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Prisoners of Civil War : Treatment in the Hands of Captors

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Prisoners of Civil War : Treatment in the Hands of Captors

Abstract

The prisoners on Rock Island, though some would later describe it in awful, vivid detail, were provided with far more than many prisoners could expect. Aside from proper food, water, shelter, and latrines, the prisoners were given much freedom to do with their time what they so desired. Prisoners were allowed what reading material they received from friends and family, and they formed debate societies, drama clubs, and mock trials. Lastly, beginning in 1864, prisoners at Rock Island who so wished were allowed to enlist in the Union Army. Prisoners who did not want to be exchanged back to the South or who no longer agreed with the Confederacy could take an oath of allegiance to the United States and enlist with the Yankees.

Prisoners of Civil War: Treatment In the Hands of Captors*Lauren O'Connor*

In Margaret Mitchell's famous novel *Gone With the Wind*, the handsome Ashley Wilkes describes life at the Union prison camp Rock Island Barracks in Rock Island, Illinois. From the viewpoint of this Southern gentleman, conditions at the camp were horrific: "Food was scanty, one blanket did for three men . . . Three-fourths of all the men sent there never came out alive."¹ Not only is this information untrue, in comparison with Confederate camps, specifically the logistical nightmare of Andersonville, conditions at Rock Island and most other Northern camps appear to be far less dire. Memoirs of soldiers captured in the South paint a foul picture of their imprisonment, as do some diaries and newspapers written at the time, and some authors blame this lack of humane care on Confederate malice.² In the tradition Blight addresses in his study of Civil War remembrance, *Race and Reunion*, the "politics of memory" may have misconstrued interpretations about the treatment of prisoners of war.³

Although conditions in Southern prison camps were infinitely worse than those experienced by Rebel prisoners in the Union, this unfortunate discrepancy appears to be due much less to Confederate vindictiveness and notions of white Southern "honor" than it is to a severe lack of funding and supplies as well as the economic and social breakdown of Southern society due to the war and emancipation of the slaves. Rather, it

¹ Margaret Mitchell, *Gone With the Wind* (New York: MacMillan, 1936), 286.

² William Best Hesselstine, *Civil War Prisons: A Study in War Psychology* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1930), 175.

³ David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), 4.

seems a delicate compromise between the two. What evidence there is towards deliberate Rebel cruelty indeed stems from individualized spite; however, it was not directed at white prisoners of war housed in Confederate prison camps. These instances of vengeance are evident only in the capture of black Union soldiers, with the majority of the reason for such poor conditions at Andersonville and other prison camps being lack of supplies and a society falling quickly into dysfunction.

Northern prison camps, as can be assumed about all prisons, were less than ideal places to live, though they did provide all the necessities and more to their Confederate residents. The most famous of all the Northern prisons, and a fairly good example of how most of them looked and felt, was Rock Island Barracks, located on Rock Island, Illinois. Rock Island, referred to in much Civil War memory as the “Andersonville of the North,” was presided over by Adolphus J. Johnson.⁴ The camp itself was specifically built to house Rebel prisoners, unlike all but two other Union prisons. Though unfinished when the first prisoners arrived, Rock Island provided shelter and cooked food for every prisoner, as well as hospital services and specialized barracks for the sick. Water for prisoners was pumped out of the Mississippi River, in which the island was located, a continuous source of fresh water. Prisoners began arriving in December of 1863, many never experiencing temperatures like those in the North during winter. Despite conditions making it difficult to ship coal, Johnson did not put a limit on how much Confederate prisoners could burn in the barracks’ stoves the whole winter, impressing upon the citizens of the town of Rock Island to lend sleigh-pulling teams of horses to cross the frozen river to the island with coal for the prisoners.⁵

⁴ Benton McAdams, *Rebels at Rock Island* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000), 35.

⁵ McAdams, *Rebels at Rock Island*, 50.

