

Elizabeth (Simmons) Lee

Introduction

While most of us do not think much about salt, it is essential to life. During the Civil War, salt was used to cure meat and was an important part of the diet of both humans and their livestock. When both the Confederate and Union militaries occupied the Ozarks, many rural Missouri families were cut off from any access to salt as the armies consumed local supplies and tried to prevent their adversaries' access to goods. In desperation, many families turned to boiling the salt-laden earth on the floors of smokehouses to leach out the salt there. Mrs. Elizabeth (Simmons) Lee and her family were just one of these desperate families.

During the War

Brigadier General Paul MacDonald Robinett of Mountain Grove, Missouri, described their experience, saying "Elizabeth (Simmons) Lee, who lived on a Beaver Creek farm in Wright County, Missouri, had been left a widow with a rather large family of children in 1857.... With the advent of the Civil War their cattle, hogs, and chickens disappeared; rail fences were torn down by foraging parties for firewood; and limited stocks of cured meat and salt were appropriated. Finally, she was forced to ride horseback for many miles in search of salt without success. In time they were compelled to recover salt that had fallen on the dirt floor of the smokehouse during the curing of meat. The salty earth was immersed in water which was then boiled away leaving the salt deposited in the container. It was then placed in a receptacle and hid in a hollow tree where prying eyes were not apt to find it.

Elizabeth and her family were gradually reduced to a condition of starvation. Loading everyone into a wagon drawn by two old horses, they abandoned their home and drove to Elizabeth's aged father, a veteran of the War of 1812, who lived in Thomasville, Missouri. Still later they made their way to Arkansas and relatives in a less disturbed area near Walnut Ridge....

At the end of the war she returned to Missouri with the children to find her farm grown up in brush and her house and barns in ruin."

Later Life

Elizabeth lived to be 89. She recalled many experiences, but none made a more profound impression on her grandchildren than the story of salt. Without the slightest irreverence she noted that the first supplication in the Lord's Prayer could well be, "Give us this day our daily bread and the salt of life."