

## **“Hard Crackers Come Again No More”: Army Life in the Civil War**

### **The Basics**

#### **Time Required**

3 class periods

#### **Subject Areas**

Grade 5: U.S. History, English/Language Arts, Life Skills, Art

Civil War and Reconstruction, 1860-1876

#### **Common Core Standards Addressed:**

Writing Standards K-5

#### **Author**

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### **The Lesson**

#### **Introduction**

As with many a Civil War parody, no one knows who came up with the words for "Hard Crackers Come Again No More." The tune comes from Stephen Foster's 1855 song, "Hard Times Come Again No More" (*Voices Across Time*, 3.62). The humor of the parody will be clearer if your class explores the original ahead of time.

Complaining about the food has been a soldier's prerogative for time immemorial. Of course, in the Civil War, they had excellent reason to complain. Hardtack, a staple for men in the field, was a brutally hard cracker as issued, dangerous to the teeth, exhausting to the jaw. Even if crumbled in coffee or fried in grease, it wasn't exactly tasty. Lacking modern preservatives, hardtack was susceptible to mold-and occasionally weevils and maggots. Clearly, hard crackers deserved a tribute in song.

Use these songs as a springboard for discussing the soldiers' problems with nutrition and disease.

#### **Guiding Questions**

What provisions does a soldier need to survive in the field?

#### **Learning Objectives**

Students will:

Use historical data from a variety of primary resources

Understand the people and the political, geographic, economic, cultural, social, and environmental events that have shaped the history of the United States

Relate what the student views, reads, and hears to practical purposes in the student's own life, to the world outside, and to other texts and experiences

Apply elements of effective writing and speaking; these elements include ideas, organization, vocabulary, sentence structure, and personal style

A student should understand and respect the perspectives of others in order to communicate effectively

Understand how the human body is affected by behaviors related to eating habits, physical fitness, personal hygiene, harmful substances, safety, and environmental conditions

Participate in dance, drama, music, visual arts, and writing

### **Preparation Instructions**

Gather necessary ingredients for hard tack recipe.

Songs used in this lesson

“Hard Crackers Come Again No More”

“Army Grub”

“Goober Peas”

### **Lesson Activities**

#### **Day 1: Intro**

Tell students: "Imagine you are a Union soldier. You're about to go on a hard week-long march before facing the enemy in a battle that might take two or three days of deadly fighting with bayonets and single-shot rifles. You are pretty good: you can reload fast enough to get off three shots per minute. On top of that, it's the middle of the summer and your uniform is made of heavy wool! Knowing you'll need plenty of food to keep you going over the grueling days ahead, the army gives you .... What?"

- Ask students what rations they expect to be given. Then explain about actual Union rations.
- "Why would they give soldiers such horrible stuff as salt pork and hardtack? Why not give them some lovely sandwiches, pizza, or mac and cheese?" (*No refrigeration or vacuum-packing. Hardtack and salt pork were fairly cheap, easy to prepare, and would keep for a long while without refrigeration.*)

Mention that complaining about the food is practically a military tradition (even as rations have improved). Referred to as "teeth dullers" and "sheet-iron crackers," hardtack received a mocking tribute in "Hard Crackers Come Again No More."

Sing the song as a class, or at least listen to it. First you may wish to sing or display a verse of Foster's original "Hard Times Come Again No More."

On the board, with student suggestions, compare the pros and cons of hardtack.

Pro: lasted indefinitely, easy to make, plentiful, etc.

Con: moldy if wet, victim to weevils and maggots, hard as heck, not exactly tasty, etc.

Ask: "If you've got salt pork and hardtack, what's missing from your diet?"

- Discuss food groups briefly, enough to realize that vegetables and fruits are quite absent.
- Mention that fruit was scarce in the field, unless you scavenged it from a passing farm. Without a good source of vitamin C, scurvy was a serious problem during the war.

The Union Army tried to address the lack of vegetables by issuing horrible dried vegetables, called "desiccated vegetables." The stuff was so ghastly, soldiers referred to it as "desecrated vegetables."

In short, the men were malnourished. This kept them susceptible to disease, with weakened immune systems and poor hygienic practices. They had no knowledge of bacteria. Men drank dirty water, and often drew water near latrines. Hand-washing and bathing were not priorities. Stomach-ache was all too common, and diarrhea (nicknamed "The Vicksburg Quickstep" and "The Tennessee Trot") was rampant.

Ask: "How effective can an army be when it constantly has to make runs to the latrine or the bushes?"

Sing and/or listen to "Army Grub" (sung gleefully to the tune of "America" or "God Save the Queen")

## **Day 2: A closer look at hardtack**

Ask:

- "What was the No. 1 cause of death during the Civil War?" The surprising answer: Disease killed many more men during the war than bullets, bayonets or cannonballs.
- "Why was disease such a problem during the war?"
- "How did bad food and bad hygiene affect the outcome of the war?"

Review the two songs and briefly discuss the Union soldier's problems with food and disease.

### **Activity: Make hardtack!**

There are a number of hardtack recipes. A kid-friendly recipe for hardtack, calling only for flour and water, is found in Janis Herbert's *The Civil War for Kids*. I've chosen one off Ken Anderson's website (<http://www.kenanderson.net/hardtack/>). I have not yet tried this particular recipe out, but it looks more authentic, as it includes the three traditional ingredients-flour, water, and a little salt.

As with any classroom cooking activity, make sure everyone washes their hands and uses clean items. Remember what happened during the Civil War to men who didn't know about germs!

