

Jerry Morris

**AN ARMY MOVES
ON ITS STOMACH**



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Seminole Wars Historic Foundation, Inc. (dba: Seminole Wars
Foundation, Inc.)
35247 Reynolds St.
Dade City, FL 33523

www.seminolewars.us

AN ARMY MOVES ON ITS STOMACH:

AMERICAN ARMY FOOD IN THE 1830's

by
Jerry Morris

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Pictures courtesy
James Julian Morris

Series Editor
Frank Laumer

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Jerry Morris grew up in Hillsborough County Florida. He joined the U.S. Army in the 1950's, was assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina where he graduated from Jump School and took Airborne Artillery Training. Transferred to Europe two years later, he took further schooling as a mechanic and truck driver in Fussen Germany. Discharged after five year's service he returned to Tampa Florida where he lives with his wife Linda.

Jerry's interest in the Seminole Wars began in 1988 when he joined the reenactment of Brevet Major Francis Langhorne Dade's ill-fated march from Fort Brooke [Tampa] Florida in 1835. He is the co-author (with Jeffrey Hough) of *The Fort King Road; Then and Now*, a member of the board of directors of the Seminole Wars Foundation and past president of the Dade Battlefield Society.

AN ARMY MOVES ON ITS STOMACH

I knew nothing of Major Francis Langhorne Dade or the Seminole Indians when I read an article in the Tampa Tribune in December 1988 about a hike planned by the Dade Battlefield Society. The Society was accepting volunteers to recreate the march in the winter of 1835 of Major Dade and his command of 108 officers and men. According to the article, they had left Ft. Brooke (Tampa) on the 23rd of December to reinforce Ft. King (present-day Ocala) one hundred miles north. Ambushed by Seminole Indians on the morning of the 28th, only two soldiers had survived the day-long battle to make it back to Ft. Brooke.

It sounded like an interesting hike. I went to a meeting of the Society at the Dade Battlefield State Historic Site in Bushnell. I learned that Dade's battle began the Second Seminole War, at six years and eight months, the longest Indian war in American history. Founded in 1987, the Society is a volunteer organization whose purpose is to raise public awareness of the battle, its causes and results. The reenactment of their march would call attention to this tragic and forgotten part of American history. I signed up.

Dan Marshal, a ranger from Fort Foster at Hillsborough River State Park offered to loan me the type of uniform that Dade's men had worn, in addition to a musket, bayonet, cartridge box, and haversack, all the equipment that a soldier would have had on the march. A couple of weeks later we were ready. We would follow the route of the Ft. King Road, a twenty foot wide path cleared through the Florida wilderness in 1824, the road that Dade's command had traveled. To avoid the downtown traffic in Tampa we began at the point where the road crossed the Little Hillsborough River, seven miles north of Fort Brooke, where Dade and his men had spent their first night. We walked in two columns as they had, as close to the old road as possible, camping each night in the same places they had camped. There was one big difference however - someone brought us a good meal every morning and evening.

After a few days on the road I got to wondering, "What did those soldiers eat?" No one seemed to know. I knew what modern army rations were from my service with the 82nd Airborne Division in the 1950's, but I knew nothing of rations in the "Old Army". Most thought they had some salt pork and hard bread, some thought maybe beans, but none were sure of the amounts. We completed our hike on the sixth day just as Major Dade had but were met with a hot breakfast instead of battle. The question about their food stayed with me. I decided to learn something about it.

I started my research at the John Germany Tampa library. I found that from the Revolution through the Civil War the field rations for an American soldier were mostly hard bread, salt pork and dried beans, described sometimes as “not much, but enough to keep you going.” I had heard that Napoleon had said, “An army moves on its stomach.” If this is true, the early American armies must have moved slowly. Their rations were light enough for each man to carry his own and could be cooked in small tin buckets in a four man mess. The buckets were carried by the cooks.

Then I found a history of Dade’s march and battle titled *Massacre!* written by Frank Laumer which included a rough list of the amount of rations that each soldier carried in his haversack; eighteen ounces of hard bread (it was not called hardtack until the Civil War) and twelve ounces of salt pork. In addition they would have carried on their supply wagon two quarts of salt, four quarts of vinegar, eight quarts of beans or peas, four pounds of coffee and eight pounds of sugar per day to be rationed out among one hundred men. It was a start but I wanted to know more.

