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Camp Pastimes

Life in camp could become quite boring. Most men joined the army to see action and the daily drudgery of cutting wood for cooking fires and performing guard duty wore on their nerves. To relieve that boredom, the soldiers would look for anything that they could do to make the time pass more quickly.

There are things that fall into the category of a pastime, meaning that they help to pass the time. Pastimes can be a group activity or enjoyed by one individual alone. Many pastimes that we know today were also popular in the days of the American Revolutionary War. Pastimes are usually categorized as 'parlor games' because they do not require large, outdoor spaces in which they are played; they can be played indoors, in many cases played around a table.

Playing cards are believed to have been created in China during the Tang Dynasty (*circa* 9th Century AD). By the 11th Century, the cards had spread to Egypt and Arabia. Out of the Middle East, the cards emerged as the

Tarot, a fortune telling device. The Tarot spread into Europe by the 1300's, where they once more became associated with simple parlor games. It is as a simple parlor game that playing cards gained popularity among Revolutionary War soldiers.

Die (or the plural, dice) consisted of cube shapes carved out of animal bone, with a number of



dots (one through six) carved into each of the cube's six sides. Throwing or rolling the dice will

cause them to randomly land with one of the numbered sides aimed upward. Dice are believed to have been created in the region of present-day Iran some time between 2800 and 2500 BC. Some archaeologists might argue that the game of *senet* played in Egypt as early as prior to 3000 BC utilized a sort of dice in the form of flat sticks which indicated the number of moves a player could make. During the Revolutionary War, two soldiers might play against each other to see who could roll the highest sum of two dice. There were also board games in which dice were rolled to determine the number of spaces a man would move a small object, called a pawn, forward along a path

game closely associated with our present-day ‘croquet’ or ‘polo’, and played by hitting a ball with a mallet to make it roll over the ground. Some men played a game called *fives*, which was similar to our present-day game of tennis, in which a ball would be hit back and forth using the hand (of *five* fingers) as a sort of racket or paddle. The game developed in the English colonies out of the French game, *Jeu de paume*, translated as ‘palm game’. During the summertime, soldiers might take advantage of a nearby stream or pond to pass the time swimming.

Note: The attached engraving, while not showing Revolutionary War soldiers, does show

soldiers engaged in the pastimes of camp life.

Samuel Haws was a young man from Wrentham, Massachusetts who joined the American forces in the midst of the fervor raised by the skirmishes at Lexington and Concord. On the afternoon of the day when the shot was heard around the world, Haws began a



laid out on the board.

Athletics, or *games of exercise* as they were then called, were not limited to tossing a ball back and forth. Organized games with which we are acquainted today, such as football, basketball, baseball and so forth, were not established as early as the 1770’s. But there were a few ‘games of exercise’ that had a long history prior to the 1770’s. Cricket was one of those games, having been developed in England as early as the 1500’s. With a name sounding similar to cricket was ‘wicket’, a

journal. His entries for the first couple of days beginning on 19 April 1775 detailed his company going here and going there. Then on the 21st, his entries began to repeat themselves: “*Nothing remarkable this day.*” Young Haws’ boredom was alleviated on the 13th of October. On that day his journal entry stated: “*I went a chestnuting with a number of respectable gentlemen that belonged to the army and we had a rifle frolick and came home about 10 Oclock.*” The thing he called a ‘rifle

frolick' was shooting at a mark with the object being the winning of a bottle of some sort of liquor.

The last pastime that will be mentioned was not an enjoyable one for some soldiers. John Trumbull, the artist, wrote an autobiography in 1835. Having been an aide-de-camp to General George Washington and later and adjutant under General Horatio Gates, Trumbull was experienced with the War. His paintings, drawn from his personal experiences during the War, earned him the title of 'Painter of the Revolution'. Trumbull told, in his autobiography, the story of particular pastime, engaged in once and thankfully only once. In May 1775, while the Continental Line was coming into being around Boston, General Thomas issued General Orders which included notice of a small reward for every enemy cannonball picked up and delivered to the General's headquarters. In Trumbull's words: "*This soon produced the intended effect ~ a fearless emulation among the*

