

# 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 of eatables” that made “a very

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good thanksgiving for us.”

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, 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

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, 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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## Turkeys No Match for American Ingenuity

By Lucie Winborne

It’s probably safe to say that most of us dream of a Norman Rockwell Thanksgiving, with a golden-brown turkey, savory trimmings and radiant faces around the table. But, of course, we don’t live in a Norman Rockwell world. We live in a world where this most traditionally American of meals occasionally takes an unexpected turn.

Just ask the good folks at the Butterball Turkey Talk-Line, who for more than 30 years have provided a listening ear and helpful advice for bewildered holiday cooks. Some of their most memorable calls include a gentleman who, after bisecting his bird with a chainsaw, queried whether the oil from the chain would harm it, and a lady who needed instruction on thawing her gobbler -- which she had creatively frozen in a snowbank outside her house the night before. The call ended prematurely when she realized she wasn’t sure *which* snowbank.

Or perhaps you’re one of those unfortunate souls whose oven decides to call it quits the day before the big event. Have no fear ... there’s always your car engine, though unless you’re planning an overnight drive to

your dinner destination, a full bird will likely be too much for it. However, with a little help from Chris Maynard and Bill Scheller’s car-engine cookbook, “Manifold Destiny,” and a trip of at least four hours, you can still manage a breast and some side veggies. Just have someone else bring the green bean casserole and pie.

Then again, as Jim McClarin demonstrated for Mother Earth News back in 1980, neither an oven nor a car engine is necessary to roast a piece of meat if you have a compost pile, which at its peak life cycle can reach an internal temperature of up to 170 F.

After initial experiments with yogurt-turned-cheese and a hardboiled egg, McClarin took things a step farther with a roast (13 hours cooking time), and then a duck with orange juice and apricots (23 hours). Both efforts yielded delicious results, though the backyard chef took care to include a disclaimer that his “limited knowledge of microbiology” didn’t permit him to recommend the method to others. Nevertheless, if done correctly, compost cooking is perfectly safe, according to a 2013 article on the subject in Bon Appetit magazine.



Not in a state of distress but looking for a new flavor sensation? How about turkey gravy cranberry cupcakes, pumpkin pie fortune cookies, or mashed potato and gravy jellybeans for dessert instead of pecan pie? And forget the customary turkey sandwiches the day after: A slice of Thanksgiving leftovers pizza has everything needed to satisfy. (Yes, these are all real. Just think outside the box!)

Let’s face it, sometimes it’s fun to be non-traditional. That’s how great stories -- and memories -- are made.

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## To All Our Good Neighbors At Thanksgiving

*As we count our blessings this Thanksgiving holiday, we realize that your friendship is at the top of the list for this, we are truly thankful.*

*From all of us to all of you, we send you sincere best wishes for a happy Thanksgiving filled with the blessings of family, good friends, good food and good fun.*

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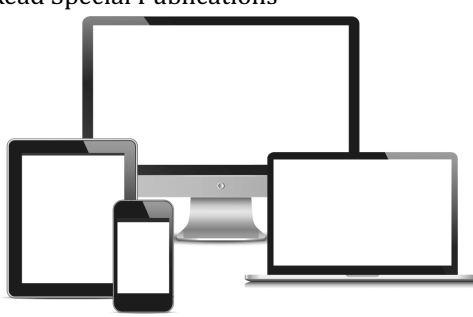


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