A librarian suggested that I look through their Special Section, a collection of rare and fragile books. After a couple of days of searching there I found some help but not much. I went back to the Librarian. This time she did a computer search of libraries throughout the country and found a book that seemed to be just what I needed, *Feeding The Frontier Army, 1775-1865* by Barbara K. Luecke. Unfortunately there was only one copy in

circulation and it was in a library in Dayton, Ohio. I had neither time nor money to go to Ohio but the librarian said there was a program called inter-library loan through which libraries loan books to each other. In about two weeks she called and said the book was in.

This book was like a bible for me. Barbara Luecke had been a ranger at Fort Snelling, a National Park in Wisconsin. The book is loaded with information on how supplies were ordered, shipped and received and also includes hundreds of recipes describing how everything was cooked. Luecke wrote at length about the flour. It seemed to be the most inspected food stuff of all. Three times a week the quantities of flour had to be checked by an officer against the number of loaves of bread baked. The officer had to sign the Bread Book to certify the amounts were correct. After baking, the bread was placed on shelves to age for three days before it was passed out to be eaten. Fresh bread was believed to be unhealthy.

Because of the remoteness of the early forts the soldiers did their best to become self-sufficient. Many had gardens to supplement their rations. Luecke wrote that at Ft. Snelling they had had 300 acres in corn and 200 acres in wheat, more a farm than a garden. Hundreds of forts were built in Florida during the Second Seminole War but none had gardens that would compare to the size of those at Ft. Snelling.

At Fort Brooke they did have a small orange grove for a time but the trees were killed in the freeze of 1834. They had plenty of seafood. Fishing was so good that two soldiers could take a row boat out in Tampa Bay and catch enough fish to fill the boat in two hours. This would feed everyone at the fort, the few settlers in the shacks around the fort, and still have leftovers to fertilize the garden. And hunting was good in the wilderness around the forts in Florida. Deer, turkey, hogs, rabbits, squirrels and gopher turtles were all plentiful. Of course the soldiers knew how to cook the cabbage palms that were everywhere. It was called swamp cabbage and is still eaten today by country folks in the know.

Based on the recipes that I had found I came up with approximate amounts for a soldiers ration (all measurements are dry except of course the vinegar); eighteen ounces of hard bread cut into three inch squares, (seven pieces for each of the two meals cooked at camp and seven pieces to carry in the soldier's haversack), twelve ounces of salt pork cut into three pieces (four ounces for each of the two cooked meals and four ounces to carry in his haversack along with the hard bread to snack on during the days march). Their ration included two and one-half ounces of peas or beans (for two meals, not one), one and one-quarter ounces of sugar (usually molasses sugar pressed into a cone shape wrapped in paper and handed out in portions by the cook), five-eighths of an ounce of salt (most likely sea salt in Florida), three-

quarter ounces of coffee and one and a quarter ounces of vinegar (used in the peas to reduce the gas and prevent scurvy).

A good cleaning agent, the vinegar was also used by the soldier to brush his teeth. His tooth brush consisted of a straight



bone handle with slots cut into one end and Boars hair stuffed into the groves and glued, looking very much like modern ones except that the bristles were very coarse.

Having learned something about the food I decided to make a display of a soldier's daily rations. I was able to find some small glass jars with glass lids held on by wire hinges, just the size I needed to hold the small amounts of rations. I placed the correct amounts of each food in a jar and sealed them with the wire clip and labeled them. I found a small wooden box to hold the jars and another for the hard bread. I cut out a piece of wood the same size as twelve ounces of salt pork, wrapped it in brown paper and tied it with string to start my display. I looked up the names of beans and peas they had eaten and decided on pinto beans, coffee beans and sugar broken into small pieces, all in the correct amounts. I was surprised and pleased to find the molasses sugar still in a cone shape at the local grocery. I put five-eighths of an ounce of sea salt in one jar and vinegar in another. I used balsamic vinegar because it was dark and would show up better in the sealed jar. These all fit in my little box. The display was beginning to take shape.

