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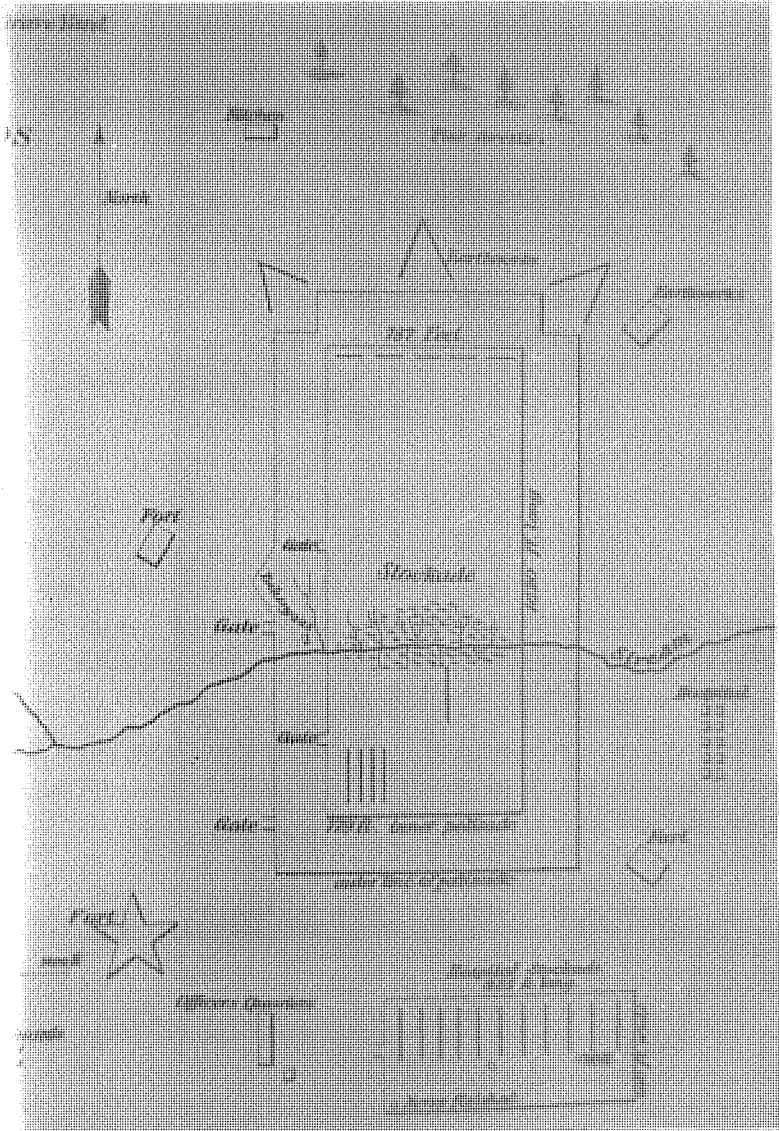


Life and Death
at
Andersonville Prison

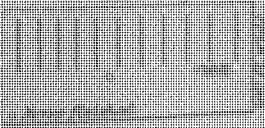
by
Ann Cleary

One of the most serious problems which faced the nation during the American Civil War was care and treatment of prisoners of war. The Confederacy responded by constructing Andersonville prison in an isolated region of Sumter County, Georgia. The earliest prisoners arrived by train during February of 1864. They were marched a mile from the depot at Anderson to the prison. The first order of business was to divide the prisoners into 270 man detachments, which were subdivided into messes containing ninety men. These messes were placed under the control of Union sergeants, who had to record the name, regiment and company of each of the men.¹ Also, the sergeant was responsible for drawing the rations for the men in his mess and for making certain that they were in position for roll call. After these divisions were made, the prisoners were marched into the stockade.

