

ARMY LAUNDRESSES

A Working Bibliography of MHI Sources

The U.S. Army no doubt inherited the practice of company laundresses from the British Army. These washerwomen constituted the only female camp followers to receive official recognition from the military authorities, with as many as twenty per regiment authorized to draw rations and certain supplies.

The practice was institutionalized by act of Congress on 16 Mar 1802, when rations were authorized "...to the women who may be allowed to any particular corps not exceeding four to a company." By 1813, one woman per seventeen men drew rations in kind plus straw. Appointed by company commanders, the laundresses served at his pleasure and became subject to military law. They received quarters, fuel, rations, and the services of the post surgeon. The post council fixed the prices charged for their laundry services. And "...no woman of bad character will be allowed to follow the army."

At the beginning of the Civil War, each company could appoint four women as laundresses. Soldiers' laundry debts were collected at the pay table, a measure that obviously strengthened the financial positions of the women. Mid-war regulations stipulated that laundresses must be present in the company in order to draw their authorized daily rations, which implies abuses were taking place, probably involving absentee appointees.

The laundresses, usually wives of enlisted men, earned fees and drew an extra daily ration, which enabled a family to survive on a soldier's low pay. Probably this explains why, after the Civil War, the number of enlisted marriages approved within a regiment equaled the number of laundresses authorized the regiment.

Although of low social position, laundresses' presence--as washer- women and as wives--was felt necessary by many. Others thought differently, and the laundress question became entwined in Army reorganization hearings in Congress during the late 1870s. In Jun 1878, Congress decided and the Army so ordered "That hereafter women shall not be allowed to accompany troops as laundresses....," except those presently-appointed wives of soldiers, who could continue as laundresses at the discretion of regimental commanders until the end of their husband's terms of enlistment. (General Order 37, 19 Jun 1878).

Although the 1887 Army Regulations omit any mention of laundresses, women continued to serve in the capacity of laundresses at some posts in the West. However, in 1901, post exchange officers received authority to operate laundries, and eight years later Congress permitted the Quartermaster Corps to establish post laundries. Thus the institution and practice of laundress came to an end early in the 20th century.

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