

IN ANY LANGUAGE...



Annie Manning and granddaughter Clara took advantage of a recent segment in the Sentinel's popular "Kids Scoop" section to learn Egyptian Hieroglyphics, and the upcoming holiday gave them a perfect opportunity to try out the ancient pictorial language.

How Civil War soldiers celebrated Thanksgiving in the field

BY TOM EMERY
For the Sentinel

As in most wars, the men of the Civil War found it excruciatingly difficult to be away from loved ones at holiday time. Thanksgiving was no exception.

The holiday itself has its roots in the Civil War. The first official proclamation declaring Thanksgiving as a national day of remembrance was issued by Abraham Lincoln in 1863, partly in honor of northern successes in the war that year. Lincoln designated the last Thursday in November "as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise."

That year, Thanksgiving fell on the day after a crucial Union victory at the battle of Chattanooga. The previous year in late November, armies were on the march during the Fredericksburg and Vicksburg campaigns. Around Thanksgiving 1864, some Union forces were on the cusp of the bloody battle of Franklin, while others were marching to the sea with William T. Sherman.

Due to their harsh surroundings, many Civil War men in the field enjoyed only the most Spartan of celebrations. In Kewanee, Illinois, teenage sisters Tirzah and Sarah Vaill received a letter from their older brother, an Illinois infantryman, after Thanksgiving 1861 that described his holiday meal, "hard bread" and salt pork. He added that "during the day I thought of you at home having your nice

dinners" and "wishing maybe that you might present a plate to some of us soldiers filled with your own goodies."

From his camp in Virginia that same year, Private Zebina Bickford of the 6th Vermont Infantry made the best of his day. In a letter home, he mused that "you may think we are homesick today but it is not so," mainly because of a care package sent from loved ones back in Vermont. The goodies consisted of "a box of clothing and a few knick-knacks consisting

turnip, apple butter, and cheese butter." Bean, though, lamented that he "cannot eat much without being sick." He, too, would die months later.

Elsewhere that year, Federal soldiers stationed at Fort Pulaski, Ga. held their own "fete and festival." The day's events included target practice and a rowing match, foot race, and hurdle sack race. Competitions involving a greased pole and a greased pig were also on the agenda, as was a "burlesque dress parade."

apples, vegetables, and cheese. One appreciative soldier saw the deeper meaning, writing that "it isn't the turkey, but the idea that we care for."

Others received far less. That year, Lewis Crater of the 50th Pennsylvania recorded in his diary that the Sanitary Commission "issued three fine apples to every man." Despite the middling fare, Crater and others likely gave thanks that they had survived to see another Thanksgiving during the four bloodiest years in American history.

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With tongue in cheek, he wrote that "you can't imagine what a lot of fine things we had for supper...a piece of sour bread and salt pork." However, he gleefully noted that "some of mother's cookies and doughnuts that came in our box" made the evening memorable. It would be Bickford's last Thanksgiving, as he died the following April 30.

The following year, Asa Bean, a doctor in the 114th Ohio, enjoyed greater tidings. On Nov. 27, 1862, he wrote that "there has been a surprise party here today for the benefit of soldiers and nurses." The feast included "roast turkey, chicken, pigeon, and oysters stewed" along with "baked chicken, boiled potatoes,

In some cases, Thanksgiving was a time of spiritual reflection. On the first official installment of the holiday in 1863, Sewell Van Alstine, a soldier in the 95th Illinois, wrote in his diary that he "went to town" and "heard an excellent discourse by an army chaplain at the Presbyterian Church." He also wrote there was "no drill today," a welcome respite.

In 1864, the Union League Club of New York City pleaded for donations of "cooked poultry and other proper meats" as well as "mince pies, sausages, and fruits" for men in the field. The call brought in some \$57,000 in cash donations, as well as nearly 225,000 pounds of poultry and large quantities of cakes, gingerbread, pickles,

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