail of nice clean water with that horrid nasty black cup!" [18]

Several dippers and a boiler mentioned in this article: the Captain Clarke dipper, the Private Smith dipper, and the Private Bridgman boiler are available from the Museum Store at the Wisconsin Veteran's Museum, 30 West Mifflin Street, Madison, WI 53703, and (608) 267-1799, and on the Internet:

<http://badger.state.wi.us/agencies/dva/museum/gsform.html>

Each is a faithful replica of the original artifact, rendered in hot-dipped tin and correct construction techniques of the period. In fact, if liquid levels are not kept up in these containers when used over a campfire, the tin coating will sag and slough where unprotected by liquid, just as it did on the originals — like Captain Clarke's dipper. Please contact the museum for a list of current prices.

RB

Notes:

1. Arthur J. Robinson, *Memorandum and Anecdotes of the Civil War*, p. 25.
2. John D. Billings, *Hardtack and Coffee*, p. 25.
3. Larry M. Strayer and Richard A. Baumgartner, *Echoes of Battle: The Atlanta Campaign*, p. 99.
4. John W. Deforest, *A Volunteer's Adventures*, p. 74.
5. *Daily Wisconsin*, May 21, 1861.
6. Alan D. Gaff, *If This is War*, p. 73. Many large cups surveyed by the author ranged in capacity from around 28 oz. to 30 oz. A quart is 32 oz.
7. Charles J. LaRocca, *This Regiment of Heroes*, p. 7.
8. For a quick view of artifact tin cans, see Francis A. Lord's *Civil War Collector's Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2, p. 56 (hereafter cited as "Lord").
9. 12th Wisconsin image courtesy of Stephan Osman Collection; Garthwaithe cup courtesy of the Milton Historical Society, Milton, Wisconsin; Paul Hedren, "Army Tincups on the Western Frontier," *Military Collector and Historian*, Vol. XLIV, No. 2, Summer, 1992, p. 57; Charles S. Harris, *Civil War Relics of the Western Campaigns*, p. 213. Lieutenant Colonel Fouratt's cup bore the scratched initials "E. O. S." on the bottom and was found at the approach of the 33rd N. J. toward some Confederate earthworks on the Resaca battlefield.
10. Lord, Vol. 1, p. 167.
11. Lord, Vol. 1, p. 168.
12. Bell I. Wiley and Hirst D. Milhollen, *They Who Fought Here*, p. 14. But see Harris' *Civil War Relics of the Western Campaigns*, p. 68, which shows a boiler lid with a "D" lift ring and a "V"-shaped hinge piece—all very similar to those seen on "billies." Mr. Harris in his caption described the lid as being from a "coffee pot," but the lid could well be from a private purchase boiler.
13. Larry M. Strayer and Richard A. Baumgartner, *Echoes of Battle: The Atlanta Campaign*, p. 99.
14. Matthew J. Graham, *The Ninth Regiment New York Volunteers*, p. 283.
15. Byron R. Abernethy, *Private Elisha Stockwell Sees the Civil War*, p. 88.
16. Seymour D. Thompson, *Recollections of the Third Iowa Regiment*, p. 349.
17. Sergeant Austin C. Stearns, Co. K, 13th Massachusetts wrote in his *Three Years with Company K*, p. 98, that when some new recruits arrived in the 13th, the Chaplain "seeing the recruits had nice clean dippers, warned them that if they wanted to keep them, they must keep their eyes open all the time, for if there was one thing that a 13th man envied, or wished to get possession of, it was a nice clean dipper. The warning was not wholly without results, for on one occasion I tried to borrow one to strain my coffee in..." Sergeant Stearns was not successful in his attempt, and latter confessed his intentions to the new recruit whose cup he tried to purloin.
18. Charles H. Weygant, *History of the 124th New York State Volunteers*, pp. 168-9.

Other sources of dippers and boilers:

Village Tinsmithing Works,	Patrick Cunningham, Tinner
Bill Hoover	1034 Park Ave.
PO Box 539	Madison, IN 47250
Hamptonville, NC 27020	(812) 273-4193
(336) 468-1190	