The prisoners were not provided with any shelter at all. Except for the first 3,000 men, the prisoners did not have much wood either.² Therefore, the men improvised and built shelter with whatever was available. The shelters built by the first prisoners were constructed by bending the withes and poles that



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grew in the swamp into semi-circular bows that would support the canvas covers from army wagons, and then pushing these poles into the ground.³ In some cases men wove briars, vines, leaves, and pitch pine into these shelters for protection from the rain.

Some men constructed shelters in imitation of the A tent with two blankets and a ridgepole. Those who did not own blankets constructed this type of tent with old shirts and pants. These were termed "aristocratic shelters" because few men had them.⁴ Those who owned blankets but did not have any wood often dug holes in the ground and placed their blankets over the holes. This worked well when it was not raining. Once it rained the men faced the ultimate danger of drowning as their holes filled with water. This same problem existed for men who had dug little caves for themselves. These caves were dug so that the occupant could slide in feet first with only his head showing. Most of the caves were large enough to hold one person and were used by men who did not have blankets but were able to find crude tools to dig holes. However, the majority of the prisoners had no shelter at all. They were forced to sleep on the bare ground night after night whether it was raining or not. This became more and more common as the prison was crowded with prisoners. At some points it was so crowded in the prison that any kind of movement during the night meant that one would kick his neighbor in the face or even run the risk of stepping on someone's

head. More seriously, though, this totally inadequate shelter certainly played a role in contributing to the ill health of the men.

Besides shelter, a major concern of the men was their food supply. The prisoners were issued the same type of rations as their Confederate guards. These rations were: one-half of a small loaf of corn bread, four ounces of bacon, sweet potatoes, a pint of Indian meal (called "chicken feed" by the men), and sometimes beans, rice, salt, and molasses.⁵ As the war progressed, however, these rations were constantly reduced, with such items as bacon and molasses eliminated altogether.

Rations were issued once a day. An uncovered army wagon drawn by mules would enter the camp. The officer who had to issue the food had a difficult job because the men always crowded around the wagon for their rations. This officer, however, distributed the rations directly to the sergeants who were in charge of each mess. The messes had been further divided into groups of ten or smaller, and the sergeant then gave the food to these groups. For this duty, each mess sergeant was issued an extra ration. During the confusion of food distribution, men, men tried to steal some food. Those caught were forced to endure the process of "gagging", which consisted of having one's head dunked in the brook, and then having it shaved on one side.⁶

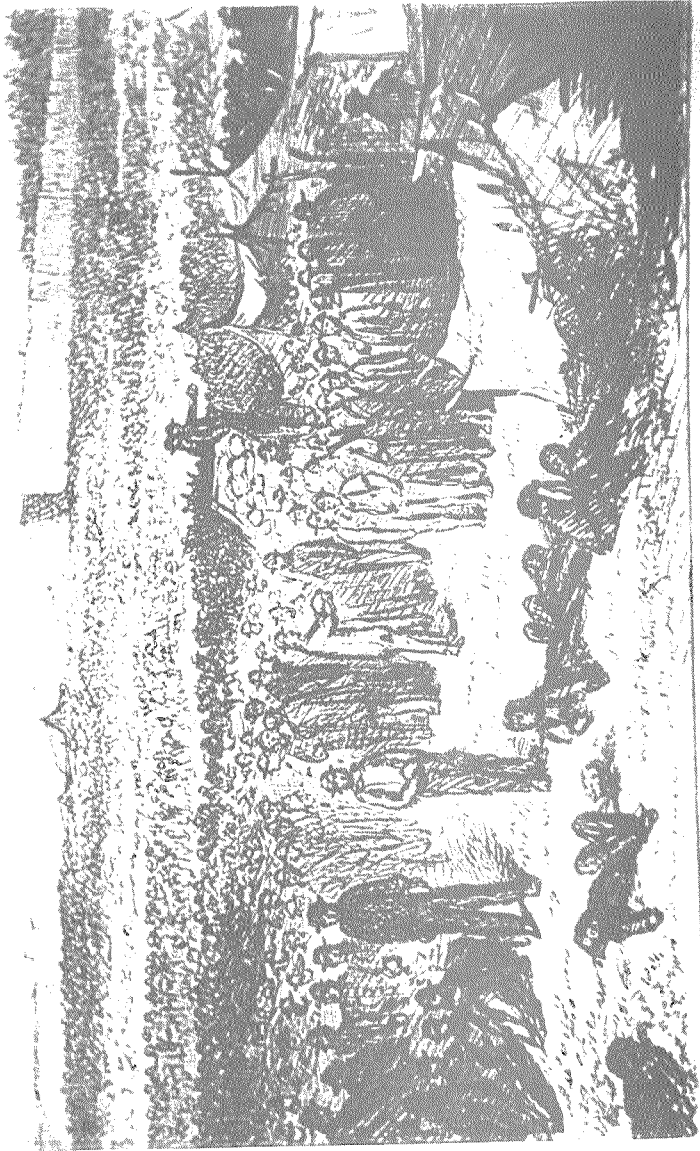
After the food was distributed, the men broke up into small