The hard bread was next. I found a recipe in Luecke's book that called for four cups of unbleached all-purpose flour, (they used the best that could be found), one and one-half cups of water and a half-teaspoon of salt. I preheated the oven to 425 degrees, put the flour in a bowl, mixed the salt in with the water and added



it to the flour. I stirred it with a fork until it was mixed well and the flour became a ball. I sprinkled some dry flour on a flat surface to roll out the dough, sprinkled more flour on top of the ball and rolled it out until it was about one-eighth of an inch thick. Cut into three inch squares, it made about twenty three pieces. I placed the squares in ungreased baking pans and punctured each side twice with a fork. This lets the steam out, just like modern crackers. After fifteen minutes I removed them from the oven, turned them over and cooked them for an additional fifteen minutes. (Every oven is different, it might take longer in yours.) They should be light brown when done. If all the water is cooked out and they are stored properly the bread will last three years or longer. I have some pieces that are four years old and still good. When I weighed

the hard bread cold I was amazed to find that twenty one pieces weighed exactly eighteen ounces, the same as the soldier's ration. My display now had the amount of food a soldier was given every day, the small jars in one box and the hard bread in another. It was a simple display that anyone could understand.

I was at Dade Battlefield a few days after I completed it and met Dr. John Mahon, the head of the History Department at the University of Florida. Dr. Mahon was very tall and looked intimidating to people who did not know him but he was very gracious. I asked him to come out to my car and see my display. He examined each bottle and a piece of the bread. He didn't say anything for a moment or two. Finally he grinned and said, "You know, I have written about this food but I have never seen it". We discussed it for a few minutes and he went back inside. Later in the afternoon he hailed me down. He said "I have been looking for you. I wanted to thank you for making that display and showing it to me." It was the proudest moment I have had with my display.

I was at the battlefield again a few weeks later and Barbara Roberts, the park manager, told me that a Seminole, Billy Cypress, was bringing some Seminole children to the park from the Indian reservation near Clewiston. Their elders wanted to teach them some of their history. Barbara asked if I would come back on Saturday dressed in my uniform and show the children what the soldiers ate. I made up enough of the hard bread for each child to have a sample. I also took some wild honey to go on the bread.

They all enjoyed it and asked for seconds. I have used the honey with the bread ever since.

Later on I took the display to the Battlefield Society's booth at the Sumter County Fair and explained the rations and handed out samples. By this time I had gotten a musket like the ones that Dade's men carried. I dry fired it and they could see the spark the flint made as it hit the frizzen. They all seemed to enjoy it so the next time I went I carried all my gear and let the people fire the musket themselves.



By this time I had learned how the meals were cooked. When the soldiers came to the place they were to camp for the night, they divided into what was called a four man mess. This meant one man would cook and the other three would make camp. One hundred soldiers meant twenty-five cooks would have to be around making the meals. Each man appointed cook drew rations from the supply wagon for their four man mess, a small cloth bag for each item and a small bottle for the vinegar. He would take



part of each man's share to prepare breakfast and supper. To start supper he would cut up sixteen ounces of salt pork in small pieces and put them in a tin cook pot, a little bigger than a one gallon paint can and with the same kind of wire handle or bail. He then put the lid on and placed it over the fire to cook all the grease out.

While this was cooking he broke up twenty-four ounces of hard bread into pieces the size of a quarter and crushed them with his mortar and pestle. He added the bread and five ounces of beans to the pot and enough water to bring it within an inch of the top. The pot hung over the fire for about two hours, then some vinegar was added and supper was ready. Each soldier got his share of four ounces of salt pork, six ounces of hard bread and one and a quarter ounces of beans. In the cooking process the dry bread would soak up the grease, water and the juice from the beans and swell up like dumplings. It makes some of the best beans you'll ever eat.



After supper the cook would start breakfast with the same amount and same food used for supper. By this time the big fire would be burned down to embers. The cook would dig a hole beside the coals and place the pot in the hole, rake hot coals all around it and over the top and cover it with dirt, leaving the handle exposed. In the morning he would pull the pot out of the ground and breakfast was ready. All he had to do was add water to the coffee grounds and heat it up. It was the same thing day after day on a march until you reached another fort.

