



Life on the Home Front During the Civil War

*... what about the wives, the sons,
daughters and parents
that were left behind?*

By Beth Bassett

The Civil War has captured the interest of people in the United States and beyond more than any other episode in American History. One reason may be the fact that the war was within the proximity of the everyday lives of so many modern Americans. People who live in the states such as Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Indiana drive on many of the same routes that massive armies marched along some 150 years ago.

It was in April of 1860 that Newton County was created from Jasper County, the last county to be formed in Indiana; even so, enough of our men and boys answered the call to arms in 1861 to fill an entire Company - Company B of the 51st Regiment of Indiana Volunteers - that would send them into battle fighting side by side with their neighbors against the southern corps.

The generations have carried the memories of how the war affected their lives, through shortages, destruction of property, loss of limb in battle, or loss of a brother, son or father in the war. Most of the documentation of the war focuses on military events - but what was day-to-day life like for our ancestors in 1860s America?

Statistics show that the Northern society was more urbanized than the South in the mid-19th century. Some 5.5 million Northerners were city dwellers, about a quarter of the 22 million people living in the Union States. The balance, 16.5 million lived in towns or villages or on farms. By contrast, only about 10 percent of the South's population - less than a million people - lived in cities. The remaining 8 million Southerners lived in small towns and villages, and on plantations and farms. Southern cities tended to be smaller, less industrialized and less congested than urban areas in the North.

Oh, Give Me A Home

Housing costs varied from North to South, from city to country during the Civil War. A prairie style farmhouse construction

cost in the Mid-1800s ranged from \$800 to \$1000; rent of a home averaged about \$500 a year. In areas affected by wartime housing shortages, the price at least doubled.

At Any Cost

The cost of all goods and services also increased dramatically during the war. In 1863, the cost of living for a family in an Urban city was \$1,333 per month - compare that to the average wages of the day, (see Table A, next page), and you can imagine the hardships that many families faced.

As the value of goods increased and the value of money decreased, women tried to sell or trade homemade items, such as soap, for food and other necessities. Glue was made from cherry, peach or plum tree gum, or from egg whites mixed with lime.

Paper, ink, and pens were often unavailable, especially in the South. Old business forms, wallpaper and other scrap papers were folded into envelopes. Letter writers conserved paper by turning a page 90 degrees once it was covered with words, and then writing across them until it was full again, a method called "cross-hatching." (see Table A, next page.)

The Pay Check

Although factors such as age, race, geographic location and gender make it difficult to characterize an "average" American's wages during the Civil War, you can get an idea of what many people earned by looking at a number of examples. In the North, buying power for wage earners remained stable from 1860 through 1861, then declined 7 percent by 1862, 16 percent by 1863 and 23 percent by 1864. By 1865, it rose again to 18 percent below what it had been at the start of the war. In the South, real wages plummeted even more quickly, going down 16 percent by 1861, 65 percent by 1862, 81 percent by 1863, and 89 percent by 1864. (see Table B, next page.)

Food For Thought

Wartime conditions led to more acute

food shortages in the South than in the North, with far more Southerners suffering from malnutrition and starvation than did their Northern counterparts. Today's modern benefits of refrigeration and chemical preservation didn't exist and our ancestors either ate fresh food or preserved it through canning, pickling, smoking, salting, drying or storing in cool areas such as a root cellar. Alcohol, salt, sugar and vinegar were important elements in preserving and canning foods.

However, they also ate some manufactured foods that are still familiar to us today: Underwood Deviled Ham (since 1822); Lea and Perrins Worcestershire Sauce (since 1885); Borden's Condensed Milk (since 1856); Van Camp's Pork and Beans (since 1861); and McIlhenny Co.'s Tabasco sauce (since 1868). The typical foods items of the day were soups and stews, many types of fried meats and vegetables, many sorts of breads and biscuits, fruit pies and regional specialties, such as seafood in coastal areas.

That's Entertainment

Dice, board and card games were popular among civilians and soldiers alike. Because of the monotony of camp life, many soldiers in particular spent as much time as they could absorbed in games when other duties didn't call.

Dice were generally small, a bit crude and made of wood (some might've been made from flattened musket balls, like those of the Revolutionary War, amongst men using muskets). Craps was the dice game played most often, but other games included one known variously as birdcage or chuck-a-luck and sweet cloth.

Chuck-A-Luck or Birdcage: Chuck-a-luck is played with three standard dice that are kept in a device shaped somewhat like an hourglass that resembles a wire-frame bird cage and that pivots about its centre. The dealer rotates the cage end over end, with the dice landing on the bottom. Wagers are placed based on possible combinations that can appear on the three dice.

