

Prison Camps During the Civil War

What happened to prisoners during the Civil War? Did the Union and Confederacy run concentration camps? Last year I studied World War II and its concentration camps. Now I wanted to know if similar camps were run during other wars. In particular, I wondered how prisoners were treated during the Civil War, a war that pitted Americans against Americans.

I started with our textbook. It had a good summary of the causes and major battles of the war, but I couldn't find any references to prisoners of war (POWs) or prisons. I went to the school library and found many books about the Civil War, but book after book had no entry for "prisons" or "prisoners" in its index. Finally, I found a few pages about POWs in James M. McPherson's book, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*. According to McPherson, an infamous Confederate prison camp was located at Andersonville, Georgia, where 13,000 Union soldiers died, and the worst Union prison camp was located at Elmira, New York.

I wanted to find out more about Andersonville and Elmira. I went to the public library. I can't remember now which key words I used for my search, but I do know that nothing promising came up on the library's computer catalog. Frustrated, I decided to just go to the Civil War section and browse through the books. After a few minutes there, I came across what became my main source for this paper: *Portals to Hell: Military Prisons of the Civil War*, by Lonnie Speer.

From Speer, I learned that Elmira was grossly overcrowded and led all northern prisons with its death rate of ten Confederate soldiers per day. Most died from diarrhea and dysentery. Exposure and scurvy were also contributing factors. The pond inside the camp quickly became a haven for rats. This was actually a benefit—many prisoners preferred eating the rats to prison food and the rats became a part of the prison bartering system. One prisoner wrote that "these...delicacies commanded a price of about four cents apiece."

If Elmira might have qualified as a concentration camp, Andersonville certainly did. There, 33,000 prisoners (or 1,250 per acre) were confined with no shade and little food during the hot Georgia summer. Desperate prisoners would catch low-flying swallows that swarmed over the stockade and eat the birds raw. Because of the overcrowded conditions at Andersonville, not only death became commonplace, but murder, either by guards or fellow prisoners, happened every day also.

Although the point of taking prisoners is supposedly to act humanely while depriving the enemy of soldiers, I found out that neither the Union nor Confederacy was prepared to provide for the basic needs of the huge numbers of enemy soldiers it captured. Because of these conditions, long before World War II, concentration camps existed in America—run by Americans for Americans.

I learned two important things about research during this project. One is that it's sometimes a good thing to simply browse through library shelves, rather than assuming I can find everything in the catalog. The other thing I learned is that primary sources, like quotations from Civil War prisoners' diaries, are powerful ways to learn about something.

Opening

The search for resources

Discoveries

Reflection