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State of the Union

NEW YORK AND THE CIVIL WAR

Edited with an Introduction by

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Foreword by

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First Edition

New York's Andersonville: The Elmira Military Prison

Lonnie R. Speer

EVEN BEFORE THE END of the Civil War, the P.O.W. camp at Andersonville, Georgia, had become symbolic of the terrible conditions experienced by thousands of Union soldiers held by the Confederacy. At the time, and for many years afterward, the general public was led to believe that no similar places existed for Union-held P.O.W.s in the North, despite the accounts of those who had experienced such places. Well into the 1880s, and even into the 1950s, Andersonville was believed to be in a class by itself. Today, however, we realize that there were prisoner-of-war camps in the North that were as bad as any in the South. Among the worst of these was the camp at Elmira, New York.

Though outwardly very different in appearance from Andersonville, and much smaller in prisoner population, the conditions—and even the death rate—at Elmira were remarkably similar to those at Andersonville. Established about five months after the notorious Georgia prison, Elmira, like Andersonville, received many P.O.W.s—often in poor health—from other overcrowded prisons.

Elmira was one of the three original military depots established in the state to muster and train recruits.¹ The Elmira depot consisted of four large camps known as Barracks No. 1, No. 2, No. 3, and No. 4. Barracks No. 1, known locally as Camp Rathbun, was located near the Northern Central Railroad shops. Barracks No. 2 was in Arnot field, south of Washington Avenue and east of Lake Street. Barracks No. 3 was situated on West Water Street above Hoffman, along the Chemung River, and Barracks No. 4 was located a mile and a half

¹ Established on July 30, 1861. The other two depots were in Albany and New York City.

southwest of town. Barracks No. 3, officially known to the federal government as "Post Barracks," was eventually chosen as the prison site.

"[It is on] a plot of ground quite level, not easily drained and considerably lower than the surrounding country," according to the original report. "In consequence . . . [it] becomes at wet seasons quite soft and muddy. . . . The water from the wells on the grounds and from the junction canal south of it is unfit for use and must be hauled."² Unlike the other three Elmira posts, which were situated on higher ground with better water supplies, about a third of this site would remain wet, soggy, and—due to a stagnant pond or lagoon—unhealthy.³ As at Andersonville, a flash flood would wreak havoc on the site during one point of the prison's existence.

Post No. 3 consisted of twenty 88' × 18' barracks designed to house 100 men each. Each building contained two small rooms, one measuring 24' × 7' and the other 8' × 5'. Upon conversion to prison use, additional bunks three tiers high and running the length of each room were constructed, bringing the capacity of each building to 150, or 3,000 for the entire prison. Construction of fifteen additional barracks measuring 100' × 22', including a 20' × 22' kitchen in each, brought the total prison capacity to 5,250. However, Federal authorities continued to refer to the prison's official capacity as 8,000 to 10,000 in official reports.⁴

These barracks, one-story structures of rough wood, often referred to as "sheds" by the Commissary General of Prisoners,⁵ were mere shells, uninsulated and without interior walls or ceilings. Such construction was of little consequence to the prisoners during the warm summer months but became a harsh environment with the onset of the frigid upstate winter. According to a number of prisoners' memoirs, snow and ice became common between December 6 and March 15, and it wasn't at all unusual to see Elmira's prisoners standing ankle-deep in the snow for roll calls during this period. "[F]or at least four months of every year," complained prisoner Anthony M. Keilley, "anything [here] short of a polar-bear would find locomotion impracticable." December 1864 and January 1865 were especially brutal:

² O.R., Ser. II, 4:70.

³ *Ibid.*, 67–75.

⁴ O.R., Ser. II, 7:152, 157, 425.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 918

the temperature hovered below zero for quite some time and fell to eighteen below at least twice. "It was a pleasant summer prison for the southern soldiers," agreed prisoner John R. King, "but an excellent place for them to find their graves in the winter."⁶

Approximately 30 acres, consisting of the barracks and additional buildings, about eight acres of open ground for pitching tents, and the lagoon were all enclosed by a 12-foot-high stockade fence with a parapet around the outside for guards to patrol and to have an unobstructed view of the compound's interior. At even intervals, 24 sentry boxes were positioned along the parapet.

