**Prisoners of War Readings**

**Reading 1: Andersonville Prison**

Andersonville, or Camp Sumter as it was officially known, was the largest of several military prisons established during the Civil War. It was built in 1864 after Confederate leaders decided to move the many Union prisoners in Richmond, Virginia, to a location away from the war. A site was needed where the prisoners could be guarded by fewer men, there would be less chance of military raids to free them, and food would be more abundant. The town of Andersonville was located on a railroad line approximately 65 miles southwest of Macon, Georgia. The village, near a small stream and in a remote agricultural area, seemed ideal. Construction of the 16 1/2 acre prison camp began in January 1864. Pine logs, 20 feet in length, were placed five feet deep in the ground to create a wooden stockade. In June 1864, the prison was enlarged to 26 1/2 acres. The prison proper was in the shape of a rectangle 1,620 feet long and 779 feet wide. Sentry boxes, or "pigeon roosts," were placed at 30 yard intervals along the top of the stockade. Along the interior of the stockade, 19 feet from the stockade wall, was a line of small wooden posts with a wood rail on top. This was the "deadline." Any prisoner who crossed the deadline could be shot by guards stationed in the sentry boxes. Small earthen forts around the exterior of the prison were equipped with artillery to put down disturbances within the compound and to defend against Union cavalry attacks.

The first prisoners arrived on February 25, 1864, while the stockade wall was still under construction. Small earthworks, equipped with artillery, overlooked the compound. Designed to hold 10,000 prisoners, the prison was soon overcrowded, holding 22,000 by June. Although the prison was enlarged, the number of prisoners continued to swell. By August 1864, more than 32,000 prisoners were confined at Andersonville.

Hindered by deteriorating economic conditions, an inadequate transportation system, and the need to concentrate all available resources on its own army, the Confederate government was unable to provide adequate housing, food, clothing, shelter, and medical care for its captives. These conditions, along with a breakdown of the prisoner exchange system, created much suffering and a high mortality rate. More than 45,000 Union soldiers were sent to Andersonville during the 14 months of the prison's existence. Of these, 12,912 died from disease, malnutrition, overcrowding, or exposure. They were buried in shallow trenches, shoulder to shoulder, in a crude cemetery near the prison.

In September 1864, when General William T. Sherman's forces occupied Atlanta, and a Union cavalry column threatened Andersonville's security, most of the prisoners were moved to other camps in Georgia and South Carolina. The prison operated on a much smaller scale for the remaining six months of the war.

Following the Confederate surrender in April 1865, Clara Barton, later founder of the American Red Cross, and Dorence Atwater, a former prisoner assigned as a parolee to keep burial records for prison officials, visited the cemetery at Andersonville to identify and mark the graves of the Union dead. During the war Atwater had labeled the soldiers by name and number after their deaths. Through Barton and Atwater's efforts, the cemetery was dedicated as Andersonville National Cemetery in August 1865.

Another important event that occurred after the war was the arrest and trial of Captain Henry Wirz, the commandant of the prison. Wirz was arrested and charged with conspiring to "impair and injure the health and destroy the lives of federal prisoners" and with "murder in violation of the laws of war." At his trial in Washington D.C., many former prisoners testified against him, vividly describing conditions at the prison. The former prisoners (and one who testified but was never actually a prisoner) blamed Wirz as the cause of their suffering. Historical documents, however, attest to the fact that prison officials attempted to acquire supplies for the prisoners but were severely hampered by the need to use supplies for the military and war effort. The question of whether or not Wirz could have done more to make life more bearable for the prisoners is still debated today. Was he simply a convenient scapegoat? Because of public outrage and indignation in the North over conditions at Andersonville, Captain Henry Wirz was found guilty of war crimes and was hanged on November 10, 1865. It has been said that Wirz was the last casualty of Andersonville.

**Reading 2: Life as a Prisoner**

Soldiers and civilian support personnel from 26 states and the District of Columbia were imprisoned at Andersonville. Among the diverse prison population at Andersonville were American Indians, African Americans, men from several foreign countries, and two women. All prisoners found themselves confronting common obstacles and problems at Andersonville, including the need for shelter, clothing, food, water, and medical attention. Prisoners tried in various ways to make the most of a terrible situation.

Prisoners arriving at Andersonville quickly discovered that they lacked many of life's basic necessities. Many were without shelter and constructed crude dwellings known as "shebangs," made from various items including cloth, mud bricks, tree limbs, and brush. One group of prisoners, including a printer from Trenton, New Jersey, constructed a shebang by sewing together "the sleeve and back linings of my blouse...our sugar and coffee bags, and...the flap of Hoffman's knapsack."¹ In some instances, prisoners shared their shebangs with others and cared for those who were sick.

