

Bacon by Bollet

By Alfred Jay Bollet, M.D.

One of the problems in dealing with original medical material of the Civil War is the difference in the meaning of various terms at the time. It reminds me of the famous statement by George Bernard Shaw about Britain and America being two countries divided by the same language. An instance of language dividing the people who fought the Civil War from us today is the use of the term “bacon.” Bacon was one of the staples of the diet of Civil War troops on both sides. The basic ration per man on the Union side at the beginning of the war was: “one pound of biscuit (hardtack, pilot breads or crackers), 22 ounces of bread or flour and 1 1/4 pounds of fresh or salt meat, or 3/4 pound of bacon. (To that were added: eight gallons of beans, ten pounds of rice or hominy, ten pounds of coffee, 15 lbs of sugar, 4 gallons of vinegar, 2 lbs of salt per 100 men.)¹ When they ran out of it, troops complained of the lack of availability of bacon. Now I like bacon, but it seems to me that the concentration on it as a nutritional staple seems strange, especially given its fattiness and relatively low protein content, although those matters were of no concern at the time. A little investigation revealed that the term bacon used to mean salted or cured pork, and only recently has come to be used exclusively for thin strips of salted or smoked meat from the back and sides of a pig. Even modern dictionaries include definitions such as “South Midland and Southern U.S.: pork cured in brine, salt pork.”² A 1963 dictionary, the Funk and Wagnalls, New Standard Dictionary of the English Language, published in 1963, defines bacon as, “1. Salted and dried or smoked flesh of the hog, especially the back and sides.”³ Thus in the literature of the Civil War we find there was both bacon and fresh pork, the difference being whether or not the meat was cured or salted. Many examples are available to illustrate the meaning of the term “bacon”. One instance: after the Battle of Gettysburg, Dr. Simon Baruch remained behind with the desperately wounded Confederate troops, and he recorded that he had hired two horses to transport the supplies he obtained from the Sanitary Commission by “paying a shoulder of bacon.”⁴ When Grant moved his army south of Vicksburg and invaded Mississippi towards Jackson, ignoring General-in-chief Halleck’s warnings, he supplied his army with only “three days’ rations of hard-tack, coffee and salt,” and as for the rest, he obtained it from the countryside. His men feasted; in his own words, “Beef, mutton, poultry and forage were found in abundance. Quite a quantity of molasses and bacon was also secured from the country.” Bacon was thus a food similar to beef, mutton and poultry, although not quite as abundant in this instance.⁵ Most of the time, the lists of food available for rations show bacon in quantities equivalent to beef, or as in the instance below, equivalent to other cuts of meat from the hog. In the Official Reports for mid-1863 (Series 1, Vol. XXIV/3, p866) there is a report concerning the bacon that “Capt. George A. Woodward, department commissary, has on hand:

Bacon sides, in fine order

Pounds
270,000

Old sides bacon, in fine order	9,000
Old jowls, in fine order	5,000
Old sides, in bad order	65,000
Hams and shoulders, in bad order	30,000
Spoiled meat, too bad for issue	6,000
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Total	385,000

Similarly, the amount of bacon expected from a hog would indicate that it is the primary form of meat obtained from each animal:

“ I learn that the product of army supplies will amount annually to 25,000 head of beeves, equal to 10,000,000 pounds; 1,000 hogsheads of sugar; 100,000 gallons of sirup, equal by exchange to 4,000,000 pounds bacon; 10,000 head of hogs, equal to 1,000,000 pounds of bacon;” (Hogs were expected to average 200 lbs in weight, and each hog, thus, yielded about 100 lbs of bacon.)⁶

The embattled and vilified Commissary General of the Confederacy, Col. Lucius B. Northrop, was constantly blamed for the insufficient quantities of food available for the troops, especially General R. E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia. In Northrop’s reply to Lee on July 23, 1863, he seems to have been using the word bacon as equivalent to hog, or else he meant the 50% yield of cured pork per hog: “Such has been my constant effort since the battle of Fredericksburg, on 11th and 13th of December last, ¼. Near half a million of pounds of bacon killed here alone enabled us to get along, and the most persistent and varied exertions to gather a large surplus of flour and wheat failed in consequence of the impossibility of procuring transportation.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,
L. B. Northrop.⁷

When the Confederate government tried to get farmers to turn their production of meat over to the government (at prices lower than they could get in the open market), the law stated: “... SEC. 12. That every farmer, planter or grazier shall exhibit to the assessor, on or about the first of March, eighteen hundred and sixty-four, an account of all the hogs he may have slaughtered since the passage of this act and before that time. After the delivery of this estimate to the post quartermaster hereinafter mentioned by the assessor, the said farmer, planter or grazier shall deliver an equivalent for one-tenth of the same in cured bacon, at the rate of sixty pounds of bacon to the one hundredweight of pork.”⁸ The expectation of obtaining 60 pounds of bacon per 100 pounds of pig (or porker) would rule out the meaning of the term as the kind of bacon we now consume. “Canadian bacon” is another example of using the term for a form of meat different that we usually mean by the term. At any rate, knowing it is cured pork makes it easier to understand the ration lists, the lists of the food available to the troops at various times, and what they actually ate.

Endnotes

- ¹ William Quentin Maxwell Lincoln's *Fifth Wheel. The Political History of the U.S. Sanitary Commission*. Longmans, Green & Co., New York, 1956, p 34
- ² The Random House Unabridged Dictionary, 2nd edition, New York, 1993 and 1987. 3 Funk and Wagnalls, New Standard Dictionary of the English Language, New York, Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1963.
- ⁴ Simon Baruch, *A Soldier's Story of Battle and Capture, Confederate Veteran* 1914; 22: 545:6.
- ⁵ Confederate Military History, Vol. 7, Mississippi, p 155.
- ⁶ Official Reports., Series I, Volume XXXV/2: Confederate correspondence, etc. from March 1 to November 13, 1864, p 606.
- ⁷ Official Reports, Series I, Volume LI/2 Confederate Correspondence, etc. p 743
- ⁸ Official Reports, Series IV, Volume II, Correspondence, etc. July 1, 1862-December 31, 1863 p522 and Series IV Vol. III, p 149.