### **Army Hardtack Recipe**

Ingredients:

4 cups flour (preferably whole wheat)

4 teaspoons salt

Water (about 2 cups)

Preheat oven to 375°F.

Makes about 10 pieces

Mix the flour and salt together in a bowl. Add just enough water (less than two cups) so that the mixture will stick together, producing a dough that won't stick to hands, rolling pin or pan.

Mix the dough by hand. Roll the dough out, shaping it roughly into a rectangle. Cut the dough into squares about 3 x 3 inches and 1/2 inch thick.

After cutting the squares, press a pattern of four rows of four holes into each square, using a nail or other such object [perhaps a clean skewer would be best!-MF]. Do not punch through the dough. The appearance you want is similar to that of a modern saltine cracker. Turn each square over and do the same thing to the other side.

Place the squares on an ungreased cookie sheet in the oven and bake for 30 minutes. Turn each piece over and bake for another 30 minutes. The crackers should be slightly brown on both sides.

The fresh crackers are easily broken, but as they dry, they harden and assume the consistency of fired brick.

[Note: From experience I've learned not to store fresh hardtack in a sealed container. It must have a chance to dry completely, or else it will mold, and then the army will not eat it. Store it in a perforated container, or a cookie jar.-MF]

Following up: Don't eat your hardtack fresh out of the oven—that would be missing the whole point. Fresh hardtack is actually pleasant and soft. This is not the hardtack familiar to Union soldiers. You've got to let it get dry, dry, dry. When it takes on a rocklike hardness, then it's ready.

Now that you've got your authentic hard crackers, try eating them. Options include crumbling them in water or milk, but to get the full effect, I recommend wrapping the crackers in a towel, smashing them with a hammer, and letting your students try a bite-sized shard. It'll take a while to soften in their mouths, and this might be a good moment for you to read aloud or play "Hard Crackers" while they work on it.

## **Assessment**

### **Day 3: Assessment**

Between a Rock and a Hard Cracker

- Review what they've learned so far about the life of a Union soldier.
- Sing "Hard Crackers" or "Army Grub."
- Assign the following writing project. "Okay, you're a Union soldier, and you've got a little time between marches and battles to write a letter home. Before cell phones and e-mail, people wrote letters, and getting mail was extremely important to the soldiers, who were homesick, scared and weary."
- Have students write a simple two-paragraph friendly letter back home. Soldiers typically described conditions around camp, mentioned the health of any fellow soldiers known to the folks back home, and asked for more mail. Your students should use this opportunity to show their mastery of the friendly-letter format and of four different problems experienced by Union soldiers.
- Many soldiers were indifferent spellers. If you wish, you could let your students know that for once, spelling will not be counted!

## Extending the Lesson

- Rewrite "Hard Crackers" with most-loathed food in mind.
- Sing "Goober Peas" and "Gee But I Wanna Go Home"

## Resources

### Lyrics

“Hard Crackers Come Again No More”

There's a hungry, thirsty soldier who wears his life away,  
With torn clothes, whose better days are o'er;  
He is sighing now for whiskey, and with throat as dry as hay  
Sings, "Hard crackers come again no more."

Chorus:

'Tis the song and the sigh of the hungry,  
"Hard crackers, hard crackers, come again no more!  
Many days you lingered upon our stomachs sore,  
Oh, hard crackers, come again no more."

Let us close our game of poker, take our tin cups in hand,  
While we gather 'round the cook's tent door,  
Where dry mummies of hard crackers are given to each man;  
"Oh, hard crackers come again no more!"

'Tis the song that is uttered in camp by night and day,  
'Tis the wail that is mingled with each snore;  
'Tis the sighing of the soul for spring chickens far away,  
"Oh, hard crackers come again no more."

“Army Grub” (sung gleefully to the tune of "America" or "God Save the Queen")

My rations are "S.-B." [= "So Bad"]  
Taken from porkers three  
Thousand years old.  
And hardtack cut and dried  
Long before Noah died.  
From what was left aside  
Ne'er can be told.

### Other Resources

I used "Hard Crackers Come Again No More," "Army Grub," and "Goober Peas," appearing in McNeil, Keith & Rusty. *Civil War Songbook*. WEM Records: Riverside, Calif., 1999.

"Goober Peas" appears also in *Voices Across Time*, 4.58.

A good recording of "Hard Crackers" is found on Bobby Horton's 1996 CD, *Homespun Songs of the Union Army, Volume 3* (ISBN 1-882604-21-0). No publisher is apparent. Horton has a phenomenal series of albums covering Union and Confederate favorites. He uses period instruments, "mostly."

To show how history repeats itself—or at least how soldiers have continued to complain about army food—you may wish to compare "Hard Crackers" etc. with "Gee But I Wanna Go Home," which was popular during WWI and WWII. The lyrics may be found in:  
Silverman, Jerry. *The American History Songbook*. Mel Bay Publications, Inc.: Pacific, Missouri, 1992.

**Other books:**

Wright, Mike. *What They Didn't Teach You About the Civil War*. Ballantine Books: New York, 1996.

Herbert, Janis. *The Civil War for Kids*. Chicago Review Press: Chicago, 1999.

**CD-ROM and book:**

*Civil War Illustrations*. Dover: Mineola, NY, 2003.

**Websites:**

[http://www.qmfound.com/feeding\\_billy\\_yank.htm](http://www.qmfound.com/feeding_billy_yank.htm)

This site is helpful in giving background to the Union daily rations between 1861 and 1865.