COMFORTS FROM HOME

Virginia Mescher

Just as today's soldiers look forward to receiving boxes from home, civil war soldiers looked forward to receiving boxes or packages from loved ones or items sent by relief societies. Women, from both the north and south, busied themselves preparing items to send to the soldiers. Letters, diaries, and newspapers provide a great deal of primary documentation as what was sent and how items were prepared so they could be sent to the soldiers, as well as numerous lists of items that were sent to the relief societies to soldiers by relief societies.

Women worked individually, sending boxes directly to particular soldiers; or worked as part of a group, such as the Sanitary or Christian Commissions, in the north, or similar relief organizations that were organized in the south. Mary Livermore, of the Chicago Sanitary Commission, commented in her memoirs that at the beginning of the war, people sent so many boxes that transport could not be arranged. Perishable items spoiled and poorly packed foodstuffs leaked and spoiled the contents of the entire box. One mother wrapped two honeycombs in a shirt that she was sending and the honey leaked throughout the box which rendered the contents unusable. Mrs. Livermore was instrumental in trying to get mothers, wives, sisters and sweethearts to send the goods directly to the Sanitary Commission and where the goods would be properly prepared for shipment to the soldiers.

In order to prevent mishaps in shipping, both the Sanitary Commission and Christian Commission

published instructions for packing boxes as well as lists of needed items. A pamphlet published by the Christian Commission in 1863 included the following advice. "How to Pack — Pack in boxes. Barrels are not as good. Secure well. Boxes should not be so large that two cannot conveniently lift them into a wagon. Pack eatables by themselves. Never pack perishable articles, such as oranges, lemons, bread, cakes nor jars of jellies and jams with other goods. Tin cans should be soldered; all other modes fail. Stone jars should be corked and firmly bound with oiled linen or leather over the cork, and packed closely in saw-dust or hay, in boxes never exceeding a dozen and a half in a box, and nailed strongly, to bear rough handling. Jellies in tumblers, covered with paper, and wines, cordials, &c. in bottles, with paper or other poor stoppers, are liable to spill out, and if packed with other things, sure to injure them." Instructions were also given as to how to address the boxes. They also requested monetary contributions so that the societies could purchase perishables, rather than perishables being sent from home.

Period magazines, such as *Peterson's*, published receipts for food items and instructions for particular items such as how to prepare lint or bandages or waterproofing fabric for soldier's overcoats. Newspapers contained numerous recipes, directions for making homemade items or general advice to pass on to soldiers.

Below are accounts that were found in period newspapers, magazines, diaries, or memoirs that listed the contents of the boxes. Items, sent from either the north or south, differed according to the availability of goods in each area and the circumstances of the giver. Women showed the love and concern that was felt for loved ones as well as strangers, and the boxes supplemented what was supplied by the army. These extras increased the quality of life for the soldiers and the wounded that were in hospitals. In the South, as the war wore on, there were fewer luxuries to send and more ersatz items found their way into the boxes, but families tried to send the best they had to the soldiers.

From the *Xenia Torchlight*, Xenia, Ohio, March, 1862: "...and the Sanitary Committee asks that the People contribute articles for Bedding, such as bed-sacking, sheets, comfortables [coverlets], quilts, blankets, pillow ticks, hair pillows, feather pillows, and pillow case; for Clothing, such as shirts, flannel undershirts, drawers, knit woolen, socks, dressing gowns or wrappers, slippers, handkerchiefs and towels, and mittens; for Surgeons supplies, such as compresses or pieces of old soft linen or cotton, washed thoroughly, ironed and rolled into smooth bundles, and cases of muslin or calico 20 inches long by 8 inches wide, for cushions for wounded limbs; for Edibles, such as dried fruits and berries of all kinds, jellies, tomatoes, farina, sago, oat meal, tapioca, arrow root, cocoa, yeast cakes and yeast powders; for Sundries, such as Castile soap, sponges, old silk, pin cushions well filled, needle cases containing a few coarse needles, coarse thread and buttons, fine toothed combs, pencils, pens, envelopes &c to the Soldiers' Aid Society of Xenia will see that all articles are properly boxed and forwarded..."

