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Elmira Prison

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This paper provides a historical narrative of the often forgotten Elmira prison camp, a notorious Civil War prison managed by the Union. This narrative describes the people and the conditions that help make Elmira prison camp to become a nightmare of the South.

By May of 1864, the Civil War between the United States and the Confederate States had been raging for three years. Southerns' were suffering from northern blockades by land and sea and many were starving, but still willing to fight for their beliefs. One of those men, Private Berry Benson, from South Carolina, served as a sharpshooter and scout. While on a scouting mission Benson was captured and sent to Point Lookout, Maryland, near the Chesapeake Bay. On the 25th of May Benson sat on the sandy ground watching the gates, waiting for them to close marking the end of another day of his captivity. Yet, they were not closing. The sun was going down and the gates still had not closed. To his amazement the guards changed and forgot to close the gates! Cautiously, Benson stood, gathered a few belongings and causally strolled out of Point Lookout prison and slid down one of the wooden pillars into the water.

For a couple of days Benson followed the beach line then decided to head into the woods, figuring it would be safer to make his way back to Virginia and hook up with Lee's regiment. Growing tired and suffering from sore feet (his socks had been lost in the bay); Benson decided to "borrow" a horse.

> I came upon two horses feeding. Approaching very cautiously, I caught one. He was facing the right way, and I sprang on his back. But no sooner was I mounted than he whisked around and carried me back at a gallop the way I had come. Having no bridle, I tugged at his mane and growled, 'Whoa!' But he only sped the faster. Not daring to jump off because of the condition of my feet, I reached forward and seized his ear and gave it a wrench. He stopped. So did I. But the method of my dismounting I respectfully decline to state.[1]

After recovering from his dismount, Benson continued on until running into two small boys in a field. Not wanting to give away that he was an escaped prisoner since he did not know who was on which side,[2] he

[1] Berry Benson, *Berry Benson's Civil War Book: Memoirs of a Confederate scout and sharpshooter*, (University of Georgia Press, Athens, Georgia, 1991), pg. 98. (Will now be cited as Benson).

[2] Maryland was considered a border state and some of the citizens were for the North but some were Southern sympathizers. In this regard Benson made up stories to aid in his escape.

asked the boys if they had seen his horse that he had lost. Knowing they would say no, he thanked them and went on his way. Later on in the day he used the same lie to a woman and her two children were working in a field. Again they told him they had not seen the fictitious horse, but did give him something to eat.

However, deciding he had better change his story to keep people guessing, he told the next couple he met, much to his disliking, that he was a deserter from Lee's army. He came up with this story from a suggestion from the man who offered him a meal. Again, growing exhausted from his walking and lack of food, Benson sat against a tree to rest only to be discovered by a little girl. She stared at him for what probably felt like an hour and then hid behind a tree, but continued staring. She would not come out even when her father called for her. Benson got up and walked rapidly away. "The little girl must have been considerably frightened, no doubt associating me with all the giants, ogres, Bluebeards and what-nots that she'd ever hear about."[3]

Luckily, Benson was given some shoes and happily continued his journey. He met two young boys claiming to be looking for a horse. Benson was taken aback. He decided to walk with them since his suspicions were up. Why were they using his ploy? Had they heard the story and decided to find the horse themselves? However, as they approached a gate, the two boys saw their horse and left Benson alone again. He swam across the Potomac and was finally in his beloved Virginia. It was there when Benson again met two boys, about 12 and 18 years of age. The older boy called out, "Halt!" Benson, not wanting arouse suspicion did as they asked. They took him to the miller who turned out to be the acting sheriff. After being on the run for six days, Benson was captured by an 18 year-old boy in a Southern state and sent to the Old Capital Prison. From there, he was placed on a boat and taken to Elmira prison in New York. The prisoners called it "Helmira."

Between July 6, 1864 and July 11, 1865, over twelve thousand Confederate prisoners-of-war were imprisoned at Elmira Prison in New York. During that one year of existence nearly three thousand of those soldiers died. Their deaths were caused by a lack of decent housing and hospitals. The resulting influx of diseases was aided by the putrefying existence of Foster's Pond and the disastrous New York weather. In addition, a desperate need of food and clothing also hastened the prisoners' deaths, which were as well accelerated by punishments from the guards and bureaucratic retaliation and incompetence on the government.