The first 399 prisoners arrived on July 6, 1864; 400 were transferred from the overcrowded Point Lookout prison in Maryland, but one escaped en route. Within a week, another 751 arrived. By the end of the month, nearly 4,500 P.O.W.s had been transferred to Elmira. Within that time, two had managed to escape and eleven had died. In addition, one of the trains bringing more P.O.W.s was wrecked at Shohola, Pennsylvania, killing 48 prisoners and 17 guards; 93 prisoners and 16 guards were seriously injured.

By the end of August, more than 9,600 P.O.W.s were confined at Elmira. The initial arrivals had filled the barracks, so tents were erected for the overflow. The supply of tents was quickly exhausted and many prisoners, poorly clad and many having no blankets, found themselves sleeping out in the open air with no shelter whatsoever. "Thinly clad as they came from a summer's campaign, many of them without blankets and without even a handful of straw between them and the [cold] earth," one prisoner observed, "it will surprise no one that the suffering, even at that early day, was considerable." Adding to the severe suffering and discomfort, winter came early to the area. "Last night and this morning was cold, the coldest weather I ever experienced in August," prisoner Wilbur W. Gramling noted in his diary on August 31, 1864, before he finally came down with pneumonia.⁷

⁶ G. T. Taylor, "Prison Experience in Elmira, N.Y." *Confederate Veteran*, 20 (1912): 327; Matthew S. Walls, "Northern Hell on Earth," *America's Civil War* (March 1991), 25; Anthony M. Keiley, *In Vinculis: or The Prisoner of War, by a Virginia Confederate* (Petersburg, VA: Daily Index Office, 1866), 129; John Rufus King, *My Experience in the Confederate Army and in Northern Prisons* (Clarksburg, WV: Stonewall Jackson Chapter No. 1333 UDC, 1917), 36.

⁷ Keiley, *In Vinculis*, 136; Wilbur W. Gramling, "W. W. Gramling Diary," *Southern Christian* (Macon, GA) *Advocate*, January 25, 1871.

By December, the suffering and fight for survival intensified. In addition to the various ailments from the cold, smallpox came to Elmira with the arrival of transferred prisoners from Governors Island. Within weeks it had swept through the prison to become an epidemic which led to a smallpox camp being established nearby. “[This] camp was several wall tents,” advised prisoner Miles O. Sherrill, “with cots having two Confederates laying on each in reverse order—heads on opposite ends of the cot.” Gramling noted forty cases of the disease in the prison by Christmas Eve of 1864 and learned that four of those had died. “Small pox is growing worse every day,” he wrote on December 26. “Quite sickly in camp, from 15 to 25 die a day.” According to the official records there were 397 cases of smallpox from December 1, 1864 to January 24, 1865. Union medical officials later admitted after the war that during this same period there were 1,738 on the sick list of the total prison population of 5,934 P.O.W.s at Elmira at that time, and due to the lack of adequate hospital accommodations many of those were left to suffer in their quarters. “They were dying by the hundreds here with small-pox and other diseases,” insisted Sherrill. “The people at home never knew how we suffered in prison,” lamented King. “If we attempted to tell it in our letters, the Censor saw that they were not mailed.”⁸

Extending east and west across the south-central portion of the enclosure was a one-acre backwater lagoon of stagnant water that served as the prison’s latrine and garbage dump. Originally named Foster’s Pond, it began to radiate an offensive stench within five weeks of the arrival of the first prisoners. Before long it was nothing more than a large cesspool.

“[O]ne large sink used by the prisoners stands directly over the pond which receives [their] fecal matter hourly,” complained the post surgeon, “[and] seven thousand men will pass 2,600 gallons of urine daily, which is highly loaded with nitrogenous material.”⁹ This lagoon varied from fifteen to thirty feet wide and from three to six feet deep. According to the post surgeon, the water remained a cloudy green

⁸ Taylor, “Prison Experience,” 327; Miles O. Sherrill, *A Soldier’s Story: Prison Life and Other Incidents in the War of 1861–65* (Raleigh: n.p., 1911), 11–12; Gramling, “Diary”; Joseph K. Barnes, ed., *The Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1876), Vol. 3, Part 5, 56; King, *My Experience*, 41.

