

POW camps' atrocities a part of their legacy

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Thousands of soldiers died of diseases and exposure at U.S. and Confederate prisoner of war camps during the American Civil War. - Carlton Fletcher, metro editor

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Faith Weaver, 9, puts a flower and a "USA" ribbon at the base of a headstone of an unknown Civil War soldier at Andersonville National Cemetery. Weaver, her sister and mother, drove from Warner Robins to put the flowers on the graves.

As America marks the 150th anniversary of the start of the Civil War that divided the country from 1861-1865, debate still rages over the writing and teaching of the war's history and its continued impact.

And while historians all agree that notorious prisoner of war camps at Andersonville in Sumter County, 45 miles north of Albany, at Elmira, N.Y., and at Camp Douglas just outside Chicago were scenes of atrocities that will long mar the American psyche, there remains disagreement over the root causes of these atrocities.

Southern heritage groups like the Sons of Confederate Veterans contend that most of the inhumane treatment afforded Northern prisoners at Andersonville, long viewed as the scene of Southern barbarism by Northern historians, was the product of conditions brought on by the war. These same groups counter that the treatment of Rebel soldiers at camps like "Hellmira" and Douglas — dubbed "80 acres of Hell" — were acts of retaliation and intentional cruelty.

The truth, as is usually the case, most likely lies somewhere in between. But there is recorded evidence to support the Southern view.

"What we really want is for the truth to be told," James King, commander of the Albany-based SCV camp, said. "The conditions at Andersonville were terrible. But so were the conditions at the camps in the North. That's something that's been overlooked by historians

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"Most people realize that it's the victors who write the history books, but the Northern slant of history surrounding POW camps during the Civil War has not been fair and honest. There is a strong belief that Northern historians have intentionally diverted historical information about (Northern prison) camps."

No one can dispute the horrendous conditions that left thousands of soldiers dead at all Civil War prison camps. Historians have long since agreed on some alarming figures: 270,000 U.S. soldiers were captured and held in Confederate POW camps compared to 220,000 SCA prisoners in Northern camps.

Of those prisoners, 26,436 Confederate soldiers died in U.S. prisons, while 22,570 Northerners died in CSA prisons.

Those numbers become especially gruesome when the histories of the war's most notorious POW camps are examined. At Andersonville, which was built to hold 10,000 prisoners, as many as 32,000 men were crammed into the camp at any given time. By the time the war ended, more than 45,000 Northern prisoners had been held at Andersonville, 30 percent of which (12,912) died in captivity from dysentery, scurvy, malaria and exposure.

At Camp Douglas, built to accommodate 6,000 prisoners, as many as 12,082 were in the prison at any given time, and more than 26,000 CSA soldiers were held there over the course of the war. The death toll is listed at 4,275 known dead, but many who were at the camp said that number most likely surpassed 6,000.

Likewise at Elmira, unused barracks intended for as many as 5,000 prisoners held up to 12,122 men at any given time, and the death toll at the notorious camp surpassed 25 percent (2,963). Exposure was one of the chief causes of death, but dysentery, smallpox, pneumonia and starvation were also deadly.

"What many people who don't study the history of the war fail to understand is that it was the elements and the conditions — especially insufficient rations — that led to many of the deaths at Andersonville," King said. "But at the Northern camps like Douglas and Elmira,

much of the inhumane treatment came at the hands of people who today would be considered a criminal element.”

Col. William Hoffman, the commander of Elmira, in retaliation for reports of ill treatment of Northern prisoners at camps like Andersonville, ordered rations for Southern prisoners to be cut to just bread and water. And when Southerners’ relatives sent clothing to help the prisoners cope with the cold weather at the camp, Hoffman reportedly refused to allow them to receive any that was not gray in color.

All other clothing he burned.

On orders from Washington, Camp Douglas Commander Col. Benjamin Sweet ordered that stoves at the alternately flooded and freezing facility be removed and that prisoners receive no vegetables.

That act, again reportedly ordered as retaliation, increased disease in the camp proportionately.

The Confederate Congress, on the other hand, passed a bill in May of 1861 requiring that rations furnished prisoners of war be “the same quality and quantity” as enlisted men in the Confederate army.

“Lincoln has been let off the hook about this by history, but he doesn’t deserve it,” King said. “He micromanaged the war; he had to have known what was going on at the prison camps. He had to have known about the mandated inhumane treatment.”

Confederate leaders were known to have sought an exchange of prisoners, but correspondences show that U.S. leaders would not agree to such a move.

Dr. Isaiah H. White, the chief surgeon of military prisoners east of the Mississippi River who was for a period headquartered at Andersonville, recalled as much in an 1890 newspaper article.

“It is a well-known fact that Confederate authorities used every means in their power to secure the exchange of prisoners, but it was the policy of the U.S. government to prevent it,” White said.

White pointed to a letter written by Gen. Ulysses S. Grant as evidence.

“It is hard on our men held in Southern prisons not to exchange them, but it is humanity to those left in the ranks to fight our battles,” Grant, who later gave the same testimony before a post-war tribunal, wrote.

“Every man released on parole or otherwise becomes an active soldier against us at once, either directly or indirectly. If we commence a system of exchange which liberates all prisoners taken, we will have to fight on until the whole South is eliminated.

“At this particular time, to release all rebel prisoners would ensure (Gen. William T.) Sherman’s defeat and would compromise our safety here.”

In the aftermath of the war, Andersonville commander Capt. Hartmann Heinrich (“Henry”) Wirz was court marshalled by a military court and hanged on charges of conspiracy and murder.

Wirz, a native of Switzerland who was banned from his own country for indebtedness, lived in Russia and Italy before coming to the United States. He joined the Confederacy’s 4th Louisiana Infantry in 1861 and rose to the rank of captain. He was in charge of prisons in Richmond, Va., and Tuscaloosa, Ala., before being named commandant of Andersonville on March 27, 1864.

Wirz’s namesake, Heinrich L. Wirz of Bremgarten, Switzerland, has spent the past 20 years seeking a presidential pardon for his ancestor, thus far to no avail.

“I agree with what he’s doing,” King said. “Especially in light of the intentional criminal acts carried out at Northern prisons.”

The disagreement over the notorious histories of U.S. and Confederate POW camps will no doubt rage on, to no one’s full satisfaction. But such disagreements do little to erase the blight of inhumanity — intentional and unintentional — that is the legacy of such camps.

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