Elmira, New York, less than ten miles from the Pennsylvania border[4], was a "tough-as-leather" town and its main resources were coal, gypsum, salt, lime and lumber. Interestingly enough it was "a staunch pro-Union settlement that just happened to be the seat of a county (Chemung) with strong Copperhead sentiments."[5] The property that would be known as Elmira prison, formally an area where the local fairgrounds were, was owned by the Foster family and leased to the government in 1861 to build barracks on so the army could train soldiers. Camp Rathbun faced Water Street and the barracks were built on low-lying ground near the Chemung River and a backwater called Foster's Pond was at the south end of the

[3] Benson, pg. 105.
[4] http://www.mapquest.com/maps?1c=Fassett&1s=PA&1y=US&1l=41.986099&1g=-76.773598&1v=CITY&2c=Elmira&2s=NY&2y=US&2l=42.089699&2g=-76.808098&2v=CITY
[5] Philip Burnham, *So Far From Dixie: Confederates in Yankee prisons*, (First Taylor Trade Publishing, Lanham, Maryland, 2003) pg. 32. (Will be cited as Burnham).

camp.[6] Camp Rathbun was originally built to house two thousand men at one time, but with some remodeling it could house another thousand.[7]

In a foreshadowing report to the command, Captain Henry Lazelle stated, "A plot of ground quite level, not easily drained and considerably lower than the surrounding country. To complicate matters, well water on the grounds and from the junction canal south of it is unfit and must be hauled."[8] Another report in 1862 stated "that the sinks (latrines) were 'insufficient, incomplete, and filthy.'"[9] On May 14, 1864, Brigadier General Edward D. Townsend announced there were enough barracks at Camp Chemung to house prisoners-of-war and appointed Lieutenant Colonel Seth Eastman as camp commander, who was told to prepare the camp for at least ten thousand prisoners.

The first and foremost problem of Elmira prison came from the buildings, or lack thereof, and the people that worked in those buildings. There were thirty barracks housed with two rows of bunks with windows and ventilation. They could hold one hundred men comfortably. The buildings were made with green lumber, warping in cold weather and there were no hospitals on the grounds.[10] Eastman finally decided to build a 400-bed unit located about one mile from each barracks. The hospitals were to be completed by July which meant there would be no hospital when prisoners began to arrive. At this point he had room for three thousand troops without crowding and one thousand could sleep on the grounds in tents.[11] Before the first prisoners arrived Eastman had managed to build enough barracks to house six thousand men. Unfortunately, "the flooring hastily assembled of green lumber and lacking foundations, afforded little resistance to either wind or water." [12] To make matters worse he received a message from Colonel Hoffman, the US commissary general of prisoners who was known for his thriftiness, stating, "From what I have heard, I judge the number [of prisoners] will be 8,000 to 10,000."[13] Eastman's resolution was to order more tents and finish the perimeter fence by June. Plus, in another foreshadowing move, Eastman rented a plot of ground near the local cemetery to bury dead prisoners. It was decided half-an-acre would suffice.[14] By July 12th Elmira prison was home to 1,151 prisoners-of-war. By August 1st the camp housed 4,424.[15] In just a two week period the count readjusted 9,262 men.[16] Private Benson said of his arrival and barracks, "Baxter, Atkinson and I being assigned to the same long room with bunks fitted up on both sides, in two tiers. The bunks were made of unplanned pine boards, as we had no blankets, they were left bare during the day, and at night occupied simply by ourselves. And the very next night, big locomotive lights were put all around inside the fence, so that the prison was like a gas-lit sidewalk."[17]

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[6] Burnham, pg 33. Camp Rathbun was also known as Camp Chemung. After the buildings were completed they changed the name to Camp Chemung and barracks 3 was known as Camp Rathbun and barracks 1 was known as Arnot Barracks named from the mayor of Elmira.

[7] Michael Gray, *The Business of Captivity: Elmira and its Civil War prison*, (Kent State University Press, Kent, Ohio), 2001, pg. 3. (Will be cited as Gray).

[8] Michael Horigan, *Elmira: Death camp of the North*, (Stackpole Books, Mechanicsburg, Pa, 2002), pg. 16. (Will be cited as Horigan).

[9] Burnham, pg 35.

[10] Burnham, pg. 34.

[11] James I Robertson Jr., *Civil War Prisons: The scourge of Elmira*, edited by William Hesseltine, (Kent State Press, Kent, Ohio, 1962) pg. 81. (Will be cited as Robertson).

[12] Robertson, pg 88.

[13] Gray, pg 7 & Horigan, pg 27.

[14] Burnham, pg 37

[15] Horigan, pg 36 & 47

[16] Gray, pg 19

[17] Benson, pg 127 & 128

Yet more problems arose in August when Eastman ran out of tents. "Hundreds of half-clothed prisoners found it necessary to sleep in the open, many of them without blankets."[18] Due to the fact the prison's enrollment was up nine thousand, the mess hall became another issue. Captain Bennett Munger, a prison camp inspector, concluded: "The causes of the filthy condition of the mess-house were: First, the building is in such constant use it is difficult to keep it tidy; and, second, there was a temporary neglect on the part of the officers in charge."[19] Even Eastman complained to Colonel Hoffman to no avail and finally gave up in September and resigned as commander of Elmira prison with five thousand men still living in tents. Command of Elmira went to Colonel Benjamin Franklin Tracy.

