

ECHOES

Camp Morton, 1861-1865

By Carol Berry

On April 14, 1861, two days after Fort Sumter was fired upon, word reached Indiana that President Abraham Lincoln had issued a call for 75,000 volunteer troops. Governor Oliver Morton quickly responded with an offer of 10,000 men from his state. Recruiting stations throughout Indiana opened on that same day and men hurried to enlist.

Governor Morton and his adjutant general, Lew Wallace, surveyed Indianapolis for a suitable camp site where the newly enlisted volunteers could be quartered. The State Fairgrounds, located just north of the city, seemed to meet the criteria. Besides being outside the city limits, it had several buildings, shade trees and a stream running through the area. The camp was readied and on April 17, 1861, troops began arriving.

Camp Morton was used as a training camp for Federal soldiers until the following February, when the issue

Frederick Douglass Visit

A visit with Frederick Douglass, embodied by re-enactor Robert Snowden, will be the principal program at the Feb. 29 meeting of the San Joaquin Valley Civil War Round Table. Also on the program are Leigh McLean with members of Ebony Verses.

Snowden has portrayed Douglass at the Fresno County Historical Society's annual Civil War Reenactment in Kearney Park for the past seven years. He has sung with the San Diego Star Light Opera in "Carmen Jones" and "Finian's Rainbow." He also has acted in such things as "Native Son," on PBS.

The meeting will be in the Remington restaurant, Clovis and Kings Canyon Avenues, beginning with a social hour at 6 p.m. and dinner at 7. Reservations may be made by sending checks for \$15 for each dinner to SJVCWRT, P.O. Box 5695, Fresno, CA 93755. Seating will not be guaranteed without a reservation.

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Headquarters Row, Camp Morton; once a fairground.

of dealing with prisoners of war arose. Prior to that time, most prisoners had been paroled on oath not to return to combat until exchanged. What few POW's there were in Indianapolis had been allowed to live at a hotel and report daily to headquarters. A prisoner without financial means could work to help pay for his support.

In reply to General Henry W. Halleck's query as to how many Confederate prisoners Camp Morton could accommodate, Governor Morton answered 3,000. However, 3,700 men were sent to Indianapolis, the first of them arriving by train on Feb. 22, 1862. The Indianapolis Journal encouraged citizens to "show a kindly spirit toward the prisoners and refrain from insults to men who were powerless to resent them."

A large crowd of town residents gathered at Union Station, many waving and shouting as the train rolled by. Some of the onlookers climbed on the train roof and rode along; one young man even marched with the prisoners through the streets of Indianapolis to Camp Morton. Unable to prove that he was a resident of the town, he was detained overnight, sharing a bunk with a Confederate prisoner.

Colonel Richard Owen of the 60th Regiment of Indiana Volunteers was appointed commandant of the prison camp. He was an experienced soldier disciplined with a combination of strength and gentleness. Colonel Owen believed that the prisoners should be treated in a way "to

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Camp Morton (Continued)

make them less restless in their confinement, and likely, when they returned to their homes, to spread among their friends and acquaintances the news that they had been deceived regarding northern men."

Under Colonel Owen, prisoners were allowed to send and receive mail, join one of several glee clubs, participate in sports, take part in camp theatrics. Books and periodicals were available to them for purchase, Colonel Owen believing that reading materials were "beneficial to the Prisoners by keeping them occupied & contented." Colonel Owen also obtained several hundred books for the use of the prisoners from the superintendent of public instruction.

Organizations such as the Masons and Odd Fellows held meetings in the camp. Photographs, taken at Mr. Charles D. Vajen's "Daguerrian or Photographic Establishment," could be bought and sent home. Prisoners were even allowed outside the camp to visit hospitalized friends. That privilege, however, was revoked after one group stopped at a saloon, "imbibed freely," and caused a disturbance at camp.

To the dismay of the prisoners, Colonel Owen was sent to the field in June of 1862. A succession of camp commandants, none with Colonel Owen's sense of fairness, consideration and latitude, followed. In addition to turnover

in commandants, poor planning, lack of planning, red tape, and an ever-present admonition to economize caused conditions at the camp to deteriorate. Prisoners -- in number from as few as 103 in September 1862 to 4,999 in July of 1864 -- had to endure lack of proper hospital facilities, overcrowded and unsanitary quarters, deficient diets, shortages of basic supplies, extremes in climate, uncaring guards, unscrupulous sutlers, and boredom.