groups to eat or cook their food. The "raw rations" were preferred by the men because cooked food was often prepared indifferently.⁷ For example, bread might come half-baked and would be unfit to eat the next day. Also, when cooked beans were issued they always seemed to contain a supply of gravel, pods, and bugs.⁸ Consequently, the men preferred to cook and prepare their own meals.

It was difficult to cook, however, due to the lack of wood or other fuel. As wood was essential, the men had to find ways of procuring it. The easiest method, for those with money, was to buy it from the guards. One fellow and his two comrades bought six or seven small pieces for two dollars.⁹ Others who were not so fortunate might volunteer to be stretcher-bearers for the dead, and on the way back to the prison they would pick up sticks and branches.

The prisoners were never issued cooking utensils. One group of men who had been imprisoned in Richmond, Virginia, were lucky, however. There had been tobacco presses in that prison and each of those presses had sheets of tin.¹⁰ These were bent into square pans for cooking. Those not so fortunate used whatever they could find in the way of sticks, wood, and small knives, to hold their food over the fire.

There were numerous recipes devised by the prisoners. One meal was called "hoe-cake." This was made by spreading a layer



VIEW OF THE PRISON FROM THE MAIN GATE,

which were taken when about 35,000 men were here confined. Ohio



VIEW OF THE INTERIOR OF THE CAR

At the quarterly, and annual, meetings of the Board of Directors, the following resolutions were adopted:

of dough about one-half an inch thick on a piece of tin. The tin pan was then propped upright near the fire, causing the dough to brown over nicely. When one side was brown, the dough was turned over so that the other side could brown too.¹¹

"Mush" was another meal eaten by the prisoners. This was made with Indian meal and water. Bacon was put on a sharp stick and held over the fire until it was cooked. In some cases, however, the men ate the bacon raw because it was believed to be a way to prevent scurvy.¹²

One of the favorite dishes was made with bacon and Indian meal. A pint of Indian meal was mixed with water to form a dough which was then shaped into dumplings the size of a hen's egg. These were boiled in water with bacon bits which were as big as marbles until those bits floated on top of the soup. Then the dumplings were taken out, split in half, and the soup was poured over them.¹³

Coffee was made up with burned bits of bread which were boiled in a tin cup. Some men even made "sour beer" from Indian meal by souring it in water.¹⁴

During May of 1864, the rations for the Union prisoners started to decrease. There were many reasons why this happened. First of all, the camp was overcrowded. It had been built for ten thousand men, but at one time it held thirty-eight thousand.¹⁵ This was why the food was prepared badly. For example, the bakery

was preparing bread day and night for almost four times the number of men originally expected.¹⁶ Also, food was scarce throughout the Confederacy during the last two years of the war, and Andersonville was far from any sources of supply.¹⁷ So, the Confederates were eating what the prisoners were eating, which was not very much.