Also, from the *Xenia Tourchlight*, in the July 16, 1862 the following items were sent by the Soldier's Aid Society: "76 shirts, 20 pairs of drawers, 2 double gowns, 36 handkerchiefs, 6 slings, 2 pairs of slippers, 8 pillow cases, 4 vests, 3 pairs of trowsers [sic], 1 quilt, 24 wash rags, 17 towels, 20 bundles of soft rags, 80 bandages, 1 box of lint, 15 pillows, 2 quires of letter paper, 10 pairs of socks, soap, 3 bedticks [sic], 22 cans of fruit and tomatoes." Two individuals were also responsible for the following items, "2 cans peaches, 1 jar pickles, 1 jar lard, 2 pounds butter, 1 basket of eggs, 1 jar of tomatoes, 1 bottle catsup, $1 worth of sugar [about 5 pounds] 1 bag sage, 5 sheets, 3 slings, 9 pillow cases, 10 towels, 7 pairs of slippers, 1 pair trowsers [sic], 1 vest, 8 pairs socks, 16 pairs drawers, 25 shirts, 4 woolen shirts, 6 bundles soft rags, 10 handkerchiefs, 3 eye shades, and 7 canes."

Items sent by the Maine Camp and Hospital Association in one month was as follows: "72 shirts, 68 pairs of mittens, 70 towels, 2 graters, 9 jars marmalade, 1 box herring, 5 lbs. butter, 30 papers broma, 1 barrel dried apples, 2 bot. blackberry brandy, 2 bot. ketchup, 2 bot tamarinds, 4 lbs. black pepper, cayenne pepper, 6 dressing gowns, 24 doz. handkerchfs [sic] 5 bottles brandy, 4 bots [sic], currant wine, 3 qts. sage, 13 cases meat, 30 papers cocoa, 1 jar pickles, 4 bot. cologne, 70 pr. drawers, 36 quilts, 8 pr. slippers, 10 doz. combs, 2 bot elderberry wine, 3 qts tapioca, 22 cans condensed milk, 35 doz. lemons, 2 bar. green apples, 1 bot cherry rum, 1 jar strawberry, 6 doz. figs, 1 box guava jelly, candy, lozenges, peppermint, 165 pr. socks, 30 pillows, 9 doz. nutmegs, 14 jars jelly, 2 bot port wine, 20 lbs. stripped fish, 44 papers farina, 10 doz. oranges, 1 barrel crackers, 4 bot. raspberry vinegar, 1 jar cranberry, 4 doz. eggs, and 10 lbs. tea."

Sanitary Commission reports included detailed accounts of donated items. One such report included the following items donated near Vicksburg, Mississippi in May and June, 1863. "1,882 pounds of groceries, 3,357 pounds butter, 2,401 dozen eggs, 2,376 gallons pickles, 27,367 pounds of ice, 6,898 pounds of crackers, 1,532 gallons sour crout [sic], 532 pounds tea, 13,200 lemons, 1,504 comforts, 758 bedsacks, 7,909 shirts, 2,453 pairs of socks, 5,114 fruit cans, 16,430 pounds dried fruit, 888 pounds dried beef, and 5,631 cans of condensed milk." Other donated items included towels, drawers, sheets, pillows, socks, slippers, bandages, lint, dressings, and many other food items.

Many women who made items for anonymous soldiers included notes with the items that they sent. The great-granddaughter of Benjamin Franklin enclosed the following note in a hospital box, "Close by the old battle-ground in Lexington, Massachusetts, the birthplace of liberty you are fighting so bravely to preserve for us, this shirt was made for you. The young lady who made it hopes that these sleeves will enclose two sound arms, and that no serious wound confines you to a hospital." A note included in a box of donations read, "The little girls of —— send this box to you. They hear that thirteen thousand of you are sick, or have been wounded in battle. They cannot do much, for they are all small; but they have bought with their own money, and made what is in here. They hope it will do some good, and that you will get well and come home. We all pray to God for you night and morning." Another note read, "My Dear Boy — I have knit these socks expressly for *you*. How do you like them? How do you look, and where do you live when you are home? I am nineteen years old, of medium height, of slight build, with blue eyes, fair complexion, light hair, and a good deal of it. Write and tell me all about yourself, and how you get on in the hospitals. Direct to ——. P. S. It the recipient of these socks has a wife, will he please exchange socks with some poor fellow not so fortunate."