Treatment of troops incarcerated in the South also affected how prisoners in the North fared. Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton wrote to Major General Ethan A. Hitchcock, Union Commissioner for Exchange, in November 1863: "You will please report what measures you have taken to ascertain the treatment of United States prisoners by the rebels at Richmond, and you are directed to take measures for precisely similar treatment toward all the prisoners held by the United States, in respect to food, clothing, medical treatment, and other necessities." What followed were regulations based one instant on the theory that what was good for Billy Yank was good for Johnny Reb, and the next on the theory that the U.S. Government should treat prisoners of war with decency.

Near the end of 1864, a plan was devised to allow the U.S. Government to supply Federal troops in southern prisons with food, clothing, blankets, shelter, fuel, and medical items, and the Confederacy would do likewise for its men in northern prisons. To secure funds, the South was allowed to ship cotton for sale in New York.

Brigadier General William N. R. Beall, a prisoner at Fort Warren in Boston Harbor, was released to oversee the sale of the cotton and the purchase and distribution of supplies. The cotton was sold on February 8, 1865, the sale being delayed by the late arrival of the cotton and the necessity of having it rebaled. All profits from the transaction went for the purchase of tobacco, shoes, gray blankets, and "clothing that was 'in every respect the Confederate uniform (save the buttons).'"

This was seen as an attempt to outfit men for the field, and as prisoner exchanges had once again commenced, the North refused to allow further sales of cotton. As their share of the transaction, prisoners at Camp Morton received 12 packages of tobacco, 1,500 blankets, 1,580 coats, 1,585 pairs of trousers, 1,730 shirts, 1,600 undergarments, 1,800 pairs of socks, and 800 pairs of shoes.

After General Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox Courthouse on April 9, 1865, the 1,408

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The San Joaquin Valley Civil War Round Table officers for 1996 are:



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Change of address? Call Verne Cole, 435-8410 or

Wayne Bowen, 291-4885.

A Confederate Officer's Letters From the Battlefield

Following are excerpts from letters of Confederate 2nd Lt. Dickson Leland Baker of the 24th Georgia Regiment, who served under the command of General James Longstreet through these memorable battles, among others: Seven Days, Crampton's Gap, Sharpsburg (Antietam), Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, Chicamaugua, Chattanooga, Knoxville, The Wilderness, Spotsylvania Courthouse, Cold Harbor, Petersburg, and Deep Bottom.

The author was killed either at Deep Bottom or Front Royal, Va. on Aug. 16, 1864. Accounts vary and the body was never recovered.

The letters, made available to this newsletter by a descendant, Harrison Barton of El Centro, Calif., were written to his wife and children.

Fredericksburg, Va.,
Jan., 21, 1862

My Dear Wife

I seat myself this morning to write you a few lines to let you know how I am getting along. At this time this leaves me feeling only tolerable well. I suffer with my back a good deal. ~~Dear Wife, I have been looking for a letter from you~~ for a long time but have not received any as yet. . . Capt. Davant leaves this morning for home for thirty days. I thought I would send you another letter The Captain is in such a hurry this morning that I hardly know what I am writing. . . .

My Dear, I send you some money by Capt. Davant. I send you five hundred dollars by the Captain. You can pay it over to Neal Johnson and I want you to get your Pa to get a deed for my land or rather a title so if anything was to happen to Neal Johnson I would not be out to any trouble about it. . . . I have no use for money here for if I keep it I will spend it. I would rather use it at home to stop debts. . .

Tarboro, N.C.
March 9, 1862

Dear Wife

I seat myself today to inform you of our whereabouts. We reached this place yesterday after a wearisome march. . . . I felt very much wearied when I reached here last night. We will got to Suffolk, Va. You may send your letters there. There will be thirty thousand troops there. I heard that Col. Thomas' regiment is ordered there and several others. If so, I will meet Warren. The Yankees are marching on to Washington (N.C.) since we left. . . The reason that we had

Dues Reminder

Wayne Bowen, treasurer, reminds that all dues became payable Jan 1, and as yet many have not paid up. Annual dues, which include the newsletter, are \$25 of which \$5 goes to battlefield preservation. Newsletter subscriptions are \$10. Checks should be made out to SJVCWRT and mailed to P.O. Box 5695, Fresno, CA. 93755.

to leave there is that the Burnside fleet is going to attack Norfolk in rear and we will make that a stongpoint so as to keep them from Richmond.

