

“Inventory of Effects”

A Brief Examination of the Effects of Deceased Soldiers from a Western Theater Federal Regiment

Archaeological investigation, documents, and relics all help the historian in assembling the past. These same tools serve the progressive reenactor in assembling or modifying uniforms and equipage that closely approximates the American Civil War era.

Often-overlooked tools are inventories of household belongings and effects made at the time of a person's death. Several inventories made after the death Lord Botetourt greatly assisted investigators with a reconstruction of the “Governor's Palace” at the Colonial Williamsburg restoration. Other historic restorations have enjoyed success through the use of this model. More recently, authors and progressive reenactors have employed a similar tool in discerning the effects of the common Federal soldier at Gettysburg through analysis of Mr. Samuel Weaver's “List of Articles,”— a compilation of the effects of deceased soldiers as presented by Mr. Weaver to the Cemetery Association at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Reenactors have used a study of this list to modify their impressions, based on those articles actually recovered from the persons of Federal soldiers killed at Gettysburg.

This model clearly serves the reenactor focused on the mid-war Federal soldier in the Eastern Theater. However, does this model compare to the experience of the Federal soldiers in other theaters? Do similar inventories exist for comparison? What models can Western Theater progressive reenactors use? Or is the Gettysburg model sufficient?

Happily, research conducted by Mr. Michael Thorson in 1996 began to shed light on these questions. While researching Wisconsin regiments in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Mr. Thorson uncovered documents entitled “Inventory of Effects for Deceased Soldiers” for the Thirty-third Wisconsin Volunteer infantry regiment. His findings follow a regiment, not through the course of a single battle, but over several months and years of the regiment's service. The records indicate an interesting cross-section of possessions and equipage carried by soldiers in one Western Theater regiment.

Some five months into the regiment's service, the Thirty-third Wisconsin was encamped near the railroad junction at Moscow, Tennessee. Winter of 1862-3 was in full swing, and circumstances deemed the soldiers be quartered in what they described as “wretched shelter tents.” Many died from disease. Several soldiers from Company B were among the fatalities. Clerks inventoried their effects as follows:

Private Joseph Sanborn: one pocket knife, one pair infantry pants [“worn,” meaning worn by the deceased at the time of death], one sack coat (worn), one vest (worn), one overcoat (worn), one pair infantry pants, one pair cotton shirt (new), one pair cotton drawers (new), one pair socks (new), one needle book containing \$.13 postage, one gold pen with silver extension holder, one pocket map, one Testament.

Private Joseph Cape: one flannel shirt, two pairs shoes, one razor strop & brush, one linen towel, one glove (brush), one cotton kerchief, one hymn book, one Testament, one plate and stencil brush, one pen holder and steel pen, one needle book, one pocket comb, one inkstand, one pocket looking glass, one part money [denomination unknown], one overcoat, one blacking brush, one nat [?].

Private Allen D. Addison: one overcoat, one infantry dress coat, one flannel [issued] shirt, one infantry hat with fixtures, one bunch envelopes, one pair suspenders, two pairs socks, one gold pen with holder, two needle books, one Testament, one wife's likeness (ambrotype), one box (with blacking brush) one stencil plate, brush and ink, one pair shoes, one canteen, one haversack, one tin cup, one knife, fork, and spoon, one inkstand, three towels, one cotton handkerchief.

In contrast, Wagoneer Abraham Bartholomew of Company K passed away in his quarters at Moscow. His effects consisted of: one hat, one great coat, one uniform coat, one pair cotton drawers, one flannel [issue] shirt, one blanket [presumably wool.]

During the Siege of Vicksburg, Private Frederick B. Taylor died on June 30, 1863 of a gunshot wound suffered on June 24, 1863. Three days later, Corporal James Ellsworth died from disease at a division hospital. Lieutenant George Hale most likely conducted the inventories:

Private Frederick Taylor: One cap, one uniform coat, one pair cotton drawers, one flannel [issue] shirt, one needle case, one portfolio, one pair socks, one woolen blanket, one rubber blanket, one knapsack, notes totaling \$ 1.00.

