

THE CIVIL WAR

The dispute over slavery, as well as rivalry between northern industrial and southern agrarian economies, divided the United States in the mid 1800s. Hostilities began in 1861, shortly after the election of Abraham Lincoln, an Illinois Republican, as President.

Early Confederate successes on land were balanced by a Union naval blockade of southern ports. The war did not turn until 1863 when Lee was defeated at Gettysburg. It took another two years of bloody warfare to establish final Union victory. The cease-fire was signed in May of 1865, one month after Lincoln was assassinated. Before its conclusion, 3/4 of a million men had died and another 1/2 million were wounded. Three million men had served in the Union forces and 750,000 in the Confederate forces. No American family escaped this disastrous conflict.

During the Civil War, rations for the Union troops were ample.



Some foods were not, however, available in the field. Even when full rations were provided, they were not nutritious or appetizing: a diet of hardtack, salt meat and no vegetables quickly leads to scurvy.

The food needs of the armed forces were enormous. The scale of purchasing gave plentiful chances for swindling. The defects of the system lay primarily, however, in unsupervised or inexperienced contractors and supply officers. Canned foods, an economical and reliable source of nutrition, were first used during the Civil War. Condensed milk, invented by Gail Borden in 1856, was occasionally available as were desiccated (or in the language of the troops, "desecrated")

fruits and vegetables.

The first national annual Thanksgiving of 1863 was not officially observed by the United States military. Providing a special Thanksgiving dinner for the troops was beyond the capabilities of the Commissary.



Individual units, however, particularly those with New England roots, did find their own unofficial ways to celebrate the day.

Special dinners were organized, and toasts to absent family and friends were drunk.

Thanksgiving 1864 did not go similarly unrecognized. The Union League Club of New York City launched a public campaign to provide Thanksgiving dinner for Union soldiers and sailors:

We desire that on the twenty-fourth day of November there shall be no soldier in the Army of the Potomac, the James, the Shenandoah, and no sailor in the North Atlantic Squadron who does not receive tangible evidence that those for whom he is periling his life, remember him...

We ask primarily for donations of cooked poultry and other proper meats, as well as for mince pies, sausages and fruits... To those who are unable to send donations in kind, we appeal for generous contributions in money.

The response was overwhelming. In 3 weeks, the Club collected over \$57,000 towards the purchase of 146,586 pounds of poultry. Donations of an additional 225,000 pounds of poultry were received, along with an enormous quantity of other meat, cakes, gingerbread, pickles, apples, vegetables, cheese, and mince pies.

Captain George F. Noyes reported from General Phil Sheridan's Army of the Shenandoah:

*The want of proper appliances compelled most of the men to broil or stew their turkeys, but everyone seemed fully satisfied, and appreciated the significance of this sympathetic thank-offering from the loyal North. One soldier said to me, "It isn't the turkey, but the **idea** that we care for," and he thus struck the key-note of the whole festival.*

THANKSGIVING DAY 1863
By the President of the United States: a Proclamation

...In the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed to foreign states to invite and to provoke their aggression, peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed everywhere, except in the theater of military conflict, while that theater has been greatly contracted by the advancing armies and navies of the Union...

...I do therefore invite my fellow-citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next as a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN