

THE Company Wag

August 1993

THE JOURNAL OF THE MUDSILLS, INC.

No. 7

How Authentic Is Your Rifle Musket?

A critique of reproduction weapons and how to improve them

by Capt. Mark E. Hubbs

Our organization has gone to great lengths to improve our impressions to the smallest detail. It is not unusual to hear during our events, discussions concerning the most trivial (in some people's eyes) characteristics of uniforms and equipment. I believe this attention to detail makes the hobby more enjoyable by offering a constant opportunity to improve our impressions.

Sadly, there is one area that seems to have been neglected by most of us...our weapons! This most integral part of the Infantryman's equipment is taken new from the box and assumed that it is "good to go" as is. It is the aim of this short article to critique the three reproductions available to the living historian. We will discuss how they stand "as issued" and what can be done to improve them and bring them up to the level of authenticity

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The Wartime Use of Civilian Shirts

by Paul McKee

Even doing a Western Federal impression allows few precious areas for personal expression. Aside from the choice of your slouch hat, the major means for "making a statement" is in your choice of a shirt. If clothes indeed make the man, then under a uniform, the lowly shirt helps define him. The kind of shirt you select can say much about the person you are portraying: his station in life, his education, his tastes and general upbringing.

Lying next to the soldier's skin, a shirt becomes an intimate item of apparel which was rarely mentioned in letters and diaries. In the 19th Century, shirts were considered undergarments; something to protect the skin from coarse woolen clothing which then could easily be laundered when soiled. It was considered vulgar to be seen in public in one's shirtsleeves. That is why so few images surface that show soldiers in that state of undress. When they do surface, such images are easily overlooked as being merely civilian photos.

Soldiers had several sources for



In one of those rare instances of unblushing shamelessness, a soldier poses with his pard in his shirtsleeves (Sixth Plate Tintype, Scott Cross collection)

shirts; the government quartermaster, packages from home, ready-made clothing purchased from commercial establishments, and clothing purloined from various places (farmhouses, new recruits, etc). There is evidence that in the Confederate armies, soldiers themselves sometimes sewed up shirts from captured bedspreads and tablecloths, etc., but it is unlikely that these means were resorted to by Federal soldiers. Yanks had wider

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(Left) Often one of the best sources for civilian shirt styles that were available to soldiers are photos of period civilians. Despite the military kepi, these boys probably are not young soldiers, but they show off fancy check overshirts that have typical home-made embellishments. Note the embroidered hearts and tape trimming on the extra-wide plackets of contrasting color with matching cuffs and collar. (Sixth plate tintype, William Brewster Collection)

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and more frequent opportunities to clothe themselves than their southern counterparts.

Civilian shirt design and construction was at a turning point in the 1860's between the earlier square-cut shirts and shirts that were more fitted to the body. Following, is a brief description of the various shirt types available to the common soldier:

White Dress Shirts

Civilian shirts from the early part of the 19th Century were little different from those worn as much as 200 years before the war. Usually made of white linen, they were constructed from rectangular garment parts with square gussets under each arm hole and triangular gussets on each side of the neck band. The sleeve was gathered into the cuff which closed with a single tiny button. The cuff itself was wider than modern cuffs and the closing button was positioned high near where the cuff is joined to the sleeve thus allowing the cuff to fold backward

upon itself. Often the cuff slit was strengthened at the end with a tiny triangular gusset. The body of the shirt was loose and long enough to reach partway down the thighs. The sides of the body were slit several inches and also reinforced with a triangular gusset. The front of the shirt was slit open and hemmed so it could be pulled on over the head and closed only at the throat with a single button. The upper body of these shirts were usually lined to the bottom of the neck slit. Some shirts of this period had attached collars at the neck band; others used a detachable collar of linen or paper. All shirts of this description usually exhibited incredibly fine stitching, felled seams to prevent unravelling, and meticulously hand-worked buttonholes.

Only white linen shirts were considered proper for gentlemen; cotton and colored shirts were for the working classes. However, of the use of white shirts in the army, Billings states in "Hardtack and Coffee" that "Boiled shirts, as white-

THE CompanyWag

The Journal of The Mudsills, Inc.

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The CompanyWag is an official publication of The Mudsills, Inc. Editorial offices are located at 1716 Latham Street, Rockford, Illinois 61103.

Subscriptions to *The CompanyWag* as well as the newsletter *Company Front* are available only as a part of membership in The Mudsills, Inc. Membership inquiries may be sent to:

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2706 Pandee
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Limited quantities of back issues of *The CompanyWag* are available at \$1.50 each postpaid by writing:

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bosomed shirts were called, were almost an unknown garment in the army except in hospitals. Flannels were the order of the day. If a man had the courage to face the ridicule of his comrades by wearing a white collar, it was of the paper variety, and white cuffs were unknown in camp."

Issue Shirts

Although government issue shirts are outside the intended scope of this article, a brief description is warranted for comparison to civilian styles. The army issued a cream-colored (undyed) wool flannel shirt constructed similarly to the early dress shirts, i.e.: square cut garment pieces with underarm gussets and neck gussets, and a simple hemmed neck opening which closed at the collar by a single button. There is also evidence of "coarse bluish-grey flannel shirts" being issued as well as wool and cotton mix flannel known as shaker flannel. The but-

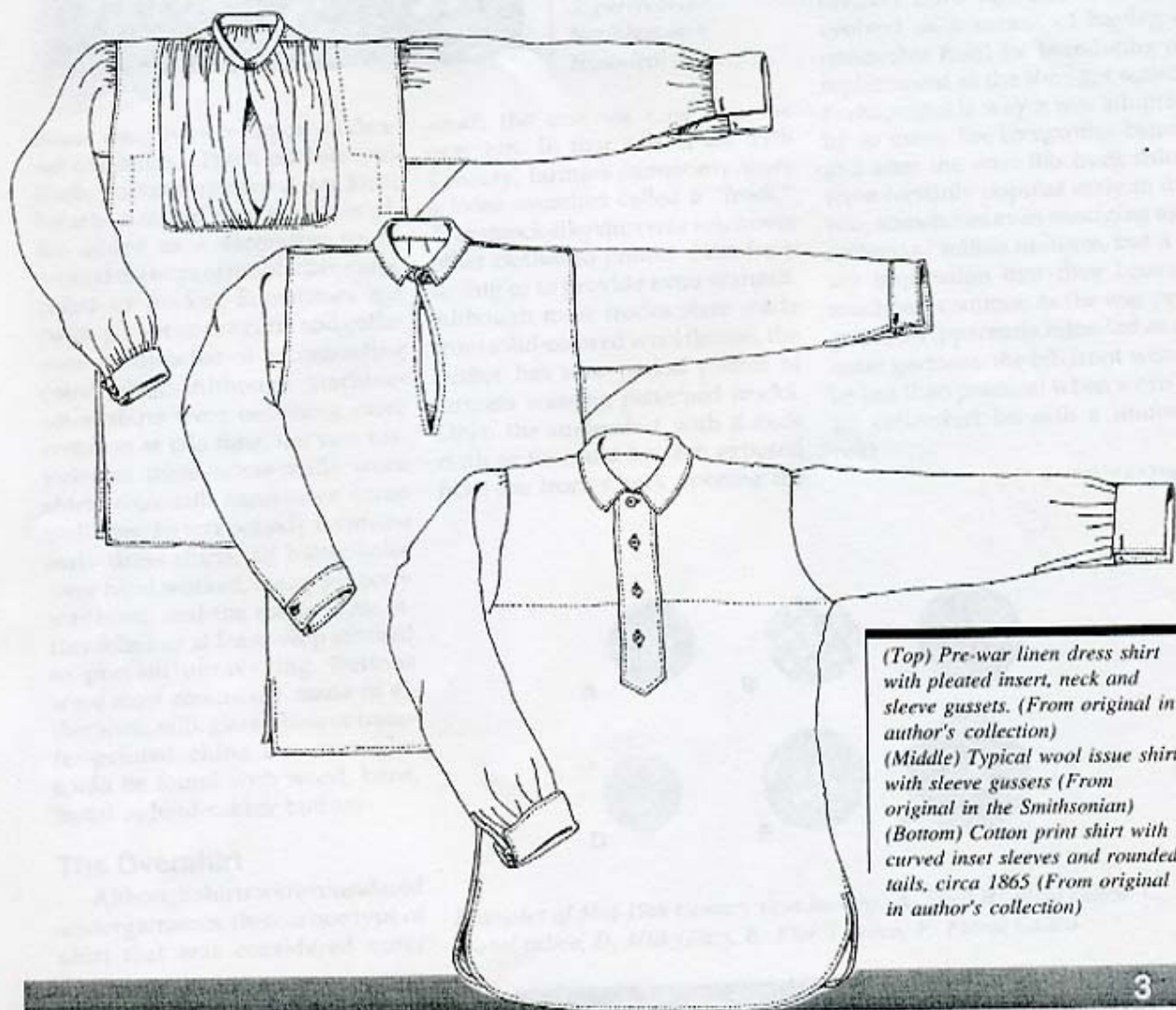
tons on issue shirts seen by the author are the stamped tin utility type of the small fly size. Obviously great numbers of these shirts were worn and may explain the numbers of "white" shirts that appear in period photos despite Billing's assertion.

