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Talk Like a Nineteenth Century Soldier

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THE USE OF 19th century slang is one of the most challenging, but also one of the most interesting, aspects of the recreation of the Civil War soldier. Basically the English language has changed little since the 1860s, thanks, no doubt, to the efforts at standardization by Mr. Webster and others. But certain words and phrases, particularly those we call slang or informal language, are different.

Soldiers in the army developed many slang terms that probably saw little usage in civilian speech until the soldiers returned from the war. Some that described purely items associated with the war and army life probably disappeared from their vocabularies after their usefulness was ended.

In recreating speech for your first-person impression there are a couple of things to keep in mind. First of all, actual talking (just as today) was somewhat less formal among friends than between strangers and all talking was probably less structured and less formal than what was written. Thus letters, diaries, and books of the period are only partially reliable when trying to recreate speech. Overall, since no oral recordings exist from the period, the best source we have are letters and diaries actually written while in the army or shortly thereafter. Soldiers in the field and under stress are less likely to take the trouble to be formal and more likely to write in much the same way as they have been talking to their pards a few moments before. In the same manner, letters to family members and friends, especially those of the same age, are more likely to contain contemporary slang. As we know from our experiences these days, slang is more likely to be shared between members of the same generation than with one's elders.

The first problem in recreating the way a Civil War soldier may have talked is to consider what words he would not have used. Most new words, slang or otherwise, which have appeared since 1865 have been due, directly or indirectly, to advances in technology. Thus our soldier would have little use for such words as "jet," "airplane," "television," or "telephone." "Car" to a Civil War soldier meant a railroad car, not an automobile.

In general the person doing living history is fairly safe as long as he stays away from some of the more obvious slang terms, particularly ones in current use. Most slang from 1865-1940 has either gone out of use or has been absorbed into formal usage. Modern slang, including words such as "hip," "cool," "far out," etc., should be avoided. Interestingly enough most have Civil War equivalents that we will discuss directly.

Another thing to avoid is the mentioning of people, places, or events that happened after the Civil War. Thus the Civil War soldier would be dumbfounded by such words as "World War II," "Adolph Hitler," "nuclear weapons," "tanks," etc. Name brands, such as Cola-Cola, should be avoided also.

The best guideline is to keep your mind on subjects that pertain to the period. If you do this, your speech will tend to fit the period as well. As a soldier your most immediate concerns are your everyday affairs, food, clothing, and survival. Beyond these concerns are your comrades, family, political convictions, etc.

Food was most important to most soldiers. There never seemed to be enough and what there was was bland and often spoiled. The following are some soldier terms for their food and drink:

sow belly: bacon or salt pork
sow-bosom: bacon or salt pork
java: coffee
sinkers: biscuits
slap-jacks: pancakes
salt horse: salted meat
grab-a-root: eat, go to mess
baled hay: desiccated vegetables
dog-robber: soldier cooking for a mess
smoked Yanks: results of sitting around a fire
rasher: two pieces of bacon

Items of equipment often had their slang equivalents. Here are a few:

horse collar: blanket roll
tar bucket: tall forage cap
beehive: knapsack
Uncle Sam's blue pills: bullets
lead pills: bullets
pill box: cartridge box

Other terms:

fast trick: prostitute, whore
soiled dove: prostitute, whore
hooker: prostitute, whore
a shake of the lips: a kiss
yaller dogs: staff officers
suckers: men from Illinois
bazoo: nose
phiz: face
gullet: throat
blue mass (U.S.): sick call
puny list (C.S.): sick call
fresh fish: raw recruits
veal: raw recruits
bug juice: whiskey
grapevine: rumors
blow on him: tell on
diggins: camp
shebang: brush arbor
draughts: checkers
grayback: louse
japaning: stealing
cabbaging: stealing
let 'er rip: keep it up
horn-swoggle: cheat, con
cracker line: supply line
rocks: dice or money
Who wouldn't be a soldier? Who cares?
all shit and no sugar: no fun

A "wag" was a jokester or troublemaker, sometimes also called a "rogue." A "keen" was a witty or funny remark. If a general got whipped or defeated the soldiers might say he "got his comb cut." A "bore" is embarrassment or chagrin. "Cruel" was sometimes used as an adjective meaning "very." So a soldier might say that the job was "cruel easy." "Hunky" or "hunky-dory" meant everything, good, magnificent, or superb. General Sherman's men thought he was a "hunky boy."

"Boy" seems to have been generally used to refer to everyone in the army. The men in a unit almost invariably referred to each other as "the boys" even though many of them were old enough to be called men. Soldiers also called each other "comrade," and would not have had in mind the use of the term in more recent times by former enemies of the U.S.

All soldiers on the same side were friends at heart, be they cavalry, infantry, veterans, or recruits. The plea "Help me, comrade" would spark instant feelings of loyalty and compassion in the hearer. This even extended often to enemy soldiers, especially if said private to private.

Rank and officers were often the target of derisive slang. The temporary rank of "brevet" was made fun of. A mule was called a "brevet horse" and a turkey vulture was called a "brevet turkey." A brigadier general was referred to as a "jigadier brindle," a lieutenant as a "LEF-tenant" and a captain as a "capting." None of these terms were particularly complimentary.

