

## **Soldiers' major challenge was Corinth water**

The other night I got a glass of water out of the kitchen faucet, drank it down, and told my wife Nita how good it tasted. "Of course," I told her, "Corinth water was not always so good." The gears in my head started turning and the outline for another article started to form. I guess she could see the look in my eye and warned me if I said anything bad about Corinth water we might wake up to find the tap dry the next morning. Banish the thought! I love Corinth water! It's the water in the 1860's I want to talk about. (Note: anyone from Corinth Gas & Water reading this article please read the last few lines again).

The truth is the water in Corinth during the Civil War wasn't just bad, it was really bad. The wells in town were sufficient to supply a population of about 1,200 folks, and if it didn't taste all that good at last there was plenty of it. Then came the war and thousands upon thousands of soldiers; close to 200,000 during the height of the siege. The heavy rains of early May stopped falling and the wells began to go dry. Men began to drink from the creeks. And they began to dry up as well.

Think I'm exaggerating? Let the soldiers (and a nurse) speak for themselves:

"The chronic diarrhea became the scourge of the army. Corinth became one vast hospital. Almost the whole army attended the sick call every morning. All the water courses went dry, and we used water out of filthy pools."

Private Sam Watkins, 1<sup>st</sup> Tennessee Infantry

"The water we had to drink was bad, very bad, and the rations none of the best. The former we procured by digging for it; the earth around Corinth being very light and porous, holding water like a sponge. When we first went there the ground was full of water, and by digging a hole two feet deep we could dip up plenty of a mean, milky looking fluid; but as the season advanced the water sank, so we dug deeper, and continued to go down, until the latter part of May when our water holes were from eight to twelve feet deep, still affording the same miserable water. My horse would not drink a drop of the water the men had to use, and if I failed to ride him to a small running branch two miles away he would go without drinking."

Private Samuel Barron, 3<sup>rd</sup> Texas Cavalry

"The water here is very bad. I sometimes think I would give 50 cents for a good cool drink of water."

Corporal James Talbert, 29<sup>th</sup> Mississippi Infantry

"With every pint of fluid one has to drink a half ounce of dirt. You feel it scrape the throat as it goes down, and after it gets to the stomach it lays as heavy and indigestible as a bed of mortar."

Captain Louis Stagg, 16<sup>th</sup> Louisiana.

"I have been told much about the suffering of our men in Corinth for the want of water. Many a time they drank what their horses turned away from in disgust."

Kate Cumming, Confederate nurse

"We again moved camp and called the place 'Camp Shellwater.' This name was derived from the character of the water, which tasted of the mussel shells found in great layers near the surface. To obtain water fit to drink, we had to go a mile from camp."

Major Charles Miller, 76<sup>th</sup> Ohio

I could go on and on but I think you get the idea. As the summer of '62 went on the problems grew worse. Not only was the water nasty to drink, it became increasingly hard to find. There was a drought and many of the smaller creeks about town simply dried up.

The water shortage became critical during the Battle of Corinth in the first week of October. The Confederates marched from Ripley in temperatures close to 100 degrees and they drank deeply from the muddy waters of the Hatchie and Tuscumbia Rivers. They filled their canteens from the Tuscumbia and for many this was the only water they had for the next 48 hours. A few were able to slake their thirst in the swampy bottoms along Turner Creek. They were the lucky ones.

The Union soldiers had it much better during the battle. There were wells in town and the waters of Phillips Creek and Clear Creek still flowed. The problem was they needed the water on the front lines. Quick thinking officers of the 9<sup>th</sup> and 57<sup>th</sup> Illinois sent wagons into town to return with oversized barrels of water. They arrived none too soon to suit the soldiers. "The heat is intense," one wrote during a pause in the fighting. "There is no water, and the men are famishing. Some of the Fifty-seventh fall in their tracks, fainting and exhausted under the rays of the scorching sun. Teams have been sent to the rear for the purpose of hauling water, but as yet none have reached us."

It was not just the infantrymen who needed the water. The artillery used it by the bucket. After every shot a wet sponge was swabbed down the cannon barrel to ensure there were no live sparks before another bag of black powder was rammed home. Even more critical was the need for water in the field hospitals. The depths of suffering and the desire for a single cup of water cannot be measured.

The quality and quantity of water in Corinth has gotten better. We take it for granted that good water will flow when we give the faucet a twist. After reading about how things were 150 years ago, I'll never take it for granted again. I think I'll stroll down the hill and tell my friends at Corinth Gas & Water how much I appreciate them.