Camp Morton 1861-1865: Indianapolis Prison Camp
By Hattie Lou Winslow & Joseph R. Moore
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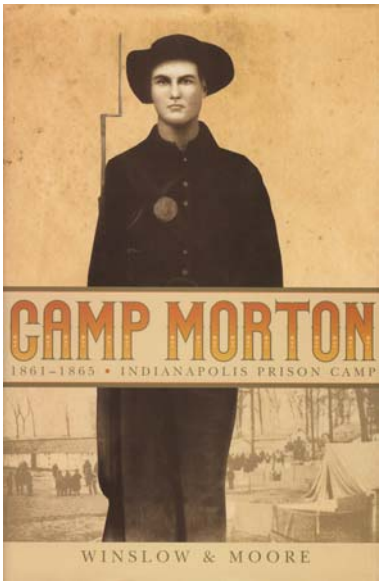
THE STORY

In 1837, a rambling bayou extending beyond the Indianapolis city limits had gotten the attention of local politicians. A creek bed in the wild, swampy area beyond Illinois and Twenty-second streets, dry in summer, was prone to flooding and property damage in spring. The state government appropriated money to widen and deepen the creek bed, and by the 1850s the spot was eyed as a good location for "a place of universal interest." In 1859 the state of Indiana took possession of the area and turned it into the State Fairgrounds. From the simplest of natural beginnings would evolve a place of assembly, suffering, and death.



April 1861. The volatile brew that had fermented national dissent for decades finally ignited. The rumble of thunder trailing the cannonballs at Fort Sumter electrified Hoosier patriots. Within days, thousands of men from every walk of life had converged on Indianapolis with imagined expectations of what it meant to be a soldier. The former State Fairgrounds, now Camp Morton, became the center of all activity at the state capital. As quickly as the recruits came, they were followed by the practical concerns of preparation and sustenance. Every step in accepting, assembling, and activating an army had to be invented in the moments after the needs arose. Despite the steady progression leading up to war, the impromptu army needed everything: uniforms, shoes, weapons, wood, tents, pots, pans, medicine, and more. The paramount issue at all times during camp history was food. Supplying thousands of daily meals from an uncertain infrastructure was an unrelenting challenge of dizzying proportions. The Federal government, the state of Indiana, and volunteer groups stumbled along in an uncoordinated (and at times

uncooperative) three-legged race to sustain and supply Indiana soldiers at Camp Morton during the initial months of the Civil War.

Expecting a short conflict, 30-day Indiana troopers were mustered, outfitted, drilled, sent to the field, returned, and re-enlisted throughout 1861. Camp Morton became the symbol of patriotic Hoosier zeal and seemingly everyone at the state capital was involved with fueling the needs of the recruiting camp. With the Confederate surrender of Fort Donelson, Tennessee, everything changed.

February 17, 1862, the day after the surrender of some 16,000 Confederate troops at Fort Donelson, General Henry Halleck was on the telegraph inquiring for places to put enemy prisoners. Indiana Governor Oliver Morton, unflagging in his commitment to the war effort, volunteered 3,000 slots at Camp Morton- he was sent an initial population of 3,700, which quickly increased to nearly 5,000. Almost overnight, the compound was transformed from recruiting camp to prison yard. Fencing was overhauled, ramshackle bunks were compressed into hastily erected dwellings, the front gate was reinforced, and Union troops -formerly inside camp learning regulation drill- were posted outside as armed guards. Like a bellows connected to the fortunes of war, Camp Morton's population expanded with captured soldiers punctuating each battle and contracted with their eventual exchange or transfer.

With the nation still optimistic about a short war, the first Rebel prisoners to arrive in Indianapolis were treated relatively well; so well, that in 1911 a bronze statue was erected in honor of the second camp warden, Colonel Richard Owen, by former Confederate inmates. Civilian volunteerism shown Hoosier recruits was freely accorded to the first onslaught of destitute Tennessee POWs. But after Shiloh, and Colonel Owen's departure, Camp Morton began a downward spiral mirrored by most other prison camps.

By 1863, both sides had realigned their expectations to the uncompromising madness of war. The care of enemy prisoners fell to the bottom of a very long list of concerns. Despite the obvious lack of priority, perhaps the most interesting aspect of camp administration was how conscientious Federal army administrators remained about the welfare of their charges. Many inspections were made, varying reports issued, and slow, incremental alterations were completed to adjust the most egregious deficiencies.

In the summer of 1863, a great tumult struck Indiana and Camp Morton became a source of anxiety for the entire state. General John Hunt Morgan's Rebel cavalrymen had crossed the Ohio River onto Indiana soil. As Morgan moved northward, rumor spread that the raiders were headed for Camp Morton to release Confederate prisoners and burn the state capital. Indianapolis seethed with frothy speculation as Union men of all ages organized for the defense of the city. Eventually, Morgan's men made it all the way to the gates of Camp Morton- only to be ushered in as prisoners.

In the winter of 1863-64, all mundane concerns were forgotten when the temperatures dropped to 20 below zero. Clad in fraying rags and disintegrating shoes, and with only a small allowance of hay for personal bedding, the prison compound in Indianapolis became a death camp. During the miserable winter months, the toll of expired soldiers averaged three men per day.

Allowing for the best in camp care, Civil War POW compounds were dicey environments. Disagreements between captured units, poor food rations, ineffective medical care, harsh weather, tumble-down dwellings, open camp sewers, disease, boredom, and the occasional trigger-happy guard conspired to limit the lives of many formerly vigorous farm boys. By most accounts, Camp Morton was better than many prisoner camps. This fact was no comfort to the nearly 1,600 men who died there during the three-and-a-half years the camp was active.

THE BOOK

Like any book produced by the Indiana Historical Society, it is a wonderful work, delightfully rendered. Its primary sources are the Official Records and the Indianapolis newspapers- the Official Records build the context and the newspapers build the camp's everyday life. The authors cleverly keep the focus on the people who populated and administered the camp, and the story is filled with human details that keep the reader anticipating the next page. One such vignette concerns the very last handful of Camp Morton prisoners to be released at the end of the camp's life cycle in 1865. A group of seven hapless Union soldiers took the Confederate oath of allegiance after being captured by the Rebels in the South- only to be re-captured by the Union Army and incarcerated in Camp Morton as traitors. In the spirit of reconciliation after the end of the war, they were

simply set free to find their way home. By the end of the book the authors have also created an intriguing portrait of the enigmatic Lieutenant Colonel William H. Hoffman, Commissary General of Prisoners- a man whose problems started after each battle had ended.

Camp Morton is a book well worth reading and, at only $14.95 for the hardcover, a book worth owning.

CONNECTIONS

When I decided to review this book I had no idea of the connections between Thunder From a Clear Sky and the goings on at Camp Morton. For example, the first commander of Camp Morton was none other than the irascible Captain Ben Nicklin, the restless commander of the Henderson-bound 13th Indiana Battery during the run-up to the Newburg Raid. Later, a successful Rebel jailbreak is discussed which may correspond to the escape of Adam Johnson's first recruit, Frank Owen. Also of interest was the fact that many of Morgan’s Raiders wound up at Camp Morton after the failure of the Great Raid before their eventual transfer to Camp Douglas in Chicago. How many of Adam Johnson's Partisan Rangers spent time at Camp Morton before being transferred to Camp Douglas to die? We don't know.