There were two sources of water for the camp. The brook running through the camp was one, and the wells were the other. The water from the brook was filthy-Union prisoners used it for washing and bathing, and the Confederate guards disposed of their wastes in the brook before it flowed through the prison. Also, the grease from the cook house was thrown into the brook. When the water became too polluted to drink, the prisoners began digging wells. Since they were never given any tools, the job was an arduous one. One well was dug sixty-five feet and no water was found.¹⁸ Once a well was successfully dug, the men had to find a means of drawing the water. The most common way was to fashion a rope and use one's boot to draw water from the well. When the soles of the boots gave way, the legs were ingeniously closed up with pine pegs to make leather buckets.¹⁹ Some men who had small knives, such as pocket knives, made buckets and other utensils. The type of food and lack of clean water contributed to the deaths at Andersonville.

Statistics indicate that the number of men in the stockade

during May through August was double and, in some cases, triple the amount that should have been there.

<u>Months</u> (1864)	<u>Number in Stockade</u>	<u>Deaths</u>	<u>Daily Average</u>
March	4,703	283	9
April	9,577	592	19
May	18,454	711	23
June	26,367	1,202	40
July	31,678	1,742	56
August	31,693	3,076	99
September	8,218	2,790	90
October	4,208	1,595	51 ²⁰
November	1,359	485	10

These over-crowded conditions proved disastrous to the prisoners' health, as it resulted in a reduction in the food rations. In addition, the water supply was spread among more men, and every foot of the prison was literally filled with them. These conditions added to the already unsanitary prison. The brook and the swamp were used for human waste and the stench became unbearable. In the summer, flies and other insects began to swarm in the camp. During the hot summer months deaths took place more frequently because of the heat and lack of shelter. In one case, a soldier's squad in April contained ninety men, but by July it had dwindled to twenty.²¹

The most prevalent illnesses were scurvy, gangrene, diarrhea, dysentery, and smallpox (a few cases). Most of the men preferred to treat themselves, for the hospital became a place of no return.

Some of the men used whatever remedies were available for these diseases.

Lice was an ever-present problem, as the men had no change of clothing and no boiling water to wash their clothes. Periodically the men had to "louse their clothing" by turning their clothes inside out and holding the seams close to the fire. In this way, the lice swelled up and died as they fell into the fire.²²

Scurvy was caused by the lack of fruit and vegetables. During the first attack of scurvy, a victim became weak and his legs would begin to swell and the cords would contract, drawing the legs out of shape. The skin would become black and blue, and would retain pressure from fingers like putty would.²³

The most common form of scurvy was that of the mouth. Teeth would fall out, the gums would rot away, and after swallowing, the "scurvy poison" could produce scurvy of the bowels which often ended in suffering and death.²⁴ Also, scurvy sores could often gangrene and the body would become putrid before death.²⁵ The only medicine given for scurvy was sumac berries.

Other remedies included bloodroot as an astringent, black-berry root for diarrhea, and camphor pills for various other diseases. Other medicines were scarce at Andersonville. In fact, medicine was scarce throughout the Confederacy because the Federal Government had declared medicines "contraband" and would

not even allow the Confederacy to buy medicine for anyone (including Union prisoners).²⁷

A hospital was built at Andersonville to provide for the sick prisoners. This hospital was 1/16 of a mile from the camp. It covered three acres of land and was enclosed by a five foot high fence.²⁸

The hospital ground was arranged with streets and tents like a regimental camp, with four divisions; each ward a wardmaster and steward, who detailed the prisoners who were best able to act as nurses.²⁹ The steward's job was to distribute medicine, while the wardmasters were to clean the hospital tents. But often, the filth could not be completely removed; the air smelled dreadful and insects swarmed about.