Clothing also presented a problem at the prison and prisoners spent much time mending their torn clothes. Some prisoners did not even have clothes. When a prisoner died and was carried out of the stockade to the "deadhouse" before burial, he would be stripped and his clothes were taken back inside the prison. (On one such occasion, the prisoner being stripped was discovered to be a female.) Besides being torn and tattered, the clothing was consistently dirty, as soap was hard to come by and often not available at all. Prisoners sometimes used sand as a soap substitute. Twenty-one-year-old Albert Shatzel, a private in Company A, First Vermont Cavalry, recorded during his first day at Andersonville that "since the day I was Born I never saw such misery as there is here...they can't get aney soap or aney thing else to wash their clothes with."² Another prisoner, John Ransom, made the most of his situation by operating a barber shop and a laundry service (using sand for soap).

Perhaps the worst condition prisoners faced was the lack of food and water. The standard daily food ration was one-quarter pound of cornmeal and either one-third pound of bacon or one pound of beef. Sometimes other items would be issued such as peas or molasses. Often the rations were issued uncooked and prisoners had to cook for themselves. That was not an easy task since firewood was scarce. Prisoners often combined their rations and cooked them together. If a prisoner had money he could do business with the sutler, who operated a small store within the stockade and sold vegetables and other food. In May 1864 eggs sold for 50 cents each, molasses 12 dollars a gallon, bacon 6 dollars a pound, cornbread 40 cents a loaf, and flour one dollar a pint. Black beans were 40 cents a pint. In June baking soda was 25 cents a spoonful, blackberries 60 cents a pint, and beans had risen to one dollar a pint.

One reason Camp Sumter was built at Andersonville was the availability of water. A small stream, called Stockade Branch, flowed through the stockade. This water source, however, flowed through two Confederate encampments and the prison bakehouse before reaching the prisoners. Once it reached the stockade it was the only water supply for drinking, washing clothes, and bathing. The prison latrines, or "sinks," were built on the hillside above the branch and overflowed after heavy rains, sending the contents into the water supply and coating the ground after the water subsided. Among several diary entries by prisoners, John Ransom's account is less graphic than some, but straight to the point. Ransom wrote "There is so much filth about the camp that it is terrible trying to live here."³ When a spring flowed out of the ground after a heavy August rainstorm and created a new water supply, the prisoners, attributing it to an act of Providence, named it Providence Spring.

It is no surprise that under these circumstances sickness was rampant in Andersonville Prison. A hospital originally located within the stockade was later moved outside. Some tents were used, and eventually wooden buildings built, but they were not enough to accommodate the large number of sick. From February 25 to May 9, 1864, 4,588 patients received treatment and 1,026 died.4 The leading causes of death as reported by the medical staff were diarrhea, dysentery, and scorbutus (scurvy).

Inside the prison, a group of prisoners called the "Raiders" banded together to improve their situation by preying on fellow prisoners. Operating in large groups, the Raiders stole food and property by force. Armed with clubs and other items, the Raiders sometimes killed to obtain money jewelry, clothes, and food. For several months during the spring and early summer of 1864, the Raiders literally ruled the inner stockade at Andersonville. Finally in late June and early July of 1864, a group of prisoners banded together to oppose the Raiders. The "Regulators," with the permission of Captain Wirz, rounded up the Raiders. Once captured, many were forced to run between two lines of fellow prisoners who beat them as they ran. Others had to wear a ball and chain or were put in the stocks. Six leaders of the Raiders suffered a worse fate. These men were tried by a jury of 12 fellow prisoners and found guilty of murder. They were sentenced to hang, and the sentence was carried out on July 11, 1864.

To cope with the horrible conditions within the stockade, prisoners turned to various activities. They carved objects, sang songs, played games such as checkers and cards, read any material they could get, and wrote letters and diaries. Letters home were censored by prison officials, and many never reached their destinations. Other prisoners, intent on escape, spent time digging tunnels. Although there are no records of successful escapes via tunnels, some men did escape, mainly from work crews when outside the prison. The escape of one ingenious soldier was recorded by John Ransom on May 16, 1864. "A funny way of escape has just been discovered by Wirz. A man pretends to be dead and is carried on a stretcher, left with the row of the dead. As soon as it gets dark Mr. Deadman jumps up and runs."5

The horrendous living conditions at Andersonville resulted in the deaths of thousands of prisoners. John Ransom, who was imprisoned at Andersonville for seven months, attributed his ability to survive to "an iron constitution that has carried me through, and above all a disposition to make the best of everything no matter how bad, and considerable willpower with the rest."