

Hardtack – A Cowboy’s Snack

It has often been said that “an army marches on its stomach”, showing the importance of staying well supplied and fed. The same could be said of the cowboy and the need for those men riding in the saddle to stay well fed while they made their way up the trail. While at the end of a hard days ride the cowboy would have a chance to fill their stomach when they were able to stop for the night and gather around the chuck wagon for dinner, during the days work there weren’t many chances to stop and take a snack break. If the cowboy wanted to eat something while on their horse working, it required something that was easily carried and could stand up to the stress of the trail. For many a snack, the cowboy turned to a traditional food item that had served many an explorer and soldier alike for a few hundred years...the hardtack cracker.

Hardtack: Not quite bread, not quite a biscuit

While not sounding very appetizing, hardtack has been found in many a pocket and knapsack throughout history. Having been around since the Crusades, the version of hardtack most commonly found on the American frontier was created in 1801 by Josiah Bent. Bent called his creation a “water cracker” that contained only two ingredients, water and flour. These ingredients would then be mixed into a paste, rolled out, cut into squares, and finally baked. Once the cooking process was over, you’d be left with a dry cracker that would stand up to the elements for a long time, while also not being the most appetizing snack.

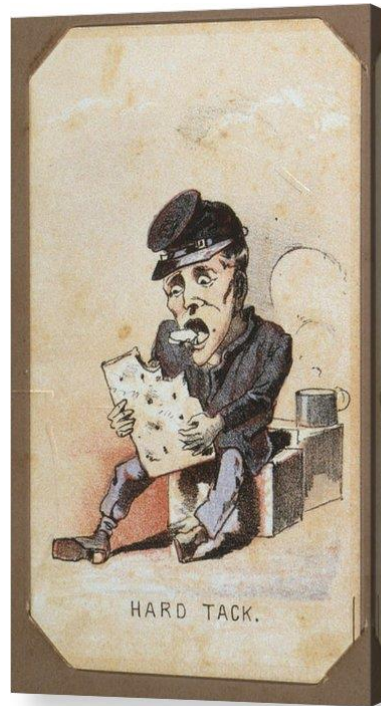
Hardtack could have a very long shelf life, and was the primary food of soldiers on both sides during the American Civil War. The life span of hardtack was so long that some units of the United States army during the first year of the war in 1861 were issued hardtack that had been created and stored since the Mexican American War in 1848.



Time to Eat:

While hardtack can be eaten as it is (and that is how both soldiers and cowboys often ate it), the “hard” in the name is certainly true, with the cracker earning nicknames such as flour tile and tooth breaker. The way to make hardtack easier on the teeth and to add a little extra taste to the food was to crush up the cracker with the butt of a rifle and place into your coffee which would soften it up. Another way to

make the cracker more edible would be to place it in your frying pan in the morning and cooking it alongside your breakfast, making sure it mixed with the grease. One of the big problems this posed was that the softer hardtack would make a mess of many a pocket or haversack (shoulder bag common throughout the 18th and 19th centuries).



Time to Start Cooking:

While there isn't any one agreed upon ratio of flour to water, the recipe below is one of the most common found during the late 19th century and would certainly had been eaten by many a cowboy. The recipe will make about 15 crackers, and measurements can be adjusted to meet your needs.

- **Ingredients**

- 2.5 cups flour
- ½ cup water
- 1 tsp salt (this is optional, but will add a little bit of flavor)

Directions:

- I. Mix your salt and flour together in a large mixing bowl.

- II.** Begin to add your water slowly in small amounts while kneading the dough. Make sure to mix everything and only add more water if necessary to avoid the dough becoming too sticky.
- III.** Once mixing in water is complete, place your dough on a hard surface and begin to roll your dough till it's about ½" thick.
- IV.** After you finish rolling, begin to cut your dough into squares. During the Civil War the squares would usually be 3x3", but cut the hardtack to your desired size.
- V.** After cutting your squares, begin to dock your crackers. "Docking" refers to poking holes in the dough to help them bake more evenly and to help excess moisture escape. Hardtack created for the military would have been created in large batches and would use hardtack cutters to make the process faster. For you at home, a toothpick or fork will work just fine.
- VI.** You're now ready to bake. Hardtack is different from most bread in that it is cooked at a low temperature for a longer period of time. Bake at 375 degrees for about 30 minutes, or until the surface is just beginning to brown.
- VII.** Time to enjoy your hardtack and store it for your next cattle drive!

Share with us how your hardtack came out! Post the pictures of your creation to our Facebook page!