⁹ O.R., Ser. II, 7:604.

most of the time and, similar to Andersonville, the general area of the prison grounds surrounding the site remained soggy during wet seasons.¹⁰

Between August 13 and October 17 of 1864, Sanger filed nine separate reports to complain about the lagoon, insisting that if the pond was drained and the decaying matter removed, a major source of disease at the prison could be eliminated. His superiors, however, ignored his warnings.¹¹

One benefit provided by the deplorable conditions of Foster's Pond was that it became a haven for rats, thus providing the prisoners with an abundant alternative food source to help supplement their diet. According to many prisoner memoirs, the rats tasted no different than squirrels. Elmira was just one of several Union prisons where the catching and eating of rats became quite common. "We invented all kinds of traps and deadfalls to catch rats," admitted one prisoner. "Many found an acceptable substitute in rats," admitted another.¹²

Clearly, the daily rations provided by the Elmira authorities were inadequate. As one prisoner dryly observed, "[It] seemed only enough to feed disease."¹³

At the beginning of the war, both sides fed their P.O.W.s the prescribed Army ration. But on July 7, 1862, Union authorities decided that it wasn't necessary for P.O.W.s to receive the same amount of food as soldiers in the field and cut the prisoners' rations in half. After much publicity and propaganda associated with the alleged mistreatment and starvation of P.O.W.s held in the South, Union authorities reduced rations by half again on June 1, 1864, in retaliation—in effect, providing only one-fourth of the original amount. These reductions caused the men to fall into a vicious cycle of starving, eating, and starving. They were unable to ration food from one issue to the next, often consuming whatever they got immediately.

¹⁰ Ibid., 1092–93; Barnes, ed., *The Medical and Surgical History*, Vol. 3, Part 5, 56.

¹¹ O.R., Ser. II, 7:682; Andrew MacIsaac, "From Bangor to Elmira and Back Again: The Civil War Career of Dr. Eugene Francis Sanger," *Maine History*, 37 (Summer–Fall, 1997): 43.

¹² The others were Ft. Delaware, Point Lookout, Johnson's Island, and Camp Chase.; F. S. Wade, "Getting Out of Prison," *Confederate Veteran*, 34 (1926), 379; Keiley, *In Vinculis*, 146.

¹³ Sherrill, *A Soldier's Story*, 10–11.

Further complicating the situation, Union authorities eliminated vegetables from the prisoners' diet, believing such food to be a luxury. By the time Dr. Sanger arrived at the prison, only a few weeks after it was first established, he faced an immediate, almost epidemic, outbreak of scurvy—from the lack of ascorbic acid provided by vegetables in the diet—among the prisoners. In a report on August 26, 1864, Sanger reported that of the 9,300 prisoners he examined, he found 793 cases of scurvy.¹⁴

It would seem that the Confederacy lacked the necessary food and other supplies for adequate care of their prisoners, owing to the blockade and the destruction of crops, processing facilities, and transport facilities. The Union, on the other hand, simply *refused* to provide adequate rations to its prisoners of war.

And, as at Andersonville, equally devastating to the prisoners was a flood that roared through the facility. At Elmira it occurred on the night of March 16, 1865. "There had been much snow during the winter," explained prisoner John R. King. "The snow melted rapidly and soon the little Chemung was raging. The water came into our prison higher and higher, and in a short time the small pox hospital across the creek had to be abandoned."¹⁵

The river continued to rage until its waters had invaded the entire camp and submerged nearly all of its buildings. "The lower bunks were submerged and the second row was threatened," declared King. "A great part of the prison wall was gone and we could see about half of the cookhouse extending above the water. . . . We were confined in the higher bunks for a day or two with nothing to eat or drink but the dirty river water. After the water receded men came into our [barracks] in row boats, passing near where we were 'roosting' [and] gave us something to eat." According to Gramling, the flood waters reached a depth of five feet, washing away some the fence, several buildings, and left a number of mess houses and cook houses in up to four feet of mud.¹⁶

DEATHS

In the majority of military prisons, both North and South, the first deaths and burials within the facilities did not occur until after the

¹⁴ J. Michael Horigan, "Elmira Prison Camp—A Second Opinion," *Chemung Historical Journal* (March 1986), 3452.

