BEAR MEAT AND BOOTLEG

The Diet of the Orphan Brigade

by

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INTRODUCTION

The Orphan Brigade consisted of Kentucky volunteers whose units were enlisted in the Confederate Army of Tennessee in October, 1861, at Bowling Green. The makeup of the brigade varied from time to time, but generally included the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, and 9th Infantry Regiments, accompanied by various cavalry and artillery units (including Forrest's and Morgan's Cavalries). The original enlistment was for one year, but at the conclusion of that time, virtually all re-enlisted for the duration. Since Kentucky was never within the reach of Confederate conscription, all were volunteers. They were considered by their leaders (and, with all due modesty, by themselves and us today) the best unit in the Army of Tennessee. Their brigade and regimental officers were generally capable and respected. Their devotion was unlimited toward John C. Breckinridge and Joe Johnston. They cordially despised Braxton Bragg and considered John Bell Hood a poor general.

The sobriquet "Orphan Brigade" was allegedly given to them by Breckinridge at Stone's River after they had been decimated in a futile charge against well-placed cannon. Breckinridge may have referred to their pitiful and lonely position: or, the term may have reference to the fact that Kentucky was never under the control of the Confederacy. At any rate, the name fit, and it stuck.

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The sun had set on April 6, 1862. It was the Sabbath, and the thousands of men near Shiloh Church saw the shadows cast a pall over the most awful scene of carnage any of them had ever experienced. The Confederate Army of Tennessee had driven Grant back to the banks of the river at Pittsburg Landing and only waited for the morning to finish the job on a prostrate foe. Both armies were exhausted and, in addition, the Confederates had lost their Commanding General, Albert Sidney Johnston as well as his aide, the Governor of Kentucky. Johnny Green, of the Orphan Brigade, went to a small creek in the semi-darkness to get water for his mess. He thought he saw a log that had drifted to the bank and, wanting to get to deeper water, he started to step on it. It was a dead body. He filled his pail anyway, as did hundreds of others. There was no choice, for the water as well as the ground was covered with the dead and wounded.

It was the Fall of 1863, near Chattanooga. Sam Watkins, who served in a Tennessee unit alongside the Orphan Brigade, rejoiced to have his father as a visitor duing a lull in the action. He was embarassed for his father to know how meager his rations were, so he went to his Colonel, explained the situation, and asked if his father could share the Colonel's

mess that evening. Colonel Field readily agreed and soon Whit, his black servant, came in with a frying pan of parched corn and dumped it on an old oil cloth. That was dinner!

Napoleon said an army travels on its stomach. That is not readily apparent when you read the general histories of war. They are filled with battles, strategy, tactics, general logistics, and heroism. A decided shift in emphasis occurs when you read the diaries of the participants, particularly those of the lowly non-commissioned foot soldiers, or "webfeet," as they called themselves in the Civil War. Here, food and drink become the vital elements of survival which take first place from day to day. The daily struggle for food is not particularly glamorous, but it was surely heroic.

It is sad that food for the common soldier of the Orphan Brigade was such a constant problem, especially since it did not have to be so. Food was the one area, other than raw cotton, in which the agricultural South should have been self-sufficient. Great effort was successfully made to convert cotton fields to corn and, to a lesser degree, sweet potatoes, peanuts, onions, and the like. Due to transportation and distribution problems, and official negligence, the food just wasn't in the right place every day, or even every week.

The men of the Orphan Brigade came primarily from the Central and Southwestern parts of the Commonwealth. Mostly they were farm boys ranging in age from 17 to 30. When they

first came together to learn soldiering at Camp Magruder, disease immediately started to make alarming inroads, largely because of lack of knowledge in personal hygiene and food preparation. There were generally about seven men in a "mess." They were furnished a mess pan and a camp kettle. They quickly learned the value of bayonets and ramrods as cooking spits. They were issued generally abundant rations, including coffee and flour, which would soon become rare indeed. Bacon was also issued, often eaten raw, and here they made the acquaintance of "blue" beef, which would become a mainstay in their diets. It was a kind of pickled beef provided by government contractors. Its appearance was unappetizing and its quality uncertain. In spite of this rude introduction, most Orphans would remember those first days as a time of abundance. The local citizens around Bowling Green and Russellville provided them with generous hospitality: "nice baskets packed with ham, eggs, & and all the "fixin's".

