

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

July 2017

Editor: Steve Johnson

Sundays on Alcatraz Brad Schall provided the impetus for the members of FOCWA to make a regular presence on Alcatraz every week. Several members have signed up to make sure one of us is on the island every Sunday. Sunday was picked because 1) it is easier to find parking in the neighborhood (free parking on Chestnut, Sansome, Montgomery, and other streets with no meters); 2) the island is often short of volunteers on that day; 3) Ranger John Cantwell is usually on the island that day, who is our liaison with the Park Service. On the day members are on the island, we try to do at least one program and one cannon drill, and position ourselves in the cannon room to answer questions. The usual schedule is: Gary Hormel on the first Sunday of the month; Steve Johnson on the second; Brad Schall on the third; and Constance Smith on the last Sunday. (Positions sometimes switch depending on necessity).

Dates to Remember

Saturday, August 19, 2017
Civil War Day at Ft. Point
10 am to 5 pm



Gary Hormel as Capt. Stewart, with volunteer Evelyn Mar

It is important that we make a constant presence on the island for several reasons. We are there to remind the public and the park management why Alcatraz is a National Park —it's not just about the Federal Prison. Second, we are there to honor those men who gave up part of their lives to ensure our state remained loyal to the Union cause. Third, we want people to know the important role California played during the Civil War.

Recently member Gary Hormel spent the day on the island, and he worked with NPS volunteer Evelyn Mar, who faithfully kept statistics on the programs Gary did that day:
Fort Alcatraz program 1: 122 attended
Fort Alcatraz Program 2: 78 attended
Several cannon demos: 92 total attended

As you can see, almost 300 people were informed about the island's military history while he was on the island. These numbers were recorded in the stats binder in the ranger office. We could always use more members to help us in this endeavor.

What Did Soldiers Eat on Alcatraz? For a historian, this can be a very tricky undertaking, because there are very few government records, letters, or journals relating to the daily routine on Fort Alcatraz, including meals. So one has to look at what people were eating in San Francisco at the time (which is only slightly easier to find), what kind of crops were being grown, what food providers and businesses were around in the 1860's, and what the army typically provided for its soldiers in the way of nutrition.

As described in *Hardee's Rifle and Light Infantry Tactics*, the typical rations for soldiers in camp were 20 oz, salted beef or pork, 12 oz. hard bread, 1 oz. compressed cube of dessicated vegetables; this was supplemented by (per 100 rations) 8 qts. navy beans, 10 lbs. rice, 10 lbs. coffee, 10 lbs. sugar, 2 qts. salt, 1 qt. vinegar.

The soldiers stationed on Alcatraz and at Fort Point had a definite advantage over field soldiers. Both forts had kitchens and ovens for the preparation of meals. We can deduce the men of Alcatraz must have had bread every day because of the ovens in the citadel, the fact that wheat was being grown in the Sacramento valley¹ and brought to San Francisco by boat, and that bread was considered a staple by the army. Thus the men did not have to break their teeth onhardtack biscuits. (One Kansas sergeant once wrote that he “was eating a piece of tack one morning and bit into something soft — a tenpenny nail.”)

We can also deduce the men had coffee every day because it was available in San Francisco. (William Bovee opened the first coffee bean roasting plant in 1850; his employee J.A. Folger later bought the business). No commander would ever think of depriving his men of coffee, and the quality of the beans, being shipped from Central and South America, was probably pretty good. (Unlike a lot of coffee served in Union camps, which “could float a horseshoe, or dissolve it.”)

The men probably did not have to suffer using the dessicated vegetables (which they called “desecrated vegetables”) because of gardens at the Presidio and later on Angel Island, and the availability of fresh vegetables in the city. Both Chinese and Italian immigrants planted gardens in the city, and produce was beginning to arrive from farms in Santa Cruz. Such vegetables as artichokes, cabbage, spinach, peas, carrots, asparagus, onions, turnips, were available in produce markets. Potatoes did not become a major crop for another decade but could be found. Apples from Sonoma County and Monterey County were making their way to San Francisco, as well as berries, peaches, plums, and apricots from the Sacramento valley. Salmon, rockfish, mussels, oysters, etc. were abundant in the Bay and ocean.

We can deduce what was available by looking at the 1855 “Bill of Fare” of a very popular and economical restaurant in the city, the What Cheer House: (average laborer in S.F. earned \$1.50/day)²

Boiled mutton with oyster sauce, 10 cents
Roast beef with lima beans, 10 cents
Pig's feet, soused or in batter, 10 cents
Beefsteak and onions, with fried potatoes, 10 cents
Stewed mutton with bread, butter and potatoes, 5 cents

¹ by 1854 California was actually exporting wheat “California Agriculture” by Claude Hutchinson

² “Wages & Earnings in the United States 1860-1890” by Clarence Long, Ch. 5, pg. 76

Buckwheat cakes with honey, 5 cents
Clam chowder, 5 cents
Cup of chocolate (hot chocolate), 5 cents
Chicken pot pie, 20 cents
Porterhouse steak, 25 cents
Baked apples, 5 cents
Stewed prunes, 5 cents
Mammoth glass of Mason Celebrated Beer, 5 cents
Roast turkey and currant jelly, 25 cents
Hot oatmeal mush, 10 cents.” (from foodtimeline.org)

We see that popular meats were beef, chicken, mutton, and pork. Because there were both floods and drought in the 1860's, cattle production fell steeply. But the sheep population increased because of the demand for wool, so mutton was available when beef supplies were low. Chickens, eggs were plentiful.

James Anderson was a member of the Sanitary Commission who tried to improve the nutrition, sanitary practices, and cooking skills in Union camps. He later was commissioned as a captain in the army, and he wrote a book of recipes, *Camp Fires and Camp Cooking; or Culinary Hints for the Soldier*, which includes this recipe for a stew. (You can make this 1860's stew at home!)

Cut 2 pounds of beef roast into cubes 2 inches square and 1 inch thick, sprinkle with salt and pepper, and put in frying pan with a little pork fat or lard. Put them over a fire until well browned but not fully cooked, and then empty the pan into a kettle and add enough water to cover the meat. Add a handful of flour, two quartered onions, and four peeled and quartered potatoes. Cover and simmer slowly over a moderate heat for 3 ½ hours, skimming any fat that rises to the top. Then stir in 1 tablespoon of vinegar and serve. Other vegetables available, such as leeks, turnips, carrots, parsnips, and salsify, will make excellent additions.

(from [the historykitchen.org](http://thehistorykitchen.org))



I would like to think that after a cold day's work on the island, the soldiers on Alcatraz could sit down to a hot meal such as Captain Anderson's stew, and for a time forget about the isolation, monotony, and dreary fog, and enjoy the fruits of California's agriculture — something we today sometimes take for granted.

Kitchen at Soldier's Rest,
Alexandria, VA, 1864