Some donated items might have be considered "useless," but nonetheless, they were reminders of home. These "useless" items included were a baby's tin rattle, a small, dressed china doll, a baby's photograph, and a comic almanac. Comfort-bags were also sent to the soldiers. These may have contained as selection from the following: "housewives" or sewing kits containing needle-books, pincushions, black and white thread, and buttons, jack-knives for whittling, scissors, tobacco, a small Testament, stationery, envelopes, stamps, pencil, socks, and handkerchiefs. The Christian Commission distributed a housewife pattern for women to use.

The recipients of the donations sometimes sent notes of thanks, some of which told how the contents of the box fared. One man wrote, "They [the contents of the box] were in a great deal better order than we expected, nothing was spoiled but Charley Dennis's turkey. The bread was somewhat moulded [sic] but we cut the outside off and put the rest away.... we received the package sent by Jacob Camp and today opened Aunty's can of cherry jam. It was splendid like all the rest of the good

things from home. You must give a thousand thanks to all the good friends concerned in donating to the box." In 1863 George Surtees, from Illinois, wrote to his wife thanking her for the box. "My dear wife: it gives me great pleasure to ..... inform you that the box arrived safely..... I am glad also to tell you that they [contents of the box] were in much better condition than I expected. The cake was beautiful.... The plum pudding was very nice, it was only a little moulded [sic] on the outside, not more than a quarter of an inch deep. It was delicious when sliced and warmed. The bread, I am sorry to say was nearly all spoiled..... The butter is first rate and is a grand treat. The chicken was not entirely lost..... The two legs, I managed to eat and the breast, after cutting off the mould and the stuffing was nearly all good..... The sausage, I have not tried yet, but I think about half of it will be good..... The paper accidently came off one of the pepper boxes and sprinkled the things a little, but did not do any serious damage. I'm glad one of them is preserved. We cannot get any such pepper here. The sutlers sell it for .20 a paper such as we get in the North for .05."

Christmas Boxes in Camp—Christmas, 1861.

Southern women did as much as they could for their soldiers. Mrs. Judith McGuire wrote to following in her diary in early May, 1861: "We who are left here are trying to give the soldiers who are quartered here [Alexandria, VA] in town comfort, by carrying them milk, butter, pies, cakes, etc. I went yesterday to the barracks, with the carriage well filled with such things, and found many young friends quartered here." She also wrote, "We must do what we can for the comfort of our

brave men. We must sew for them, knit for them..... There is so much to do, and we must do it."

On August 27, 1861, Virginia Shepard, of Henrico County, VA, wrote a letter to her sister mentioning some items that she had sent to her son. Mrs. Shepard wrote, ".... They have a long march with their knapsacks and at the same time have not half enough to eat. The reason is chiefly this, the provisions have to hauled in a wagon 45 miles over a rough road after leaving the railroad terminus and there are not enough government wagons to take charge of the long parade of boxes.... I have employed a man to go with a quantity of provisions & clothing to deliver them in person, regardless of the expense..... I am busy fixing for my boy, getting together things that will bear transportation. I shall send today raw bacon, a larger quantity of homemade gingerbread & cake, coffee, sugar, rice, salt, pickles, breads, a blanket, some clothing — last week I sent him a bundle containing a pair of shoes for which I paid six dollars, 2 pars of yarn socks, five dollars in small change (notes are of no use to them), and a quantity of bread and cakes — more since, I sent a bag of thing, biscuits, coffee, sugar, rice, bacon, brown sugar, a [jar] of quince marmalade and cake." [These items were sent at the beginning of the war and the quality of the items sent were much better that what was sent later in the war.]

Kate Stone mentioned in her diary about packing a box for her brother and uncle. She included clothes, quantities of preserves, pickles, cakes and other eatables that would keep and also mentioned knitting a comforter (muffler) for a soldier that she didn't know.

In her memoirs, Sallie Putman wrote about the industrious women of the south. "Evenings at home, formerly spent in gayety [sic] and social amusements were made pleasant and useful in the labors of love and duty which provided comfortable hose for the soldier, or a warm visor or a fancy colored scarf, which under the patronage of a kind old Santa Clause, found their way to the Christmas-bag in the soldier's tent."

