

Foods of Soldiers and Officers in the 1860s

In a letter of April 23, 1867, Capt. Albert Barnitz in a camp near Fort Hays, Kansas, wrote about food. Barnitz was a captain in Lt. Col. George Custer's cavalry during the Indian Wars.

We are very poorly provided with the comforts of life. . . . The evening after we started my cook made the discovery that my box of provisions – canned fruit, butter, baker's bread, &c &c, had by mistake been put into the wrong wagon, and was left behind! I was fortunate enough to be invited to mess with a brother officer of the squadron – whose bill of fare however was not very choice – consisting mainly of hard bread and bacon, with an occasional can of preserved meats (chicken or turkey) and green peas. However, we managed to subsist in some fashion on buffalo meat and some other game as the country afforded.



Samuel Reader, a Topeka man who was a soldier during the Civil War, made this drawing (Kansas Historical Society).

Hardtack and Deficiency Disease

Some of the soldiers in the 1860s in Kansas who had only hardtack, bacon, and coffee to eat for weeks at a time were afflicted with scurvy, a disease caused by dietary deficiency. Capt. Barnitz wrote in May 1867:

The scurvy is very bad at camp now, not less than 75 cases being reported and all for want of a proper diet, and the men are perfectly crazy for canned fruits or fresh vegetables.

Nutrition: Vitamin C was the deficient nutrient in this diet.



Soldiers often soaked hardtack in water, then fried it with bacon.

Hardtack

As recently as World War I, hardtack was the staple food of traveling armies, who called it "sheet-iron," "tooth-dullers," "crown-breakers," or "worm castles." Soldiers dipped the hardtack in hot coffee to soften it. Soaked in water or coffee, hardtack was easier to eat.

All modern crackers are dimpled in the manner of hardtack, which was pricked with nail holes to keep it compact and breakable.

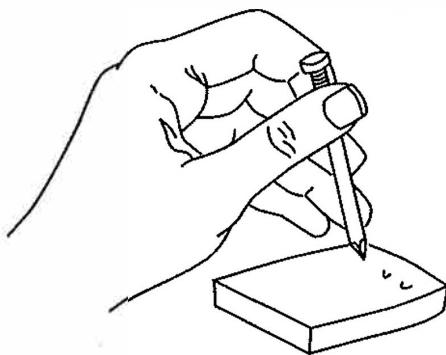
You need:

2 - 3 c flour
1/2 Tbsp salt
1/2 - 3/4 c water
2-quart bowl
spoon for stirring
table knife
rolling pin and breadboard
eight-penny nail
baking sheet

Do this:

Preheat oven to 250 degrees. In the bowl mix 2 cups of flour with the salt. Add water and stir until dough becomes too stiff to stir. Knead dough in bowl with hand, adding more flour to make it very dry. Press, pull, and roll the dough into a rectangle that can be divided into 3-inch squares of 1/3-inch thickness. Use a table knife to cut dough into squares.

Punch 9 holes through each square with the nail, being careful not to hurt yourself. Turn the squares over to punch holes in the same places on the other side as needed until the holes go all the way through the dough. Place dough squares on ungreased baking sheets, and bake for 4 hours, turning once half-way through. Bake until crisp and lightly browned. Cool before storing. Makes 6 pieces of hardtack.



Food Choice Guidelines: Hardtack is a "sometimes" food.

Iron	Protein	Vitamin A	Vitamin C	Vitamin B	Calcium	Fiber
yes	yes			yes/TRN		