

"No one has anything to sell"

Julia Johnson Fisher, manuscript diary in the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Excerpts from 1864.

As you read...

Julia Johnson Fisher, 1814-1885, native of Massachusetts, lived with her husband, William Fisher (1788-1878), and her children in an isolated area in Camden County, Georgia, near the Florida border.

In these diary entries from 1864, Fisher described the difficulties faced by people on the home front. With few men to do the heavy work of farming, food became scarce. What little food was produced in the South was bought or taken to feed soldiers instead of families. With the success of the Union blockade, the South could not import goods. To make matters worse, Confederate money was almost worthless. Due to rising inflation, even the wealthiest families could barely survive.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How much did flour cost? Shoes? A dress?
2. What did the Fishers purchase? How much did they spend over these few weeks?
3. What did the Fishers eat?
4. What did the Fishers sell in an effort to make enough money to buy food? How much money did they make?
5. What did the Fishers receive from their friends and neighbors?
6. Where were the Fishers trying to go? What obstacles did they face?

March 20th [1864]

No news yet from Gussy and we fear no mail. No one but Franky came in to S. School. We have been out of meat some days. Live on corn and rice. Yesterday Kate sent us a potato pie, and radishes, such a treat! And one day in the week Mrs. Linn gave us a piece of venison¹. We have kind and thoughtful neighbors. They send many nice bits. Don't know when we shall have a pig ready to kill. No one has anything to sell — all are short. It takes a fortune to send to the City — Shoes \$100 a pair — Flour \$200 a barrel Eggs \$3.00 per dozen. It is thought there will soon be a reduction.

Gussy took over \$1,500 with him. Hope no evil has befallen him. He has been gone ten days.

March 20th

Gussy has just come with a loaded mule. Goods sent by Julia in exchange for some cast off clothing. For mine she has received \$217.00 Confederate money — worth about 5¢ on the dollar. Having no opportunity for spending the money I concluded to invest it in land thinking it might become profitable. Sybil has received some mourning goods² and cloth for the boys. Once worth from ten to twelve cents a yard — now from six to twelve dollars bringing a calico³ dress to \$100.00 — a calico shirt to \$40.00. The bubble must burst before long.

We feel a great longing for Englewood. It constitutes my day dreams. We want Northern comforts. It is tedious to spend half the time catching fleas and the other half in sleeping and eating hominy and rice. The thought of milk, potatoes and good bread makes us mourn for a return of good times.

March 25th

I have sent a letter to Mary to learn more of the Dutch cottage, and what the prospects are for obtaining it. We have not yet a passport for going North and the time is drawing near when we wish to go. Miss Chappelle writes from Columbus that they are nearly destitute, and must, if possible, get North. They will spend a few weeks with Kate which will lighten their trouble in a measure. It takes a long time here to accomplish anything. We are so far away from Everybody and everything. The railroad is about 80 miles distant and it costs a fortune to go anywhere — \$30.00 per day for board — \$10.00 to stop over night and everything in the same ratio.

March 28th

Today I am fifty years old. Half a century! I feel mute with amazement. Time, how short! and what a life?

March 30th

Mr. Fisher went over to Maj. Bailey's today to consult about getting a passport. This seems the most difficult part of all. I have but little faith in getting one and it will make a heavy expense to go to Savannah — probably cost a \$100.00. Sybil seems to be getting in a bad way. Her whole body swells badly and has a good deal of pain. If she is no better we shall be unwilling to leave her. We have been obliged to kill a pig. Poor and tough, hardly fat enough to fry itself.

April 3rd

By economizing the pig lasted us eight days. Now we are again without meat and on short allowance. Last night Mr. Fisher caught in a trap rice birds enough for supper. They are very small and without butter or pork to season are not very rich eating, but everything eatable is worth saving. The pigs are all poor and slab sided, look half starved. They cannot fatten on rough rice, it is miserable food, the horses refuse it. We long for the North. Englewood fills my waking thoughts, a snug comfortable kitchen (a thing unknown here) freedom from fleas and thousands of poisonous insects, good inviting food, such as we had

been accustomed to having until this war broke out — and freedom — sweet freedom. Why did I not understand and price my liberty more.

April 6th

We still eat our rice and corn three times a day. No meat. We are surprised to find how comfortable we can be with so little. Surely, man's necessities are small. Mr. Linn came home on ten days furlough. He says that flour is \$300 per barrel — Men's coarse boots \$250.00. He bought a bottle of squills⁴ for \$5.00 and a pound of soda for \$5.00 for sybil.

We had letters from Julia with \$70.00 for me and \$50.00 for Sybil, for old clothing. Money not worth shucks. We can neither spend it nor keep it. It will be good for nothing after the first of July. This currency business is a perfect swindle. Kate sent over for Sybil to go to King's Ferry with her tomorrow. The weather continues cool. It has been an unusually close winter — from the breathings of the northern snowhills.

April 8th

Last night we were awakened by a shell and rose from our beds to see the new mills and the adjoining buildings on fire. The little schooner came again and finished its work. Now all is gone. Sybil had gone over to Kate Lang's to pass the night to take an early start in the morning for King's Ferry as no one was hurt she continued her journey. Mr. Fisher and Lynn saved the machinery in a small out house. Gussy secreted himself and fired five times at the invaders. The pickets ran for their lives.

April 11th

Mr. Linn killed a pig and sent us a piece. The first meat we have had in eight days — with the exception of a rice bird. We were all eager for our supper but the pig was so poor and green that it made us sick. I awoke in the night distressed with hives — my body was covered with rash. All have been busy since the fire picking up nails — it is said there are none in the confederacy. A few weeks ago they were worth \$300 a keg, now more. Mr. Fisher and John are now hurrying to plant corn. The nights are so cold nothing grows fast. Sybil had a tedious ride to King's Ferry. Kate bought a common calico dress for \$120., ten yards. Merchants prefer to keep their goods until the new issue. This banking business is a great swindle. People who deposited gold for safekeeping are obliged to give it up for this confederate trash.

April 13th

We went over to Kate's in the morning. Mr. Fisher took us in his cart as far as the creek. I wished to lend them \$75.00 but they had no use for it. Shall probably lose it. Kate gave us a piece of fresh meat half dozen potatoes and a saucer of fresh butter. Such a rich day for us. I think we must gain some fat. Mr. Linn left at noon. His furlough was up and he must go leaving his wife in hourly expectation of illness. Before leaving Savannah he bought two pounds of coffee for \$30.00. On the road he discovered that someone had given him a paper of peas in exchange. He purchased a sack of flour for \$125.00 that he had not found when he left here. The country is threatened with starvation. Maj. Bailey has gone fishing.

He says he has commenced drawing up our papers — a slow process. Miss Chappelle is very impatient.

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Notes

1. Venison is meat from a deer.
2. Mourning clothes were black clothing worn by people in mourning for a family member who had died. In nineteenth-century America it was the custom for people to wear black after a death for a period of a few weeks to a year.
3. Calico is cloth made from cotton and usually has a floral or other pattern.
4. The extract from squills, bulbous plants of the genus *Scilla*, was used in cough medicine.