Board games included checkers, chess and backgammon. Checkers were popular in the armies and navies of both sides. Boards in the fields were handmade and were small so as not to be an encumbrance. Checkerboard patterns in red and green or red and yellow were common.

While dice and board-game components were frequently crude or homemade, many sorts of manufactured playing cards were available. During the Civil War, manufacturers created decks that replaced tradi-

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tional playing cards symbols with military and patriotic imagery. The Union Playing Card Company replaced the traditional suits of spades, clubs, hearts and diamonds with eagles, shields, stars and flags. The South used different Confederate generals or cabinet members on each card in the deck.

Although soldiers enjoyed gambling, a preponderance of men considered gambling - or "throwing the papers" in 1860s jargon - to be a mortal sin. As a result, soldiers would play cards or dice right up until marching off to battle, then destroy or discard their gaming implements so the items wouldn't be found on them if they were slain. After the battle, survivors eager for a game would search the former campsite for the previous occupants' cards or dice, or purchase new ones from sutlers, the traveling merchants who followed the armies during the war. Sutlers were looked upon as a necessary evil by both Union and Confederate troops. The sutler was a camp-follower civilian selling goods at high prices set by a committee of military unit officers, and who was doing so because he received a special appointment from the government, a governor or the brigade commander on the recommendation of the brigade's commissioned officers. Sutlers sold all types of goods not provided by the government, and some goods that were provided but never arrived on time.

At Any Cost

Article	\$August, 1861	\$November, 1862	Percent Increase
Brown Muslin	.10	.29	190%
Bleached Muslin	.12	.30	175%
Cotton Flannel	.20	.50	150%
Jeans	.50	1.00	100%
Boots	3.00	4.00	33%
Shoes	1.00	1.50	50%
Brown Sugar, lb.	.08	.13	62%
Rio Coffee, lb.	.15	.37	150%
Tea, lb.	1.00	1.50	50%
Rice, lb.	.08	.10	25%
Molasses, gal.	.50	.70	40%
Flour, barrel	4.50	6.50	44%
Meal, bu.	.40	.70	75%
Potatoes, bu.	.35	.80	130%
Wood, per cord	2.50	5.00	100%

Table A. Information taken from the Adjutant Report, 1861; Document#136, Increase of Pay of Private Soldiers, dated November 29, 1862, Oliver P. Morton, Governor of Indiana.

The Pay Check

Job	Pay (1866-1877)
Blacksmith	\$2.50 to \$3 per day
Cook in home	\$2 to \$10 per week, plus room and board
Clerk, Bookkeeper, etc.	\$1,000 to \$2,000/year if male; \$500 to \$1,000/year if female
Domestic worker/maid in home	\$2/week, plus room and board
Laborer, skilled (carpenter, mason, etc)	\$2.80 to \$3.80 per day
Laborer, unskilled	\$1.50 per 12 hour day
Street Vendor (newspapers, matches, etc)	a few cents a day
Teacher	\$2/student/month plus room and board
Teamster	\$2/day

Table B. Information taken from Family Tree Magazine, May 2011.

Common Slang Terms Used In Conversations During the Civil War Era

Bragg's Body Guard: lice; **Flux, Quick Step:** diarrhea; **Red Badge of Courage:** term used for a wound; **Grab a Root:** to eat something especially a potatoe; **Hospital Rat:** a malingerer, someone who fakes illness to get out of duty; **Sawbones:** slang for a surgeon; **Shank's Mare:** on foot; **Scarce As Hen's Teeth:** very rare, or hard to obtain; **On His Own Hook:** one of own's volition, without orders; **Jonah:** term for someone who has or brings bad luck; **Likely:** able-bodied, serviceable; **Copperheads:** a label for Northerners who opposed the war and occasionally worked to undermine the war effort; **Greenbacker:** political party whose name referred to paper money, or "greenbacks," that had been issued during the American Civil War and afterward. The party opposed the shift from paper money back to a bullion coin-based

monetary system. **Sutlers:** a common sight in the camps was a string of huts or tents bulging with various items for sale. The tents belonged to civilians officially appointed to supply soldiers with a long list of approved items. From these camp vendors, or Sutlers, a soldier could purchase such items as food, newspapers, books, tobacco, razors, tin plates, cups, cutlery, and illegal alcohol; **Sherman's Neckties, Sherman's Hairpins:** railroad rails that had been heated in fires then wrapped around trees to make them useless; from the practice employed by Sherman's troops during the rapacious march across Georgia; **Somebody's Darling:** reference to a dead soldier; **See the Elephant:** to experience combat or other significant events.

Source: Family Tree Magazine, May 2011 and the internet.