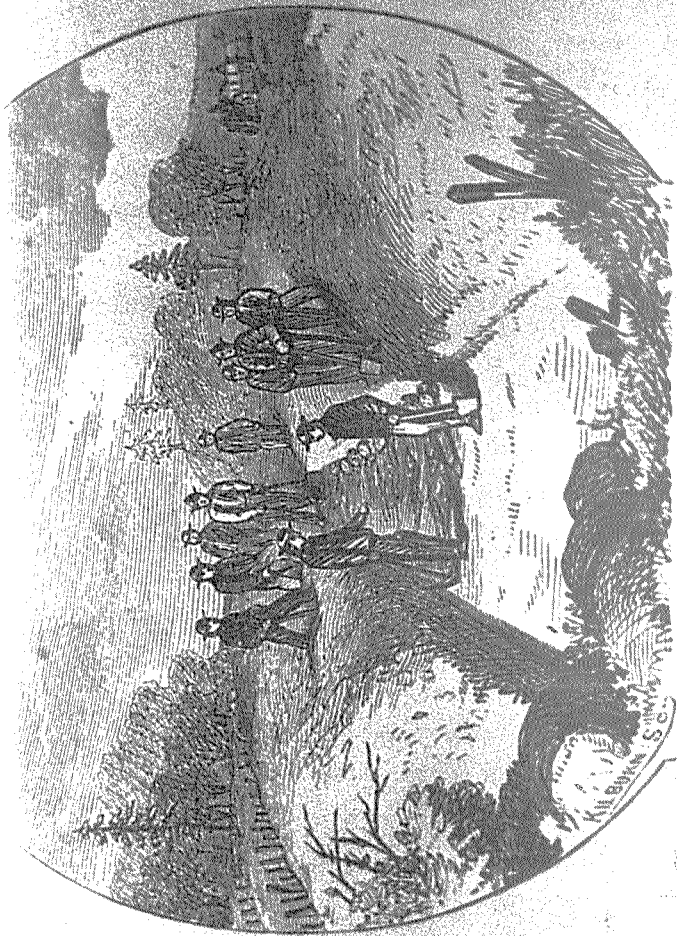
The doctor went to the stockade every day and brought the sickest men to the hospital. The hospital was so crowded that often a prisoner had to wait for another prisoner to die before he could be admitted. The hospital tents were unfurnished-men had to sleep on the bare ground. Also, the so-called "fly tents" often blew over in a storm or a gale.³⁰ The only prisoners who were not treated in the hospital were those with small pox, who were isolated elsewhere.

When prisoners died they were marked with a name tag if their names were known. If not, they were marked with a tag labeled "unknown". These dead men had their big toes tied together and

their arms folded on their chests. Then a wagon (the same one that brought food) carried the dead to the cemetery. This cemetery consisted of a large hole where numerous bodies were placed at one time and buried without coffins. The stench was unbearable here because the graves were often dug too shallow or were too full.

But men did not die only from disease. Some men could not stand the "mental trials" of seeing their comrades die before them. The result was that some men went completely insane, while others committed suicide by walking across the "deadline". As one prisoner said, "The mind was laboring under intense agony. To some the burden was too much, and they never recovered.....some recovered but the scars remain."³¹

The Confederates did not try to maintain discipline in the stockade. The only time the prisoners were punished was when they tried to escape. So, the prisoners themselves had to set up discipline. The most famous case showing discipline was the case of the "Raiders". These small parties of men would steal blankets and valuables from sick and new prisoners. In some cases, they even killed fellow prisoners. The leaders of the Raiders were caught and a trial was held. The jury consisted of new prisoners who would not be prejudiced. The men who acted as defense and prosecution lawyers had been lawyers before the war. These Raiders were found guilty and sentenced to hang. Captain Wirz, the commandant of the prison, let the prisoners build a gallows;



VIEW OF THE MANNER IN WHICH THE DEAD WERE INTERRED.

Taken from a Stebel Photograph. The bodies were laid in rows of one hundred.

and on July 11, 1864, the Raiders were hanged in the stockade.