The Orphan Brigade did all its fighting on home soil, and throughout the war the civilian population was incredibly generous in sharing food with the troops in their area. The military returned the favor with strict orders, backed by harsh punishment, for any appropriation of civilian foodstuffs without authorization. In this, however, they were not universally successful. Hunger knows no law and "bear" meat soon became a welcome article in the soldier's diet. Fresh pork,

captured, killed, and butchered on the sly and in haste, was referred to as "bear" to avoid official discovery and retribution. Many a hog foraging in the woods or barnlot was mistaken for a bear. When discovered and challenged by an officer, a generous helping of the best meat was generally proof enough that it was indeed bear. Most civilians had sons and brothers in the army and freely shared, refusing payment, when asked by individual soldiers for food, though they strongly resisted official appropriations. Lack of transportation and effective distribution usually meant empty smokehouses and barnlots in the presence of the army, even when there was abundance a relatively short distance away.

Whiskey was a rare part of the ration issue. The government tried very hard to restrict its production in order to conserve grain and sugar, but usually without success. The military supplies were generally reserved for medicinal purposes. It was, however, issued by the bucketful at Pittsburg Landing, on the way to Vicksburg after Shiloh, and by Johnston at Dalton and Resaca. At other times, ingenuity was the commissary. Coffee was scarce and more was obtained by trading with the Yankees than by regular issue. On the march to Baton Rouge, one-half pint of vinegar was issued to make the water more palatable. Water available was usually like the Missouri River, "too thin to plow and too thick to drink." The men spoke of being "thirsty" for tobacco and of wanting

a "drink" of tobacco. Fortunately, tobacco was generally available, and universally chewed.

"Hog and Hominy" was the typical Southern fare before and during the war. Corn was the staff of life for the Orphan Brigade soldier. He roasted it in season, parched it out of season, drank it when he could, and made bread out of it with water and a little salt. If he was fortunate enough to have a little grease to go with it, so much the better.

General Braxton Bragg, who commanded the Army of Tennessee from the Spring of 1862 to the Spring of 1864, was cordially disliked partly because of his lack of attention to rations. Huge stores of provisions were destroyed when Corinth was evacuated, though the men were on a starvation diet before and after. After the defeat at Missionary Ridge, great piles of corn, bacon, crackers, molasses, sugar, coffee, rice, potatoes, onions, peas, and flour were destroyed. This was after the men had gone through the worst winter of the war in terms of food. President Davis had visited them shortly before and the haggard Orphans had shouted at him, "Send something to eat. I'm hungry. I'm hungry." They were subsisting on haws and parched corn at the time. Their plaintive cries remind one of Dickens' Oliver Twist holding his empty gruel bowl and crying, "More!"

When Joe Johnston relieved Bragg, a trainload of provisions came into Dalton and the hungry men seized them before they could be distributed. Johnston immediately ordered

double rations and the men loved him ever after. Johnston, unlike Bragg, used every resource to keep the men fed as well as possible, including strict accounting by the Commissaries to see that the food got to the "webfeet." Morale skyrocketed. Soon, at Resaca, they were drawing regular rations of biscuit, bacon, sugar, coffee, whiskey, and tobacco.

When Hood relieved Johnston, matters were again reversed. At the time of the evacuation of Atlanta, the men were on half rations, yet it took a third of Hood's army to destroy around 100 carloads of supplies to keep them out of the hands of Sherman.

If, as Napoleon said, an army travels on its stomach, we can map the trail of the Orphan Brigade from Corinth to their final surrender in North Carolina in April, 1865.

