**ANDERSONVILLE PRISON**

During the first year of the Civil War, the North and South exchanged thousands of captured soldiers. But their worsening relationship soon led to a breakdown in the prisoner exchange system. Through the remainder of the war, each side was forced to care for large numbers of enemy troops.

Conditions at prisons in the North were far from ideal, but Confederate inmates were usually treated with at least a minimum of decency. The North had an abundance of food, clothing, and medical supplies. In the South, however, the situation was far different. As the war dragged on, the Confederacy faced sever shortages because of the Union blockade and the destruction of its cropland. The South had trouble feeding and clothing its own people, let alone the more than 100,000 Union soldiers that it held. The result was widespread disease, starvation, and death among the prisoners.

The most notorious of the Confederate prisons was located at Andersonville, deep in the Georgia swamps. The camp covered just 26 acres, and was surrounded by walls made of pine logs standing 15 to 20 feet high. The 32,000 captives crowded into Andersonville Prison lacked sanitary and medical facilities. There were also no building to shelter the men from bad weather or the hot sun.

At first, many men tried to escape. But this changed the day the “dead-line” was marked off. A gang of black slaves entered the prison yard and drove a line of stakes about ten feet from the outside wall. They nailed a strip of cloth to each stake. The prisoners were told that if this line was crossed or even touched, the guilty person would be shot without warning. The guards wanted to keep the men away from the walls, so they would not climb over and escape. They day after the dead-line was established, a man reached across it to pick up a piece of cloth. He was shaking all over from the long months of suffering, and did not realize what he was doing. As soon as his hand crossed the line, a guard fired a shot which tore through his body. He was left to die with the dirty piece of cloth clutched in his hand. Few men went near the dead-line again.

In the summertime, the intense heat took a heavy toll on the inmates. There was no shade anywhere. Blond and red-headed men agonized from sunburns, which became infected with gangrene and maggots. Fever spread from a nearby swamp that gave off a sickening odor during the warm months. Unfortunately, death did not always come fast. Some men suffered for weeks before dying. Others went crazy because of the dreadful conditions. The lack of food was probably the worst hardship. The men especially needed fresh fruits and vegetables. High-priced watermelons were sold to the prisoners who had money. A crowd would gather to watch a man eat his watermelon. The spectators hoped to get the leftovers when he was finished.

Insanity was always close at hand. One man thought he was sitting down to enjoy a delicious meal with his family. A second prisoner played the flute hour after hour. Many lost their minds while slowly rotting to death from disease caused by food shortages and unsanitary conditions.

Every morning at Andersonville, the prisoners walked past the main gate to count the dead. They checked to see if any of their friends or relatives were there. Because prison authorities did not have new clothes for the men, any good clothing was removed from those who died. Guards tied the big toes together, crossed the hands on the chest, and wrote the dead man’s name on a piece of paper pinned to his shirt.

The appearance of the dead was ghastly. Their eyes were open and their nose and lips were twisted from pain and hunger. Facial skin was dirty and drawn tightly over the bones. All of this was framed by long greasy hair and a beard. Lice swarmed over the bodies. The living were also bothered by lice, because it was impossible to bathe or wash clothes. All a man could do was keep down their number. If a person became ill, the amount of them increased. A sick man’s friends helped remove the lice. One of the favorite ways was by holding clothes next to a fire, and roasting the lice until they popped.

A poorly built hospital was divided from the rest of the camp by a railing. Pine needles were piled on canvas and used for beds. Bu the sick who were taken there were no better off than if they had stayed with their friends. What they needed was clean clothing, good food, and adequate shelter. They could get none of these at the hospital. There was no medicine, and the food was the same as the food which had caused many stomach problems to begin with. Three out of every four persons taken to the hospital died there.

During the last year of the war, conditions reached such a horrible state that hundreds of prisoners died each day of typhoid, typhus, infected wounds, and starvation. An estimated 14,000 men – nearly half of the prison population – died from what Secretary of Ear Edwin Stanton called “savage and barbarous treatment.” When the Civil War ended and the terrible conditions at Andersonville became known, a cry of revenge arose in the North. The prison superintendent was taken into custody and charged with murder. At his trial, evidence was presented which showed that he had done what he could to relieve the suffering. In spite of this, he was found guilty and hanged.