¹⁵ King, *My Experience*, 44–45.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*; Gramling, "Diary."

prison had been in operation for at least several weeks—in some cases, several months. Elmira and Andersonville, however, were exceptions. At Andersonville, the first death occurred within 48 hours of the arrival of the first prisoners into the compound. (Ironically, it was a trooper of the 2nd New York Cavalry, Adam Swarner of Company H.) At Elmira, a death occurred en route to the prison, and within 72 hours of the first prisoners entering the camp, the first death occurred inside. By the end of August, only seven weeks after the prison was established, 115 deaths had occurred. In September, another 385 perished.¹⁷

The majority of these deaths occurred from diarrhea and dysentery. Exposure was, no doubt, a contributing factor. Scurvy, in epidemic proportion, also broke out during the month; by September 11, there were 1,870 reported cases. By November, pneumonia was rampant and by December smallpox began to appear throughout the compound. Before long, Elmira led all Northern prisons in its death rate; 750 men died during the following three months, and nearly 1,500 more in the following four—an average of more than ten per day.¹⁸

It has been reported that most of the medicine distributed by doctors at this prison was not given out, but was *sold* to the sick. Quinine, for example, was sold for about eight cents an ounce. Nor was the free medical assistance, when provided, always helpful. In one incident, a Dr. Van Ney was told by the post's chief surgeon to give "four or five drops of Fowler's Solution of Arsenic" to three P.O.W.s to help relieve their suffering. In his haste Van Ney wrote what appeared to be "45 drops" and handed the prescription to an orderly, who proceeded to follow the instructions as they appeared. The overdoses acted quickly and within a short time killed the three P.O.W.s.¹⁹

Union authorities gave Colonel Seth Eastman, the prison commandant, authority to lease a half-acre plot in Elmira's Woodlawn Cemetery to bury the dead. Eastman obtained the services of John W. Jones, a sexton of the First Baptist Church who lived nearby, to take charge of the Confederate burials. Paid \$40 per month to dig the graves, Jones went on to do a meticulous job of keeping accurate death records throughout the existence of the prison. The first

¹⁷ O.R., Ser. II, 8:997-98.

¹⁸ James I. Robertson, Jr., *Soldiers Blue and Gray* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 204; O.R., Ser. II, 8:998-1002.

¹⁹ Walls, "Northern Hell on Earth," 28.

P.O.W. burial at Elmira was that of Abner Prevett of Company I, 4th North Carolina Regiment, who died on the train en route to the prison on July 5, 1864. Prevett was buried at Elmira the following day as the first arrivals were led into the new prison facility. The first P.O.W. death inside the compound was that of William J. Stockdale, Company G, 52nd Virginia Regiment, on July 9, 1864.²⁰

According to Jones's records, the largest number of burials in any one month was 491, in February 1865, and the most in any one day was 48, requiring eight trips of the dead-wagon. At the rate the Elmira P.O.W.s were dying, Jones barely averaged more than 16 cents per burial for all his hard work.²¹

Although the total number of prisoners held and the total number of deaths among them was much larger at Andersonville than at Elmira, the actual ratio of deaths to prison population was quite comparable. It is generally accepted that about 52,345 prisoners of war passed through the gates of Andersonville, of whom 12,919—24.7 percent—died. At Elmira, of the 12,123 P.O.W.s, 2,963 perished: 24.4 percent.²²

One need not be a Confederate sympathizer to ask: Would it not have been easier for the North to house, care for, and feed 12,000 men than for the blockaded South to house, care for, and feed 52,000?

²⁰ Clay W. Holmes, *The Elmira Prison Camp* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1912), 131.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 379, 439, 450; O.R., Ser. II, 8:1001.

²² The number of P.O.W.s held at Andersonville during that prison's existence is as various as the number of sources consulted. Totals range from 32,000 in early sources to 41,000 in later ones. The even higher total cited here was fully documented by the Wisconsin Andersonville Monument Commission in 1911. In U.S. Government sources it is simply stated that "more than 45,000" were held there.