

Episode 169: Winter Camps

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As New Year's Day 1864 dawned, most states east of the Mississippi found themselves at the mercy of one of the most brutal cold fronts of the war. Temperatures below zero were recorded as far south as Memphis and civilians and soldiers alike struggled to stay warm and fed. The bitter temperatures were being felt as far south as the Gulf of Mexico. As in other winters of the war, hostilities were far from most people's minds and most soldiers found themselves suffering the season in winter encampments.

During the warmer months, armies generally moved from conflict to conflict and soldiers either slept in tents or out in the open. During winter, when battles were few and roads often impassable, the soldiers built more permanent camps. The housing that constituted these winter camps depended on the surrounding materials and on the ingenuity of the soldiers. Usually the huts were made of logs and chinked with stone and mud. When possible, the huts included a fireplace and chimney. Sometimes a bed of dry leaves was raked onto the floor to provide a sleeping surface, in other cases wooden bunks were built. The roofs were generally from wooden boards or tent canvas.

In addition to the houses, the camps included streets, sutlers' shops, churches and prostitutes. Food was usually scarce and fresh water limited. These deficiencies combined with the typical lack of sanitation led to widespread outbreaks of disease in the camps. According to Lieutenant Henry Abbott of the 20th Massachusetts Infantry: ““...*within a few hours of Washington, men are dying of scurvy because they haven't transportation enough to give us potatoes & onions. Some of my men are in a horrible state. They can press their thumb into their legs & leave the dent there exactly as if they were putty.*”

As the war progressed, winter camps for the Confederates became generally more lacking in amenities than did those of the Unions. This was indicative of a general lack of food and supplies in the Confederacy year-round that was exacerbated in the winter months.

However, it was not all misery in the camps. In addition to church services, the men occupied themselves with sports, writing letters home, card games and music. And of course the officers insisted on constant drilling to keep their men sharp for the fights to come in the spring. If the weather permitted, gigantic snowball fights were common. In January 1863, one of history's largest snowball fights erupted in the Confederate winter quarters along the Rappahannock River. What began as a small fight between Texas regiments escalated into a massive brawl involving 9,000 men. Because some men were injured by rock-filled snowballs, Confederate general James Longstreet banned snowball fights after the incident.

During holiday times, many men put up small Christmas trees outside their huts and decorated them with whatever they could find. Many of the modern Christmas traditions were already in place by the time of the war. Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* had been published in 1843 and the common version of Santa Claus as drawn by Thomas Nast was popularized during the war. Of course, in addition to raising some spirits, the holidays depressed many of the men as they thought about what they were missing at home.