Corporal James Ellsworth: one blouse, one pair trowsers, two flannel [issue] shirts, one pair shoes, two pair socks, one haversack, one knapsack, one rubber blanket, one needle case, one portfolio, one Testament, one journal, one vest.

After the siege, two soldiers from Company B died of disease while in a Vicksburg hospital. Private William Wales' possessions at the hospital included: one pair pegged shoes, one blouse (unlined), one pair pants (worn), one flannel shirt (worn), two pair socks, one needle book, and \$ 1.52 in cash. Likewise, Private James Shields' belongings numbered one blouse, one pair cotton drawers, one wool shirt, one pair boots, one wool blanket, one haversack, and one knapsack.

On June 7, 1864, Private Simeon Reeves died in hospital, possibly either at Memphis or at a temporary hospital near LaGrange, Tennessee. His effects included: one hat, one flannel sack coat, one pair trowsers, two flannel drawers, one flannel shirt, one pair boots, one rubber coat and a pair of rubber pants

[presumably garments similar to a modern rain suit.]

The knapsack of Private Adam Smith, Company K, was inventoried after the regiment's return from A. J. Smith's first invasion of Tennessee in Summer, 1864. This campaign resulted in skirmish at Burrow's Shop (Camargo Crossroads) and Harrisburg (Tupelo.) Smith was killed in action at the action near Burrow's Shop, July 13, 1864. His knapsack contained: one great coat, one stable frock, one pair trowsers, one pair flannel drawers, one pair cotton drawers, one flannel [issue] shirt, one boot, one pair shoes, one woolen blanket, one portfolio, one miniature, one book of letters, tobacco, and a hymn book. Private Charles McCoy, Company H, died during the battle of Harrisburg, Mississippi on July 14, 1864. As a contrast, McCoy's knapsack contained one great coat, one blouse, three flannel shirts, and one blanket. [Note: The Thirty-third Regiment had not seen their knapsacks since their departure for the Red River Campaign, early March, 1864. Once the regiment departed, convalescents packed up the regiment's baggage, camp and garrison equipage for storage at Cairo, Illinois. Essentially, the regiment had served without knapsacks from early March to early August 1864—a period of about six months. This accounts for the strange appearance of overcoats in summer, 1864.]

On January 25, 1865 at the huge Federal winter encampment at Eastport, Mississippi, Private Emerson Root died in the regimental hospital. An inventory revealed: one great coat, one flannel sack coat, two pocket knives, one gold pen, one handkerchief, one pocket diary, and currency amounting to \$ 4.85. The clerk noted that the "blanket, drawers, shirt, & socks were used in the internment [sic]."

At the Siege of Spanish Fort, Mobile Bay, Private James Liff of Company K was killed near his camp on March 31, 1865. Liff's effects included: one hat, one great coat, one flannel [issue] shirt, one haversack, one knapsack, one pocket book, one

portfolio, one needle book, one pocket inkstand. That same day, Private William Newton, Company D was killed by a sharpshooter. In his pockets were found: one pocketknife, one needle book, and one pocket comb.

A few observations are worthy of note. First, the large inventories noted early in the Thirty-third Wisconsin's service dwindled in subsequent months and years of service. This trend would be in line with the expectations of the late Dr. Bell I. Wiley and others, who have opined that the process of "veteranization" was largely a process of shedding. Second, we find that these inventories were not confined to the items found on the immediate person, as was the Weaver inventory. Rather, they often included Federal issue clothing and equipage, with the exception of ordnance stores like cartridge boxes and weapons. This provides a broader look at the clothing and equipage available to some Western Theater soldiers at different points in their service. Finally, these inventories suggest a tantalizing correlation with the inventories conducted by Mr. Weaver at Gettysburg. Items like pocketknives, pocket combs, and handkerchiefs appear in both Mr. Weaver's list, and the material discovered by Mr. Thorson.

This sampling of effects from one regiment challenges an oft-quoted theory that veteran soldiers were reduced to "bare bones" possessions during the war's many campaigns. While this theory remains unchallenged technically during an active campaign, it is clear from this regiment's experience that soldiers could look forward to enjoying their writing materials, testaments, and spare clothing once they returned to their tents and knapsacks at the end of the campaign.

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