I had learned a lot about the food and the way the cooks made the meals, now I needed to get the pots and utensils. I found the cooking pot and coffee pot on line along with the utensils but everything was so expensive I couldn't afford to buy them. I told each of my five grown children about a different item and where to get it and suggested that they get it for me for Christmas. They all came through, right down to a set of sugar nippers.

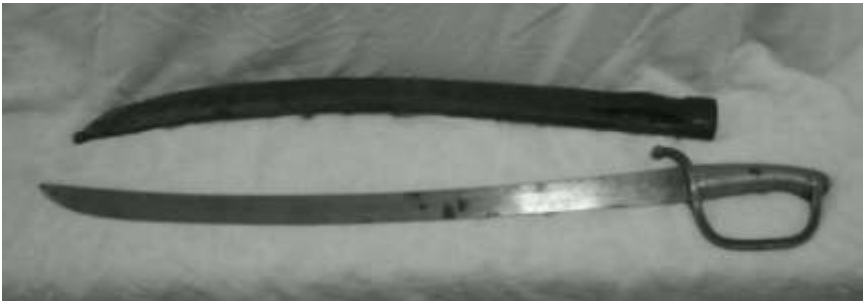




I wrote an article about the rations for the *Ft. Armstrong Gazette*, the Dade Battlefield newsletter. A teacher in Sarasota read it and wrote to the Society asking to get in touch with me. I called and she told me she was teaching Florida History to her fourth grade class. She asked if I could come to her school and talk about the soldier's food.

I took nearly everything I had. That was my first class at a school. The kids liked it so much another teacher asked if I would stay and give the same talk to her kids. I was glad to do it. About a week later I received a package in the mail. Opening it I found several two-by-three foot crayon drawings of my display and everything else I carried along with thank you notes from all the kids in both classes. There was even one from a boy who had been absent that day saying he wished he had been there. The teacher enclosed a note saying she gave the kids a quiz on what I had talked about and they all did very well on it so she knew they had learned from the class. I still have those pictures.

Since then I have presented my class at many schools, public and private. I have added to the presentation every year, including an original 1838 artillery officers' sword, a new period wall tent, a custom made hand-sewn 1835 artilleryman's shell jacket and utility shirt, broad fold trousers, new brogans and a folding table for my display. This year I made two rope beds with stuffed mattresses, three benches and two bread boxes for people to sit on under my tent fly. This has become my class room in the shade. I even have a straw broom to sweep the tent out.



In addition to each soldier's food and equipment, I had found that in 1835 each company was allotted three washer women. Their pay was free rations but each soldier paid them to wash their shirts, under drawers and socks. They usually made more money than their husbands. My wife Linda now helps me as my washer woman. We are working on her impression now. She has a period work dress and I have made her an 1830s wooden washboard, called a headstone board because it looks like a headstone on a soldier's grave. We need to add a wooden wash tub next and a bucket or two. Instead of the two small boxes I showed Dr. Mahon years ago, my display now fills a trailer.

Of all my collection, my most prized piece of equipment is an 1833 army forage cap, the most uncomfortable, hot and heavy hat you'll ever wear. I talk about it in my classes at length. What makes it special is that it was hand-made by Dr. Ray Giron from patterns he found at the Smithsonian. Ray had been a leader in the reenactments from the beginning and had made the tall leather hats for many of the soldiers. One of the first ones that he made he loaned to me to use on the march from Ft. Brooke in 1988. Later he sold it to me. Eighteen years later, in February 2006, I asked if he could do some work on it for me. He agreed and I sent it back to him for refurbishing. When he returned it looked like new. He even dyed the bottom of the brim green as they originally were. I asked him the price. He said there was no charge. I am proud to have known him and proud to have his signed label in my cap.



Through the years I have learned a lot about the soldier's food and equipment in the "Old Army" and have met many fine people, adults and children alike. I have also learned a great deal of respect for those men and women who struggled across this land through almost seven years of war. Red, white and black, they did their best.