Hospital space soon became an absolute necessity in the barracks; prisoners had brought with them multiple diseases, but the most contagious and deadly was smallpox. Having a long incubation period, it is difficult to stop cases of smallpox from spreading when kept in close quarters with a large populace. Two barracks grew to five, five grew to eleven, and two more were added simply to try and isolate cases of smallpox. The communities across the river provided hospital supplies and clothing, and a few doctors were recruited as well. The epidemic began a slow decline after the new year, but was not completely controlled until spring.⁶

The prisoners on Rock Island, though some would later describe it in awful, vivid detail, were provided with far more than many prisoners could expect. Aside from proper food, water, shelter, and latrines, the prisoners were given much freedom to do with their time what they so desired. Prisoners were allowed what reading material they received from friends and family, and they formed debate societies, drama clubs, and mock trials.⁷ Lastly, beginning in 1864, prisoners at Rock Island who so wished were allowed to enlist in the Union Army. Prisoners who did not want to be exchanged back to the South or who no longer agreed with the Confederacy could take an oath of allegiance to the United States and enlist with the Yankees.⁸

Rock Island Barracks held a total of about 12,000 prisoners, 2,000 of whom died there, a rate of about 16 percent. The vast majority of deaths were due to diseases brought to the camps from elsewhere, such as smallpox. It had a very stable command and guard

⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 140.

unit, as well as stable residency. Once a prisoner came to Rock Island, he rarely left save for exchange, enlisting with the Union Army, or leaving this earth entirely.⁹

Though it can be assumed that all Civil War prisons were quite unpleasant, the atrociousness of most other prisons pales in comparison to that of the Confederate camp in Andersonville, Georgia. The prison was constructed in January 1863, and upon the arrival of the first prisoners, the camp was sixteen-and-a-half acres enclosed by a fifteen foot high pine log fence. There were no buildings in the prison; there weren't even any trees to provide shade from the hot Southern sun. There was a stream of water running through the camp, but it quickly became a swamp where men got drinking water, bathed, and defecated. The prisoners used what scraps of pine branches and underbrush they could find to construct tents with their coats and blankets.¹⁰ There was no layout for the camp when it first opened; prisoners simply staked out a place they felt was reasonable and pitched a homemade tent there. For five months there was no means of cooking rations for the guards or prisoners, and so they were served uncooked, unsifted pints of cornmeal which they were forced to attempt to cook and eat, though upon arrival many were already too ill to cook and feed themselves. At one point some of the first prisoners who arrived were fed half rations—about a teacup full of unsifted corn meal.¹¹ The lack of shelter and quickly polluted stream caused the diseases some prisoners arrived carrying to proliferate and become fatal.

Eventually the prison became overcrowded. Originally sixteen and a half acres, the prison was holding around 26,000 men when Confederates added about ten acres to

⁹ Ibid., xii.

¹⁰ Robert Knox Sneden, *Eye of the Storm*, ed. Charles F. Bryan, Jr., and Nelson D. Lankford, (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 192.

¹¹ Ibid., 211.

the prison. This created a space of twenty-six acres, or about one thousand men per acre. Also, the Confederate guards designated a “deadline” fifteen feet inside the prison from the stockade fence which prisoners were not allowed to cross, reducing the size of the camp. The overcrowding caused a gross pollution of the stream-turned-swamp in the middle of the prison, which took away another three and a half acres. It became “not only uninhabitable but a source of disease to the entire prison. Maggots bred in the swamps to a depth of fifteen to eighteen inches.”¹²

Andersonville was built and prisoners moved there to relieve overcrowding and other poor conditions in Richmond, but it turned out to be far worse than Confederates had planned. The people of the surrounding area were unwilling to provide labor and supplies, and lumber prices were skyrocketing in the South due to speculation. By the time Captain W.S. Winder, the officer in charge of selecting and preparing the prison, received the proper materials and hands to build the camp prisoners were en route from Richmond. He had to wait for permission to impress goods and services off the surrounding residents because the people were unwilling to help.¹³ This impressment and the Confederacy’s tax in kind policies became a burden to the families whose heads of house were off fighting the North, requiring them to provide what little goods, services, and money they had left.¹⁴ Barracks were planned for Andersonville, but Winder didn’t feel the nearby pine forest’s logs were good enough and so desired to purchase plank wood. It turned out plank wood was scarce and thus very expensive, and the major sawmills had deals with the railroad companies as well.¹⁵

¹² Hesseltine, *Civil War Prisons*, 147.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁴ Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over*, (New York: Knopf Press, 2007), 57.