Items were also sent to hospitals for the wounded. The hospitals received underclothing, suits of clothes, socks, sheets, comforters, quilts, pillows, towels, shirts, linen, soap, bandages, rice, tea, sugar, pickled peaches, raspberry syrup, blackberry brandy [remedy for dysentery], jellies, preserves, eggs, ginger snaps, dried fruit, and lint. One lady from Petersburg, VA reported after working in a hospital for several days, "I appeared a few days later....bearing a basket of clean, well-rolled bandages with a promise of more to come. The ... women had gone to work with a will upon my table-clothes, sheets, and dimity counterpanes - and even chintz furniture covers. My spring-like green and white chintz bandages appeared on many a manly arm and leg."

With the increasing transportation difficulties in the south, rather than sending boxes individually, many of the women formed aid societies in order to produce more donations, but their efforts could not equal northern organizations such as the Sanitary Commission. Mrs. McGuire wrote in her diary May 4, 1861, "...that the ladies of Alexandria and all the surrounding country were busily employed sewing for our soldiers. Shirts, pants, jackets, and beds of the heaviest material, have been made by the most delicate fingers....Our parlor was the rendezvous for our neighbor-hood, and our sewing-machine was in requisition for weeks. Scissors and needles were plied by all." Mrs. Pryor wrote that, in Petersburg, Virginia, the ladies in the sewing society did not even rest on Sundays. "Sewing machines were put into the churches, which became depots for flannel, muslin, strong linen and even uniform cloth. When the hour for the meeting arrived, the sewing class would be summoned by the ringing of the church bell." [Sewing-machines were used in the South as long as factory thread was available. Homespun thread could not be used in them since it was not regular in size and was not as strong. Sewing thread and needles became contraband items that were prevented from coming

into the South.]

One box sent from an Alabama society to the Grove Hill Guards, contained 60 pairs of socks, 25 blankets, 13 pair of gloves, 14 flannel shirts, 16 towels, 5 pairs of trousers, 2 handkerchiefs, and a bushel of dried apples. Another relief society from Atlanta set up tables at the depot from which items were distribute to the soldiers. A local newspaper reported that the following items were distributed: 68 shirts, 75 pairs of drawers, 18 pairs of pants, 6 vests, 9 collars, 72 pairs of socks, 25 towels, 7 handkerchiefs, 5 comforts, old cloths, 15 bottles of wine, 4 bottles cordial, 5 bottles brandy, 8 doz. eggs, hams, beef, butter, milk, coffee, tea, sugar, dried fruit, corn starch, gelatin, meal, grits, flour, rice, jelly, pickles, all-spice, pepper, preserves, sage, etc." *The Southern Confederacy* listed the following items as being sent to the soldiers in the field: 20 bottles of wine, assorted bottles of catsup, porter, cordials, honey, mustard, and castor oil. Other items sent were goose quills, home-made ink, stationery made from wrapping paper, corncob pipes with cane stems, and red pepper.

Some soldier's aid societies concentrated on specific items. The following was from the *Memphis Daily Appeal*, May 5, 1864. "The Ladies' Soldiers Aid Association of Albermarle County, VA ....since the 1st of December last, have had wool carded and spun, and nine hundred pair of socks knit for the Government, besides giving away three hundred pair of their own." The construction of uniforms, quilts and blankets were also taken on by the societies.

In an exhibit from the Museum of the Confederacy's, exhibit "A Woman's War, Southern Women, Civil War, and the Confederate Legacy" a replica of a box sent by the Greenville Ladies' Association, sent July 11, 1862, contained 2 comforters, 19 pillow cases, 10 sheets, 16 new shirts, handkerchiefs, 2 pairs socks, 5 old shirts, 4 pairs drawers, linen and cotton rags, soap, dried fruit, crackers, cocoa, tea, arrowroot, 4 bottles blackberry cordial, 2 bottles peppermint, pineapple jam and sage.

Not all the boxes were shipped via the express companies or through the government. A number of southern women found alternative means of delivering goods to the front. Lucy Nickolson Lindsay of Missouri managed to conceal under her specially made skirt, twenty-two pairs of socks and quinine and morphine were concealed in her hair. Other women left home and traveled to garrisoned camps in order to deliver goods from home.

The everyday efforts of the women are sometimes neglected in the study of the civil war but their contributions were monumental. They sacrificed their time, money, food, and comfort in order to provide for the soldiers and their endeavors deserve to be included civil war impressions. The sending of boxes are a great way to illustrate some of their contributions.