After retreating from Corinth, the army moved to Summer quarters at Tupelo, Mississippi. There, they generally lived on cornbread, blue beef, and molasses. These were supplemented by individual fishing and blackberry picking. In July, 1862, the Orphans were sent to Vicksburg. There, salt was in such short supply they dug up the floors of meat houses, dissolved the dirt in water, and boiled it down for salt. From Vicksburg, they marched to Baton Rouge. Corn and blue beef were the standard. Outside Baton Rouge, the Colonel of the 6th Kentucky bought a 40 acre field of corn in the roasting ear stage. The men consumed it all immediately.

From Baton Rouge, it was to Knoxville on the "cars," or,

as we would say, by rail. Rail travel was always welcome to the "webfeet" and food was varied and plentiful in the towns. Those who had the money could buy whatever they desired. Oysters were a particular favorite. The citizens also fed them freely. Some of the boys soon discovered wherever chickens were in reach, a hook baited with corn would draw them in for later use. They found food both plentiful and cheap in Knoxville, especially real coffee.

From Knoxville, it was West to Murfreesboro and the terrible battle at Stone's River. Johnny Green wrote that, after the battle, the locals gave a party for the soldiers and he had all he could eat of ham, pies, etc. He even wrote to a friend in Mobile and received, in response to his request, a barrel of oysters!

In the summer of 1863, the unit was sent to the relief of Vicksburg. The expedition arrived too little and too late and, as usual when they were on the move, rations were reduced to corn and occasionally blue beef. Things got so bad that one day when the Commissary cried "Come draw your corn" the men neighed like horses and complained because they were not furnished hay, oats, and fodder. They did subsist on green corn and blackberries at Brierfield, the home of President Davis, though he was unaware of his hospitality.

From Central Mississippi, it was back to the "cars" again, this time for Chattanooga. The Fall and Winter of

1863, fortifying and losing Chattanooga, almost destroying the Yankee army at Chicamauga, and the devastating defeat at Missionary Ridge, was a seriously trying time for the Orphan Brigade. Winter quarters around Dalton were occasionally enlivened with revivals of religion and snowball battles, but hunger reigned supreme. The men scrabbled for "bear" and sweet potatoes to supplement the scarce corn and blue beef. They hunted for black haws and persimmons. At Missionary Ridge, they went where the horses were fed and picked grains out of the dirt, washed and parched the corn, and were grateful for it. All this time, there were vast quantities of stores building up in their immediate rear at Resaca. No wonder they disliked Bragg! Armed guards protected the food stores and guards along the roads confiscated any "pinetop" liquor they found. John Jackman found that, by posing as a guard and then bringing the confiscated bootleg into camp in a pumpkin, liquid refreshment was sometimes possible. Some of the men went "bear" hunting and brought in a sheep. They caught it with salt, since the death penalty was given for firing behind the tents. (Incidentally, the private soldier was paid $11 Confederate a month, which, in 1863, was the equivalent of about six pre-war dollars. He was charged a quarter for every cartridge he lost or fired without authorization.)

On the steady and stubborn retreat from North Georgia to

Atlanta, it was short rations again. Men were generally issued three days rations at a time, which they promptly cooked and ate in one meal. It generally consisted of corn meal and sweet potatoes or peanuts with only occasional blue beef. One day, some kind local ladies sent some fresh vegetables. Johnny Green's share was two simlins. A shell knocked his plate into the ashes. He scooped up the simlins and ate them with relish. Once, when captured near the Chattahoochee, he was fed coffee, hardtack, and bacon and proclaimed it the best meal he had eaten for many a day.

After the fall of Atlanta, Hood moved North in hopes of destroying Sherman's supply lines. Most of the remaining survivors of the Orphan Brigade, or at least those for whom horses could be found, were assigned to Wheeler's cavalry and given the task of harassing Sherman on his march to the sea. For them the times were occasionally good, depending on the food captured from Sherman's outlying units. Often, however, it was nothing at all for days, except the corn intended for the horses.

The final surrender of the Orphan Brigade came on April 21, 1865. They were paroled May 6. The survivors were, without exception, thin and hungry. Worn out. Many would never recover their health, not because of wounds alone, but also because of years of hunger and malnutrition. They could truthfully utter the 9th Century Prayer: Libera nos a furore Normanorum.

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