¹⁵ Hesseltine, *Civil War Prisons*, 135.

The Confederates also made a concerted effort at improving the prisoners' food situations. The cookhouse wasn't finished until after prisoners had been residing in the stockade for five months. Then the prisoners began to receive better rations, and so did the guards, for the guards and prisoners were always supposed to be fed the same. Their food also began being served to them cooked. One problem the cookhouse posed, though, was that all its waste ran into the stream that permeated the camp, polluting it even more than the prisoners already had. Another problem that quickly came to light was that the bakehouse was built to cook food for 10,000 men and it wasn't long before Andersonville housed more than twice as many.¹⁶

As the prison grew more and more overcrowded, Confederate administrators tried many ways to remedy the population problem. They shipped prisoners all over the South, from Charleston to Macon, and even built a new prison at Millen. However, the conditions in most of these prisons were just as unsanitary or unstable, and most prisoners eventually were moved back to Andersonville. Charleston was the one place that stood out among the rest; the prisoners were housed in the jail's yard and though it grew very dirty very fast, they felt quite well—especially in comparison to the scant rations they'd received at Andersonville due to overcrowding.¹⁷

Though it may be unapparent by looking at the sheer awfulness of the conditions at Andersonville, no one could say that the Confederates did nothing to help the situations of the prisoners. Captain Winder and his officials had hoped to build proper barracks and feed their prisoners, as well as provide health care for them. However, it came down to the South suffering from lack of resources and speculation on lumber

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 155.

prices. The unwillingness of the Southern civilians to help improve the camp's conditions is startling and unsettling, compared to the generous citizens of Rock Island, but this was no fault of the Confederate government or the Confederate Army. Their own men were starving, especially those placed on prison guard for they were fed the same rations as the prisoners. That the civilians were less than charitable certainly has implications on what the South as a whole deemed right and important—their own families and their own lives. This by no means suggests, though, that the Rebel soldiers treated Union prisoners poorly out of spite or anger or vindictiveness. If anything, the soldiers and Captain Winder did all they could to improve their conditions, even moving them cross-country and building another prison, though by that time exchange was on the table and at any rate the war was coming to a close in favor of the Union.

While the Confederate soldiers did the best they could to treat their prisoners humanely, I believe it is important to note that they only did so for their *white* prisoners of war, and failed miserably as it was. Free blacks, who began enlisting in the Union Army in 1863, were treated far worse upon capture than white soldiers. A proclamation issued in late 1862 stated that black Union troops were not to be considered soldiers but rather as runaway slaves. Thus they were ineligible for exchange and subject to harsh treatment and oftentimes death at the hands of Confederate captors.¹⁸ Clearly the Southern soldiers were deliberately mistreating certain of their Union prisoners of war, but not all. The whites, though suffering unsanitary conditions, inadequate rations, and severe overcrowding which all led to discomfort, disease, and death, at the very least were given the opportunity to survive and return to their regiments and homes. The

¹⁸ Manning, 160.

Confederate social hierarchy saw all whites, presumably even those fighting for the Union, as far better than all blacks.

The white soldiers were taken to prisons where the guards and overseers attempted to keep them alive. Blacks did not receive the same treatment. This discrepancy in handling of Union prisoners yet again supports the claim that Southern prison camps were not designed to purposely harm their residents out of spite; it was a lack of resources and money and a general inclination of Southern citizens towards looking out for oneself rather than helping others that led to immensely unfortunate conditions for white captured soldiers. Confederate soldiers took out their vindictiveness on the blacks, not on their prisoners of war, for they saw them as less than human and the cause of all the war and strife.