The preparation of the items to be placed in boxes, packing the boxes, or the delivery of boxes to the soldiers are possible areas for additional research and may be incorporated in impressions for living history interpreters. The research should not only be a matter of collecting items to pack, but should include the construction of proper shipping boxes; period correct packaging of the items placed in the boxes; and appropriateness of the items intended to be packed in the boxes. This is a wide open field and one that makes use of the various talents of living history interpreters.

Additional items that could be packed in boxes could include Bibles or testaments; books; letter paper, pens, ink and pencils; blackberry cordial in period style bottles; fresh or dried fruit depending on the scenario; root vegetables such as potatoes, onions, carrots, or turnips; cheese; coffee – real or ersatz; tea – real or herb; period candy; tobacco; period cookies (sugar or spice but not chocolate

chip, oatmeal, or peanut-butter); nuts; and chunks of brown sugar are just a few ideas. Billings also listed some of the more unusual items that were included in boxes: round-headed nails, hatchets, turkey, pickles, chocolate, condensed milk, sewing notions such as needles, thread, buttons and yarn. Bottles of intoxicating liquors were banned and were confiscated by the inspectors but creative ways were devised in which to smuggle in the forbidden liquor.

Information on how to address the boxes appeared in *Hard Tack and Coffee*. The sample address that Billings showed was:
Sergeant JOHN J SMITH
Company A,. 19th Mass. Regiment
SECOND BRIGADE, SECOND DIVISION, SECOND CORPS
ARMY OF THE POTOMAC,
STEVENSBURG, VA.
Care Capt. James Brown

As for the boxes to send the goods to the soldiers, Billings suggested that shoe-cases or common soap boxes, having at least a capacity of a peck, were a good size for shipping. Good's boxes wooden boxes made in various sizes and were regularly sold to customers by store owners. A typical sized good's box was 18 inches high, 10 ½ inches wide and 10 inches high. They were made of wooden slats with solid sides, tops and bottoms, not having the open space between the slats as modern orange crates have. Nails were used in the construction of the boxes. Straw, bran, or soft items were used to cushion the contents.

After the box is ready for delivery, it could be delivered to camp which offers another opportunity for a different scenario in which the soldiers could participate.

I hope that this has been of assistance to those wishing to included this activity in their impressions. If someone has any questions, please feel free to contact me.

References:

Billings, John D. *Hard Tack and Coffee*. Corner House Publishers. Williamstown, MA. 1987.

_____. *Facts, Principles and Progress*. United States Christian Commission. Philadelphia, October, 1863.

Goodrich, Frank B. *The Tribute: A Record of Munificence, Self-Sacrifice and Patriotism of the American People During the War for the Union.* Derby & Miller. New York, 1865.

_____. *Harpers Weekly*. Harper & Brothers. New York, January 4, 1862, September 6, 1862.

Joslyn, Mauriel Phillips (Editor), *Valor and Lace: The Roles of Confederate Women 1861 -1865*, Southern Heritage Press, Murfreesboro, TN, 1996.

Livermore, Mary A., *My Story of the War*, Da Capo Press, New York, 1995, originally published in Hartford, CT, 1887.

Macdonald, Anne L. *No Idle Hands: The Social History of Knitting*. Ballantine Books. New York, 1988.

McGuire, Judith, *Diary of A Southern Refugee During the War*. E. J. Hale & Son, New York, 1867.

_____. *Memphis Daily Appeal*, May 5, 1864 (courtesy of Vicki Betts)

Mescher, Virginia. *Historic Accounts: A Study of Store Ledgers from the Mid-Nineteenth Century with a Searchable Database*. Vintage Volumes. Burke, VA, 2001.

_____, *Peterson's Lady's Magazine,* Philadelphia, various issues, 1861.

Pryor, Mrs. Roger A. (Sarah Agnes Rice). *Reminiscences of Peace and War*. Macmillan Company. New York, 1904.

Putman, Sallie Brock. *Richmond During the War: Four Years of Personal Observation*. G. W. Carleton & Co. New York, 1867.

_____. *The Sanitary Commission of the U S Army: A Succinct Narrative of its Works & Purposes*. New York, 1864.

_____ . Steamboat Bertrand archeology notes. December, 1969.

Stone, Kate, *Brokenburn, The Journal of Kate Stone 1861 -1868*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1972.

_____. *A Woman's War*, exhibit at Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA, November 22, 1996 to September, 1997.

_____. *Xenia Torchlight.* March 19, 1862 and July 16, 1862. (courtesy of Catherine Wilson)