Death, the ultimate form of punishment, was seldom used. Spying for the Confederates or trying to convince men to join the Confederacy was punished by having half of one's head shaved and having a "T" engraved in one's forehead. Stealing could result in being forced to run the gauntlet. Some men who were caught stealing might be beaten up and thrown in the swamp. These various methods helped to maintain order, especially after the leaders of the Raiders were hanged.

The prisoners were confronted with other problems besides death and hunger—one of these being boredom. Except for drawing rations once a day, the prisoners had nothing to do. The men had to find something to keep them occupied. One of the favorite amusements was playing cards, especially poker. The men used beans as poker chips and hoped to win enough beans to make a meal. Some prisoners played chess, having made chessmen out of the white root found in the swamp.³³

Some of the prisoners started sutler's businesses. Beans were the main product of this business because they were readily eaten. A prisoner would trade a button for tobacco; tobacco would then be traded for beans; then the beans would be cooked and sold.³⁴ Other men sold "sour beer" that they made from Indian meal.³⁵ The trading street was called "Broadway" and the men often yelled to tell everyone what they had to trade. Other men became bucket

makers, bakers, or kettle makers, using whatever material was available. Trade even went on between prisoners and Confederate guards who would trade food for buttons. Beside the above mentioned articles, wood, molasses, meat, flour, onions, and whiskey (made from sorghum) was also traded.³⁶

Many men also spent time praying. Every day priests and ministers entered the stockade to work among the prisoners. Some of the prisoners themselves started prayer meetings after dusk with many men joining in on the praying and the hymn singing. Those who had copies of the Bible or other books treasured them dearly and read them every day. Through these activities the prisoners found ways to keep themselves occupied during the long days in the stockade.

The prisoner's dream was either to escape or be exchanged. An exchange program was initiated on July 22, 1862, by General John A. Dix for the United States and General D. H. Hill for the Confederacy.³⁷ However, on April 17, 1864, U. S. Grant, Commander of the Union forces, ordered a stop to exchanges and paroles. In a statement following his order, Grant insisted that "every man (Confederate) released on parole becomes an active soldier against us at once....At this particular time to release all rebel prisoners North would ensure Sherman's defeat..."³⁸ This decision left prisoners of war with only one alternative-escape.

The prisoners in Andersonville had many ways to try to escape. When the prison was first established they tried to scale the walls

using homemade ropes. But once the "deadline" was established, this proved impossible, as anyone who approached the walls would be shot. Some prisoners pretended they were dead so that they would be carried out of the prison. A few became stretcher bearers and never returned to the prison. Others went out under guard to search for wood and tried to escape. This method was given up, though, when the commandant said he would refuse to let any more prisoners get wood. However, the most lasting means of trying to escape was tunnelling.

Prisoners dug tunnels at night. Usually the tunnels were located as near to the "deadline" as possible so the men would not have to dig far. Other tunnels were dug inside the wells that the men had sunk. These tunnels were dangerous because the soft earth caused many cave-ins. Many times Confederate guards had to help prisoners who were caught in their own tunnels.

Even if the men did succeed in escaping from the compound, they rarely escaped from the bloodhounds, which were expert in tracking the men. The prisoners developed several theories on how to throw the dogs off the scent. These included putting red pepper on the soles of their shoes, using fresh blood in the same way, or wading in water.³⁹ The men dug tunnels and tried desperately to escape but not many made it outside the compound and those who did were soon caught. Because of the rough terrain and the remoteness of the country, escapes were very difficult.

When one man did escape, the others were forced to stand in ranks until the guards found out how the man had escaped and which company he was from. There were various punishments for prisoners who were caught escaping. Some were put on the chain gang, which consisted of twelve to twenty-five men chained together. Others were made to wear a ball and chain on their ankle, but these were easily removed by the prisoners.

At the end of the War, conditions at Andersonville were exposed to an outraged nation. As a result, Captain Wirz, the commandant, was tried and hanged-the only "war criminal" of the American Civil War.

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