

**Petersburg VA Daily Express, 19 August 1861:**

**Blankets for our Soldiers—How to get  
Them and How to Fix Them.**

A correspondent of the Columbus, (Geo.,) *Sun*, writing from Glenville, Alabama, says:

It is perfectly well understood that our soldiers in Virginia must have blankets this winter, or hundreds of them must perish.—

Now blankets in quantity are not to be had, even for money. But they may be for love.

Thus:

This morning, at a merchant's counter, I saw a lady buying calico to make 'comforts'. "You are going to send those 'comforts' to the soldiers? I asked. "No," said she. "I am making them for myself." This set me back a little, but I went in again. "And how about the soldiers?" "I am going to send them my blankets," was the answer, much to my gratification. Now, it is certain that we can get along with comforts; and if we will part with out blankets there will be enough and no lack, till England and France rip up the blockade.

But why not send the 'comforts' to the soldiers, and keep the blankets ourselves?—

Because 1st. A 'comfort' is too heavy and bungling to be carried on a soldiers back.—

2d. Being made of cotton and very thick, when once wet through it would require several days good weather to get them dry. Often a wet spell lasts from ten days to two weeks, during all of which time the 'comfort' would be more like mush-poultice than a bed-spread.<sup>1</sup> The fact is, 'comforts' won't do for soldiers. You needn't undertake it.

Now how can a good blanket be made? A common blanket can be made equal to three or four by the following simple process:

Take brown paper, not heavy, so much as strong and tough, paste the sheets together to make a large sheet the size of the blanket, (the pasting breaks the joints, and it is more convenient to handle one large sheet than half a dozen small ones, when you come to sew it down;) next, varnish the paper with Copal or Grecian varnish and let it dry *thoroughly*<sup>2</sup>; next, make a sheet of homespun or calico the same size of the blanket. Now quilt the three together, strong and fast, the paper in the middle, blanket at the bottom, and homespun on top. The quilting need not be very fine or small stitch; say in rows, six inches a part [sic], right and left (or from side to side,) the rows crossing each other and forming squares 6 inches to the side. The stitches need not be less than a quarter of an inch long, as the fewer holes made the better but the thread and sewing ought to be *first-rate*. Lastly, sew up well around the edges.

Oil-silk would be better than paper, but it is not to be had, and is very costly.<sup>3</sup> Some think it would answer to varnish the homespun, and omit the paper, but it won't. I have tried it.

A blanket made as above would be light, pliant and durable, and equal to three or four common blankets not thus prepared.—

Some people will laugh at the paper, and cry out that it won't do. But it will, for the blanket on one side and the homespun on the other, prevents rubbing or strain on the paper, and the paper thoroughly excludes the air and water. In using this blanket, the cotton side is the *weather side*. If it gets wet, the water cannot go through the paper and the cotton side is soon dried.

Now for the philosophy of the subject; — A blanket depends for its warmth, not upon its weight or thickness, but its closeness of texture, and consequent capacity to keep the cold air from coming in, and the heat of the body from going out. I slept one night on a strait [sic] under

a piano cover made of cotton and coated with India rubber. The night was cold, but the piano cover soon put me in a perspiration, and I had to lift a corner of it to admit the cool air.

Again why is it that no amount of cover will keep you warm, unless it be well "tucked in?" Because if you leave a crevice the cold air comes and soon chills the air under the covering. A good mother always tucks the children in.

One more suggestion and I have done. In varnishing a large sheet of paper, the best plan is to tack it to the side of a house, and there let the sun shine upon it till dry. One hour's time is sufficient. One coat only is needed—two makes the paper stiff and brittle and prevents it from being easily folded, and easily "tucked."

T. W. L.

P. S.—The preparation of the paper might be made a business of itself. It is very inconvenient for individuals to prepare the paper, many would buy it, if to be had, who cannot take the trouble to prepare it themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> "Mush poultices" made from cornmeal, with other ingredients (including whiskey) mixed in, were popular home remedies in the Nineteenth Century and used to treat various ailments including rattlesnake bites and gangrene. See <http://historytogo.utah.gov/mt523pleasant.html> <http://www.civilwarhome.com/andersonvillegangrene.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Copal varnish, frequently used by Nineteenth Century artists, is still prepared using period formulas and is available for sale: <http://www.jamescgroves.com/mediums.htm>. An 1861 formula for Grecian varnish (one part turpentine, two parts 90 proof alcohol, three parts balsam of fir, mixed well) can be found at the on-line transcription of *Young's Demonstrative Translation of Scientific Secrets; or A Collection of Above 500 Useful Receipts on a Variety of Subjects*. Toronto, Ontario: Rowsell Ellis, 1861: <http://www.harvestfields.netfirms.com/etexts/38/13.htm>

<sup>3</sup> "Oil-silk" is silk rendered waterproof by saturation with boiled oil. In the Nineteenth Century oil-silk was frequently used in the making of such disparate items as bathing caps and umbrellas. As early as 1 February 1793 Ralph Hodgson, of New York, was granted a U. S. patent for "oiled silk and linen." <http://www.backyardcity.com/Umbrellas-Umbrella-History.htm>