men; but it produced also a very unfortunate result; for when the soldiers saw a ball, after having struck and rebounded from the ground several times, (en ricochet,) roll sluggishly along, they would run and place a foot before it, to stop it, not aware that a heavy ball long retains sufficient impetus to overcome such an obstacle. The consequence was, that several brave lads lost their feet, which were crushed by the weight of the rolling shot. The order was of course withdrawn, and they were cautioned against touching a ball, until it was entirely at rest. One thing had been ascertained by this means, the caliber of the enemy's guns ~ eighteen pounds. Thirteen inch shells were also occasionally fired, some of which exploded, at first, to our no small annoyance and alarm; but some of these also being picked up, (having failed of igniting,) were carried to head-quarters, and by this means their dimensions were also ascertained."



Straw For The Troops

In his *General Orders* for 2 November 1777, General George Washington directed that the Division and Brigade Quarter Masters were to "*provide straw for the troops, taking none that is not threshed.*" Earlier that year, on 17 August, the General in his *General Orders*, stated that "*The ground being very wet, the Quarter Master General is to procure as much straw (from which the grain has been threshed) as possible, and distribute the same in the most equal manner among the troops.*" On 14 June 1781, General Washington's *General Orders* directed that the Quartermaster General was "*immediately to make the best provision of straw in his power at or near Peekskill for the use of the Troops who are to be*

encamped at that place."

So what was the purpose of the straw for the troops? General Washington's *General Orders* which he issued on 1 October 1781 from his headquarters 'before York' provided a hint at the answer. He stated: "*The Quarter Master General is directed to use effectual Measures to obtain a quantity of Straw sufficient for the men to lodge upon.*"

When the army stopped and made camp for the night, the men set up tents. While the officers' tents tended to measure fourteen feet long, ten and one-half feet broad and eight feet high, to sleep two, the tents provided for the privates measured more like six and one-half feet square and five feet

high to sleep five. Some accounts recorded as many as eight soldiers per tent. And in 1778, a Captain Pinckney claimed that his troops had to sleep twelve per tent. Because of the crowded conditions, some soldiers opted to sleep out of the jam-packed tents and in the open air. During the winter, when the armies came to a halt for an extended camp, log cabins were built and wooden bunks were installed on which six to eight men would sleep.

Officers tended to have folding camp beds which were essentially cots. The cots were made by stretching a piece of fabric, such as linen, over a light-weight wood frame. Sleeping on one of the

cots was preferable to sleeping on the ground, and was one of the perks of being an officer.

In all cases, whether in a tent or in a log cabin, the privates were given straw with which to make their beds. The straw made the hard ground or a hard wooden bunk more comfortable. Bags filled with straw and leaves made crude mattresses. Pillows were unheard of. But after a hard day of either marching or chopping down trees to make the camp, the soldiers probably fell asleep before they could be bothered by the lack of a pillow.



The next meeting of the
Frontier Patriots Chapter
of the Sons of the American Revolution
will be held at Hoss's restaurant
at Business Rt 220, Bedford, PA
on Saturday, 13 September 2025
starting at 12 Noon.

I am very happy to announce to anyone who is not already aware of it, that the renovation of the Engagement of Frankstown Memorial has been completed. A semi-circular stone wall has been constructed 'behind', or rather to the west of the obelisk shaped monument. The top edge of the semi-circular wall bears fifteen metal plates engraved with the names of the Patriots killed during the Engagement of Frankstown. A lower, curb-like straight wall stretches from the semi-circular wall to define the boundary between the shale and the yard spaces. Various flowering shrubs and plants were then planted to add landscaping touches to the memorial.

On Saturday, 20 September the memorial will be rededicated (starting at 1:00pm). I would hope that every Compatriot member of the Frontier Patriots Chapter who resides in this central-PA region would join us at the dedication ceremony. If you do plan to come, bring a lawn chair and if will continue whether rain or shine, so if it looks like rain, bring an umbrella.

For those of you that receive this newsletter by US mail, if you have an email address, we would appreciate you informing us of it to use for future newsletters. Printing and mailing these newsletters is not that expensive, but it is time consuming. Please send to our Secretary Larry Smith at schmitt@motherbedford.com

Frontier Patriots Chapter website:

<https://frontierpatriots.com>