The Colored Cotton Work Shirt of the 1860's

The colored cotton work shirt was by far the most common civilian shirt worn by soldiers during the war. By the 1860's, the construction of civilian shirts had taken a new turn. Rounded openings were cut into the body to accept the

sleeves which eliminated the need for the square gussets under the arm hole. Sewn placket fronts were buttoned shut along the length of the opening with 4 or 5 buttons and the collar was fitted without the use of side gussets. Wide cuffs would commonly fold back as on the early dress shirts above, but narrow non-folding cuffs were becoming more common. Narrow collars were most commonly attached to neck bands or sewn directly to the shirt body. Printed calicos, checks and ginghams became quite common on everyday work shirts as they were less likely to show soiling (solid

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(Top) Pre-war linen dress shirt with pleated insert, neck and sleeve gussets. (From original in author's collection)
(Middle) Typical wool issue shirt with sleeve gussets (From original in the Smithsonian)
(Bottom) Cotton print shirt with curved inset sleeves and rounded tails, circa 1865 (From original in author's collection)



(Left) The overshirt or "frock" as traditionally worn by farmers: not tucked in to the trousers. Note the shirt and tie showing above the collar. It seems likely that the farmer's frock was the forerunner of the Rhode Island Blouse, the "Battle Shirt" and the overshirt. (Sixth plate daguerreotype, Northampton Historical Society.)

colors were more common on flannel overshirts). Patch pockets and slash pockets appeared on shirt breasts. Colored tape trim was often added as a decorative touch around the edge of the placket, cuffs, collar or pocket. Sometimes the patch pocket or the cuffs and collar were constructed of a contrasting color fabric. Although machine-sewn shirts were becoming more common at this time, the vast majority of these home-made work shirts were still hand-sewn (even well after the war period). As on the early dress shirts, all buttonholes were hand worked, the upper body was lined, and the seams were either felled or at least whip stitched to prevent unravelling. Buttons were most commonly made of either shell, milk glass, china or transfer-printed china but examples could be found with wood, bone, metal or hard-rubber buttons.

The Overshirt

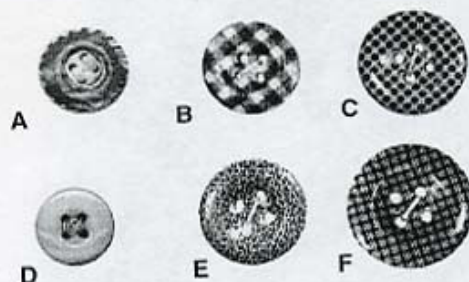
Although shirts were considered undergarments, there is one type of shirt that was considered outer

wear; the one we now call the overshirt. In first half of the 19th Century, farmers commonly wore a loose overshirt called a "frock." This smock-like shirt was worn over other clothes to protect them from soiling or to provide extra warmth. Although most frocks were made from solid-colored wool flannel, the author has seen period photos of farmers wearing patterned frocks. Often the undershirt with a neck cloth or tie could be seen exposed from the frock's neck opening the

same way a shirt and tie can be seen with a vest. The frock may be the forerunner of the Confederate battle shirt which is simply an overshirt tucked into the trousers. The frock may also be the inspiration for the 19th century soldiers' curious predilection for wearing two shirts at the same time. Numerous photos have turned up showing soldiers in double shirts. Often the outer shirt will be left completely unbuttoned at the placket, and the placket and collar folded to the inside thus exposing more of the undershirt and heightening the "vest" illusion.