Enemy soldiers had a variety of slang terms for each other. "Scamp" and "cuss" seem to be the most derisive. When a Confederate soldier ran away, the Yankees would say he was "going in search of his rights." His comrades, however, would say he "skedaddled."

Soldiers were fond of using "mister" as an adjective for almost everything. Thus a soldier might say "I took mister canteen by the neck," or "mister bullet whined in my ear." Such phraseology may have been from the Uncle Remus stories most of them heard as children.

Another adjective used almost universally was "a sure enough." Thus you have "a sure enough chair," "a sure enough good time," or "a sure enough fight." A common slang usage was the letter "a" used before verbs, such as "a-goin'," "a-shootin'," or "a-runnin'." Another common usage was "had oughta" or "hadn't oughta" in place of "should" or "shouldn't."

Many slang expressions that we use today were common at the time of the Civil War: "short and sweet," "raining cats and dogs," "okay," "snug as a bug in a rug," "chief cook and bottle washer," "drunken fool," and "scarce as hen's teeth."

In addition to the term "hunky" or "hunky-dory" was the word "bully," which was used almost universally to describe anything good or superb. "The bully boys of Company C" would be a common phrase used by a soldier to describe his outfit. "Bully fer you" expressed a job well done.

In every army there are catchy phrases whose meaning has been lost by repeated usage by thousands of men, if

they had any original meaning at all. Such nonsense phrases might be carved on furniture or written on walls, although this practice was less common in the Civil War than in World War II, when "Kilroy was here" was scribbled all over the globe by our far-flung armies. The Civil War equivalents to Kilroy include "grab-a-root," which originally meant to get something to eat, especially a plant root such as a carrot or potato. "Here's your mule" started out as a jibe at anyone riding a horse, but eventually degenerated into a general expression appropriate for all occasions and having little or no meaning. Other expressions used were: "hain't got the sand," "git thar, Eli," "same old regiment only we've drawed new clothes." "go fer 'em," "hunt yer holes," and "bully fer you."

When referring to home, or the northern states in general, the Union soldier simply called it "God's country." Back home in God's country a "copperhead" was a northerner with southern sympathies. Before the Civil War this term was used to describe a vindictive person. In even earlier usage a copperhead was a white person who was either living with or friendly to Indians. By 1862 northerners with southern sympathies were also called "Vallandighamers" after imprisoned Ohio Congressman Clement Vallandigham, a leader of the Peace Democrats.

When a soldier joined up his wife became a "war widow," and this didn't necessarily mean that the soldier had "gone above." If a soldier was killed in battle his comrades might say he was "mustered out." A soldier who was always able to find an excuse to not be there when the "minnies" began to sing was later called a "coffee boiler." If this shirker left in the middle of a fight he would have "skedaddled." This was a common 19th century term from the Greek word "skedannuani" meaning to split up.

"Contraband" meant anything a soldier was not supposed to have in camp. "Contrabands," however, generally meant escaped slaves but often meant any black person. While a soldier was taking his refreshments or "soldier's retreat" he probably would be scratching at his "army crumbs" or lice. When discussing a fight with the enemy soldiers often called it "shooting pigs." When soldiers were told that replacements, or "subs" were on the way, or that they were about to be issued new equipment, a typical response would be "good, if true." Around camp favorite card games were euchre or old sledge for enlisted men, and perhaps chess for officers.

Money had different terms than today. Federal paper money (inflated to the point that one dollar was worth 39 cents in gold) were "greenbacks" because of the color of ink. Confederate currency (inflated to a point that one dollar was worth 1.7 cents in gold) were called "bluebacks" for the same reason. Both governments spent more than they had and forced the value of paper currency down and metals up. For this reason they had difficulty keeping minted coins in circulation. The federal government's solution to this was "fractionals," tiny paper bills in 3, 5, 10, 15, 25, and 50 cent denominations. Fractionals were used until 1876. They were unpopular with troops and civilians because of inflation and their size made them easily lost. They were called "shin plasters."

Civil War America was a more religion-conscious country than today and swearing reflected this. Taking the Lord's name in vain was a more serious matter than we sometimes think today. Modern swearing, with its sexual connotations, did not begin until the 1870s, when religious oaths began to lose their impact. Blasphemy was a large part of swearing during the Civil War and mild oaths were the most common. Soldier vocabulary was rich in expletives and four-letter words, but they often toned down their profanity, especially in the presence of ladies. Thus exclamatory phrases might be "I killed the cuss" instead of a stronger noun. "Dog bite it" instead of "damn it," "by hemp" instead of "by God," "Crismus" instead of "Christ," and "I don't give a red" instead of "I don't give a damn." "Thunder" and "tarnation" were common substitutes for "damn."

Here are more examples of oaths that can add color to discourse without shocking the public. The dates are the approximate times that the words came into use:

botheration, 1801
by the great hornspoon, 1844
by Jupiter, 1841
hail Columbia, 1854
good gravy, 1856
lordy, 1839
the deuce, 1856
blame my buttons, 1835
by ginger, 1856
dog my cats, 1839
by Judas, 1842
what the blazes, 1856
gracious alive, 1840
gee whillikens, 1857
dad blamed (or blasted), 1830

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