

We Drank From the Same Canteen?

Christopher Daley

While Federal reenacting units look smart marching in Dress Parade with kersey blue canteens and white cotton straps, it is doubtful that many original Civil War companies were accoutered in this manner.

Journals, letters, and memoirs of many veterans of the Civil War downplay the importance of the canteen and question the necessity of being issued one. These sources frequently mention that tin cups were used more efficiently than canteens. However, since every reenactor needs to carry a canteen for safety reasons, it is essential that this piece of equipment be analyzed in order for it to be accurately reproduced.

In a recent issue of *The Watchdog*, the publishers expressed their view on the use of stainless steel canteens by reenactors. To further enhance the campaign against their use, if one of the stainless steel canteens is measured and compared to the specifications prescribed in the *Quartermaster's Manual*, you will find that these reproductions are considerably larger than either the originals or the conventional tin reproductions. Of the tin reproduction M1858 canteens found on the market, the majority are close enough to the proper measurements that it is unnoticeable to the eye.

While the size and shape of the tin reproductions are accurate, there are three aspects of the M1858 canteen that should be examined to determine the authenticity of reproductions: the covering, the sling, and the cork attachment.

The Cloth Covering of the M1858

Both the *United States Army Rules and Regulations* and *The Quartermaster's Manual* specify that the M1858 be covered in a coarse, cheap, woolen cloth or heavy cotton fabric. However, neither volume states the actual color, weight, nor weave of the fabric to be used.

In actuality, only 2% of surviving M1858 canteens observed by this writer have kersey blue covers on them. The majority of the coverings are brown jean cloth. The weave and weight of the wool are both heavier and tighter than that found on reproductions, which normally have 12 ounce wool on the outside.

In 1861 the War Department altered the trouser color from federal dark to kersey blue due to a shortage of the former color. However, manufacturers could not spare thousands of yards of greatcoat and trouser colored wool for canteen coverings. Alternative fabrics were preferred and extensively used. Burlap, old socks, and army blankets became viable substitutes for the much-needed and more expensive kersey blue material. The Quartermaster Department also had contracts

with several makers in the North to recover and reseal old canteens.

The M1858 Sling

The M1858 was originally designed to be used with a russet leather sling. The sling was to be six feet long and have a buckle. At the start of the Civil War, manufacturers of the M1858 began to use cotton or linen slings as substitutes. These straps were also to be six feet long. The leather slings were in use predominantly until the winter of 1863, when the Quartermaster Department realized that the leather slings, after becoming wet, would stretch and split. Although manufacturers still produced leather slings for the M1858, the cotton webbing or linen slings were more reliable.

Many alternatives were used instead of the issue straps, including rubber and a combination of leather and cotton. In the field substitutes for lost or defective slings were old suspenders and heavy string. NOTE: Although there were black leather slings used during the war, russet was the color prescribed by the Quartermaster Department for leather slings.

Cork Attachment for the M1858

The original specifications for the cork attachment called for a brass chain. This evolved into a tin chain by the start of the war. By the end of the war the Quartermaster Regulations called for four pieces of cotton twine twisted together, 20 inches long, and doubled over. Of the M1858 canteens that survive, few have the brass chains. The tin chains and twine attachments apparently were issued equally. This does not account for tin chains being replaced by string. Leather shoe laces also provided an excellent substitute, and many photographs suggest that the M1858 canteens had no attachment at all.

SURVEY OF M1858 CANTEENS

Using artifacts found in recent publications on the subject and in museums in Gettysburg and Washington, D.C., I have surveyed forty-five M1858 canteens, with the following results:

Types of Canteens surveyed

Smooth Side	28
Bulls Eye	17

CANTEEN COVERING

Brown Jean	20
Grey Jean	6
No Cover	6
Federal Blue	5
Kersey Blue	3
Federal Issue Blanket	2
Burlap	1
Leather	1
Wool Sock	1

SLING

White or off white	25
Leather	8
No sling	6
Suspenders	1
Red cloth	1
Vulcanized Gutta Percha	1
Rubber with a cloth cover	1
Cloth & leather	1

CORK ATTACHMENT

Tin	15
No chain	14
Twine	11
Brass	4
Leather shoe lace	2

This survey not only allows us to see what has survived the war, but gives us some ideas on how to improve the impressions of Civil War reenacting units. Usually the term "authentic" in the reenacting community translates into "expensive." This is one aspect of every reenactor's impression that can be improved inexpensively. The author's suggestion: buy two square feet of a jean or coarse woolen material, use the old cover as a pattern, and recover your canteen. The next time your canteen sling breaks, don't run to the merchant with your wallet, improvise. Patch the sling or use an old pair of suspenders. When your cork chain rusts through, find some twine.

Late War Specifications

CANTEEN: two semi-spherical plates of XX tin corrugated and strongly soldered together at their edges; 7 5/8 inches in diameter, three tin loops 1 inch wide and 1/4 inch deep, well and securely soldered on the edge of the canteen, for the carrying strap to pass through, one of these loops

fixed to the bottom and the other two at a distance of 4 inches each, measured from the outside of the mouth piece of nozzle; mouth-piece cylindrical, of hard white metal, 7/8 of an inch in diameter, edged over at the top, strongly soldered on and secured to the canteen. To contain three pints.

VELVET CORK: to fit the mouth piece, 1 1/4 inches long and capped on top with tin, through the center of which extends a galvanized iron wire, 1/8 of an inch in diameter, with a loop at the top, 7/8 of an inch diameter (inside), secured at the bottom of the cork by a galvanized or white metal washer and screw nut.

ATTACHMENT: to the loop of the cork wire and one of the loops of the canteen, should be a strong piece of cotton or linen twine, made with 4 threads, hard twisted, 20 inches long and doubled together to prevent the loss of the cork.

COVERING: A coarse cheap woolen or woolen and cotton fabric.

SLING: to be of leather with a buckle or made of linen or cotton doubled over and seamed at the edges or else of cotton or linen webbing, 3/4 inches wide and 6 feet long.

WEIGHT: 11 ounces.

Sources

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