

## *Shortages and Substitutions of the War-time South* ©

By: Victoria Rumble

One cannot pick up a diary from the Civil War years without reading of hunger and shortages. Once the blockades went up common everyday items became luxuries to be saved and treasured, often used only in times of extreme need, and in many cases given up completely so that they could be sent to the troops in the field who were desperate for goods of every kind.

Diaries are filled with accounts of food being taken by foraging Union soldiers, and while it was usually freely given for the support of the Confederates, the fact remains that feeding the army meant less food at home. Deserters were greatly feared because of their foraging from those already struggling under great shortages.

In the days when supplies were often purchased or put up to last for 6 months to a year at a time their loss was catastrophic. As the value of Confederate currency fell, so fell the amount of food that could be purchased with it. Constance Cary said shopping was like carrying your money in a market basket and bringing home provisions in a pocket-book.

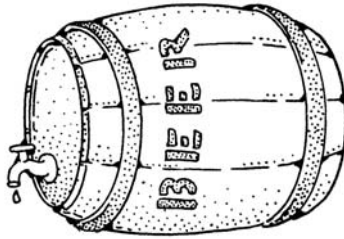
Even families that had been considered wealthy before the war found themselves struggling to put food on the table and find medicine for the sick. Bathing and house cleaning were complicated from the shortages of soap, and substitutions were the order of the day to the extent that when something other than crude substitutions was found it was of such importance journalists wrote of having “real” coffee or tea, or “real” flour.

Coffee, tea, flour, and sugar were among the first items to become scarce. Parched okra seed, dried sweet potato, acorns, corn meal, rye, garden beets, chicory, parsnips, etc. replaced the rare genuine coffee beans.

Holly leaves, sassafras, rosemary, strawberry leaves, blackberry, huckleberry, and raspberry leaves, willow, sage, pine needles, etc. came to be referred to as *tea*.

Sugar was replaced with honey, molasses, sorghum, maple syrup or maple sugar, and even molasses made from reducing watermelon, fig, or mulberry juice. It was at this time that sorghum cane, first introduced in the 1850's, came to be a standard crop in the upper South where genuine sugar cane did not grow well.

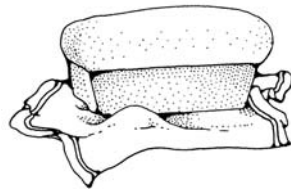
Alcohol was important in earlier centuries because of the prevalence in using it as a stimulant in treating the ill, and with the war the need for it rose, but production declined. In Alabama brandy was sometimes made from sweet potatoes, and universally persimmon beer, ginger beer, and beer made from corn or molasses became standard fare when there was none of the real beverage to be found. Whiskey flavored with juniper berries sometimes stood in for imported gin.



By 1865 flour cost as much as \$1,200. per barrel and by then bread was as apt to be made from persimmons, ground peas, sorghum seed, roots, potatoes, and ground rice as actual wheat flour though none of the substitutes contained gluten needed for forming bread dough.

In the absence of leavenings corncob ashes passed for soda or saleratus and yeast made from peach leaves, potato, hops, and other items was resorted to in bread and cake baking. Pie crusts were made from potatoes, corn meal and other crude substitutes for flour.

Various sources stressed the importance of eating hominy instead of bread. It was labor intensive, but cost nothing to make and so for many seemed the ideal solution. Parched corn filled hungry stomachs for soldiers and those at home. Bread riots erupted in various Southern cities when desperate women resorted to desperate measures in obtaining bread.



It was during the war years that Florida citrus was first recognized as a major industry when fruits from the West Indies were blocked from entering Southern ports. Dried persimmons replaced dates and raisins, citric acid replaced lemon juice, dried pumpkin replaced dried apples in pies, molasses replaced fruit in preserves, peach leaves replaced vanilla, a combination of peach and cherry leaves replaced almond flavoring, and peanuts and field peas rose to a new level of importance in the absence of more popular foods.

Vinegar, which was a staple ingredient in the 19<sup>th</sup> century kitchen, was made from apple peels and cores, molasses, figs, pears, and other fruit.

Shortages of salt caused widespread hardship because salt was used as much for preserving meat as for seasoning food and without it keeping meat was extremely difficult. It was also used to make a sponge for salt-rising bread which was important given the lack of leavening agents. Numerous accounts speak of digging up the dirt floor in smokehouses and boiling the dirt to extract salt that had been spilled over the years. Ashes sometimes replaced salt in attempts to cure meat.

Because of a shortage of seeds and farm tools vegetables were scarce during the war and wild plants, some almost forgotten, were collected in huge quantities in an attempt to relieve hunger both on the home front and in the army. Nothing was allowed to go to waste and many newspapers gave instructions for drying, pickling, and preserving.

Newspapers and magazines began to publish articles advising what plants could be used to replace various foods, and the single greatest publication in relieving the shortages was Dr. Francis P. Porcher's treatise on the use of plants from Southern fields, forests, and swamps. (See *Botany in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries* in articles section).

Once again the populace would have starved had it not been for the wisdom of the Native Americans who were in many instances still collecting various plants, barks, roots, fruits, nuts, and berries for culinary purposes. Dr. Porcher's treatise relied heavily on those and European sources.

As farm animals were taken by the army, both C.S. and U.S., meat became scarce and with that came a shortage of fats to make soap and candles. Wax for candles was obtained by boiling the wax off myrtle berries and straining it, and homespun wicks several yards long were passed through a shallow pan of pine rosin and beeswax until approximately the size of a pencil then the long wick wrapped around a bottle, corncob, or other item of similar size to produce a *Confederate* candle.

Cornshucks and cottonseed were among the items resorted to for replacing fats in soap making and most women came to know no other kind of starch than that made from potatoes.

When the number of farm animals declined so did the available quantities of milk and thus butter and cheese. Beaten egg white replaced milk in lightening makeshift coffee and tea.

Fishing, hunting, and archery helped to provide food for the table, though shortages of powder, shot, and tackle meant these methods weren't as reliable as they had been prior to the war. Many resorted to the use of snares, traps, and nets in an effort to catch birds and small game.

Conditions had deteriorated to the point that the end of the war brought little change, most Southerners experiencing the same shortages through the reconstruction era. Shortages had prevailed during previous wars, as they would do again during the World Wars when Victory gardens sometimes meant the difference between eating and going hungry.

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(See *Victoria's Home Companion; Or the Whole Art of Cooking*, Rumble, Victoria, available on this website for more information)

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