I'd also like to lump into the overshirt category the bib front or fireman shirt. The bib front style evolved as a means of having a removable front for laundering or replacement as the shirt got soiled. Perhaps that is why it was adopted by so many fire companies before and after the war. Bib front shirts were certainly popular early in the war, sometimes even emerging as a secondary militia uniform, but it is my impression that they became much less common as the war progressed. Apparently intended as an outer garment, the bib front would be less than practical when worn as an undershirt beneath a uniform coat.

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Examples of Mid-19th Century shirt buttons: A: Shell B: Plaid calico, C: Floral calico, D: Milk Glass, E: Floral calico, F: Floral Calico

Getting Your Shirt Together

by Dick Tibbals

What will the well-dressed soldier be wearing in 1863? These three photos can help us learn not only what kind of shirts were worn, they also show us *how* they were worn. Take a close look. For that matter, check out the hats, too.

(Right) Maybe these two guys are soldiers. And maybe not. The long plackets on both of their shirts are edged with fancy contrasting fabric. Note how both collars and cuffs are rolled up inside the shirts. Don't ask me why.



(Above) Hospital Steward Joel Allen of the 77th Illinois shows off a neat plaid shirt. The stiff white collar is appropriate for the camera. It's closed with a separate metal collar stud, not an ordinary shirt button.

(Below) This guy is from Saumonauk, Illinois and possibly a member of the 104th Illinois. He wears a coarse army shirt over a fancier white civilian shirt. For warmth, sure. But for a photograph? Check out his wide, floppy, striped galluses.



Soldier Laundering of Shirts

"May 29th, 1864

I washed mi shirt and towel yesterday and put a clean one on. I dont like to be Woman & Man both. I rather be at home and have a wash board on mi knee. We have to wash in the river...but no wash board but our hands."

Ai Moore, Co. C, 159th Ohio

In lieu of the washer women in a fixed camp or garrison, the soldiers themselves were responsible for laundering their shirts. Billings states:

"How was this washing done? Well, if the troops were camping near a brook, that simplified the matter somewhat; but even then the clothes must be boiled, and for this purpose there was but one resource- the mess kettles...It may be asked what kind of figure the men cut as washerwomen. Well, some of them were awkward and imperfect enough at it; but necessity is a capital teacher, and, in this as in many other directions, men did perforce what they would not have attempted at home."

What this rough and indifferent laundering did besides kill lice and ticks, was to beat a shirt into submission, removing some of the color while leaving many of the stains and imparting a worn look. Fellow Mudsill Bill Brewster offers the following advice: "The condition of your shirts should also be a matter of attention. The soldier probably never had more than two shirts at a time and possibly only one. This would mean that this shirt would become rapidly stained. To give this impression it is recommended that you wash your shirts by hand using

a little baking soda or lye soap as a cleaner, then ring out and line dry...If you own a correctly patterned white shirt that you simply can't part with, it will soon take on a color of its own while staying clean. The same may be said of colors."

What To Look For When Selecting a Reproduction Shirt

Select your shirt with care! There are many purveyors of reproduction shirts out there; some great, some worthless and many somewhere in between. An excellent reproduction shirt can be the final touch which pulls a good impression together and help give you "the look." On the other hand having a poorly researched shirt with a loud modern pattern showing above the collar of your sack coat will be a distraction which will spoil all your great efforts elsewhere. They key points to keep in mind are:

1. Avoid wide, floppy collars. Original shirts most commonly had narrow 1" to 1-1/2" collars.
2. Look for wide cuffs that fold back even when buttoned.
3. Look for lined upper bodies.
4. Avoid bright, solid colors, but be very careful when selecting patterned fabrics. Your safest bet is to look for small, square check fabrics in two or three (but not bright) colors. Look for 100% cotton and avoid cotton/synthetic blends. You WANT something that will wrinkle and fade with use.
5. Be especially careful when looking for calico shirts. Period calicos were different than those offered in the quilting section of fabric stores today. You have to develop a "feel" for what period prints look like. The only way you can reasonably do this is to look at original

printed textiles in museums and private collections and study period photos and paintings.

6. Look for felled seams. Although this is rarely featured in reproduction clothing, it is definitely something you can "retrofit" yourself. Felled seams not only make your shirt more authentic, but help your shirt stand up to repeated washing without fraying.

7. Favor SMALL 4-hole shell, milk glass or china buttons. Avoid plastic buttons.

8. Insist on only hand-worked buttonholes. They are the ONLY kind that appear on original shirts.

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