I like the place we are going to much better than Washington. In the summer season it will be much healthier, although it will be cold in tents until the winter breaks. . . . Dear Wife, I think that there will be a powerful effort made this spring to subjugate us and if they do not succeed which they will not with our humble reliance upon God I think that twelve months will close it. Possibly by winter again. . . . I want you to plant all corn this year except that patch around the house. Corn will be in great demand another year whether the war lasts or not. . . . Write soon and let me know how you are getting along and the children . . .

Camp near Petersburg, Va.
August 1, 1864

Dear Cornelia

I take my pen in hand to inform you of my wherabouts and how I am getting along . . . I have nothing new more to write than I wrote the other day, only that we have had a fight at Perersburg killing a great many Negroes, capturing two thousand prisoners. The Yankees trundled under our breastworks and blowed up about 150 yards of them. The Yankees' Negroes, when they charged, hollered "No Quarters" and our troops pitched into them and paid them in their own coin. Nothing has transpired since. I think this will satisfy them in trundling. . . .

Bill Teasley got in last night from home and Lot Skelton. They bring good news about crops, but bad news about everything else. Bill Teasley says the Negroes are almost unmanagable there. For my part I would not care if the Yankees had them all if they want to. If the Yankees do come if any of ours want to go tell them to go and they will find out who will treat them best. . .

Your loving husband D.L. Baker

Additional excerpts from these remarkable letters will be printed from time to time as space permits

Camp Morton (Continued)

Confederate prisoners at Camp Morton were released. First preference was given those who had refused exchange and had been willing to take the oath of allegiance before Richmond fell.

Day after day groups of from 40 to 400 Confederates left the camp, the last departing from Indianapolis as several Indiana regiments returned to a jubilant homecoming. "Yesterday . . . the last remnant of the rebel prisoners confined in Camp Morton were released," said the Journal of June 14. "In tattered gray and butternut the poor fellows straggled down our streets in search of transportation to their homes. The departure of many of these has been delayed because they were in the hospital. As we saw them, haggard and pale, tottering along with their little poverty-stricken bundles, we felt sincerely sorry for them. In our heart there was no bitterness of feeling against them; and we were glad, without qualification, that they were free once more . . . They go back to a conquered country — to overgrown fields — to ruined villages — to homes, the chimneys of which only are left. This could not be helped. War is a hard thing, and it leaves a black and damning trail."

By July 1865, not much was left of Camp Morton. Camp property had been disposed of as soon as the prisoners were vacated, and property purchased with monies from the prisoners' fund was sold at public auction. Claims for damages to the fairgrounds were filed with the U.S. Government by the State Board of Agriculture and settled for \$9,816.56. The land was used by the fair association until the 1890's, when, to accommodate Indianapolis' growth, the

parcel was sold, divided into lots, and homesites were established in a district which would be known as Morton Place.

Still, there remained a legacy: in Greenlawn Cemetery were interred the bodies of the Confederates who had died at Camp Morton. Some of the bodies were later returned to relatives in the South; most, however, remained, their graves marked by wooden boards. In 1912 a monument was erected in memory of the Confederate dead which reads: PAX · ERECTED · BY THE · UNITED STATES · TO MARK · THE BURIAL PLACE · OF 1616 CONFEDERATE · SOLDIERS AND SAILORS · WHO



DIED HERE · WHILE PRISONERS · OF WAR · AND WHOSE GRAVES · CANNOT NOW BE IDENTIFIED.

A second monument, erected about the same time, also had connections to Camp Morton. Located in the State House in Indianapolis, it pays tribute to Colonel Owen. The bronze bust, designed by Belle Kinney, daughter of a Confederate soldier, contains the inscription: COLONEL RICHARD OWEN · COMMANDANT · CAMP MORTON PRISON 1862 · TRIBUTE BY CONFEDERATE PRISONERS · OF WAR AND THEIR FRIENDS · FOR HIS COURTESY AND KINDNESS.

Source: Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, 1940: Camp Morton 1861-1865, Indianapolis Prison Camp, by Winslow and Moore

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