Finally, in October Colonel Tracy stated, "Many men are in tents without floors or blankets. Barracks should be erected instead of tents." Captain Munger agreed, "Weather is cold for the season and those in tents especially suffer."[20] In fact, there were 1,038 "A" tents on the grounds and a total of 5,190 men camped outside.[21] On October 3rd, Hoffman, at long last gave the order to build more barracks. Yet, problems arose from that and delays continued until December due to the fact that the prison had difficulties getting lumber in.

Another building problem that plagued the prison was the hospital. As stated earlier, there was no hospital or hospital staff when prisoners arrived and that would prove to be a disaster. July 15, 1864, a train carrying prisoners-of-war collided with a freight train near Shohola.[22] Causalities included 48 prisoners and 17 guards killed with another 100 prisoners[23] and 18 guards injured.[24] Eastman sent out hay wagons to bring the injured back. Overwhelmed, surgeon William Wey worked through the night, saw in hand, tending to those in dire need of amputation. Anthony Keiley, a former Virginian legislator and prisoner who worked in the hospital, wrote:

> Many of [the injured] were in a horrible condition and when I went to the hospital the following Monday I found the wounds of many still undressed, even the blood not washed from their limbs, to which, in many instances, the clothing adhered, glued by the clotted gore. [25]

In defense of surgeon Wey, having worked emergencies (even though it was with animals) it is extremely easy to get overwhelmed, and with a lack of a support team Wey had to take worst case first. This by no means excuses the fact men still had not been attended to for days after they were admitted, but puts the amount of stress Wey was under into perspective. That being said, the lack of speed would only aid the influx of disease. Due to the disaster from the train wreck, Hoffman finally authorized, on July 27th, a new hospital consisting of six wards to be built. Sadly, for whatever reason, by September 1st only four of the hospital wards were finished.[26]

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[18] Robertson, pg 84
[19] Horigan, pg 63
[20] Gray, pg 55
[21] Gray, pg 55
[22] Shohola is a two hour drive from Elmira.
http://www.mapquest.com/maps?1c=Shohola&1s=PA&1y=US&1l=41.474998&1g=-74.915604&1v=CITY&2c=Elmira&2s=NY&2y=US&2l=42.089699&2g=-76.808098&2v=CITY
[23] In three different book there are different numbers of wounded. The count seems to be anywhere from 85-100 prisoners injured. Though it could be 100 originally injured and some died on the way to Elmira. None of the information states precisely what happened on the way back to the prison.
[24] Robertson, pg 83
[25] Burnham, pg 46
[26] Horigan, pg 53

A second disaster would befall the hospital at the end of September/early October. Hoffman wired Tracy: "By authority of the Secretary of War all invalid prisoners in your charge who will not be fit for service within sixty days will in a few days be sent South for delivery."[27] After careful examination by the medical staff, who were told "not to send those who were unable to travel,"[28] twelve hundred prisoners were deemed "invalid" and were prepared for their trip home. As the prisoners were preparing to leave, one died. On the way to the train, five more died. Arriving in Baltimore the medical director for the city, Josiah Simpson, diagnosis stated, "a number unable to bear the journey."[29] He wired Hoffman informing him:

> The physical condition of many of these men was distressing in the extreme, and they should never have been permitted to leave Elmira….The condition of these men was pitiable in the extreme and evinces criminal neglect and inhumanity on the part of the medical officers in making the selection of men to be transferred.[30]

There was also another transfer in February 1865; again Simpson had to wire Hoffman:

> Proper care does not appear to have been exercised by the medical officer at Elmira in the examination of the prisoners for transfer, for it is not possible that so short a journey could have brought about the condition in which these sick men were found on their arrival at this point.[31]

Again this points to the lack of knowledge, care, supplies, food, and everything else needed to tend to sick and dying men that Elmira prison was not supplying to their prisoners. In fact, author Michael Horigan states in his book, "…17 Confederates deaths in Elmira's Union hospital between July 12 and September 1."[32]

In addition to the first and second problems, the third problem with the running of the prison was one Major Eugene F. Sanger, surgeon in charge of Elmira prison. Sanger was in fact a medical doctor and surgeon who lived to serve on the front line. In the story of Elmira, Sanger seems to serve as hero and villain. On July 29, 1864, Major Sanger was ordered to report to Elmira prison; on August 6th he arrived a full month after the prison opened.[33] At that point, Sanger would become the most controversial character at Elmira.

For example, Sanger recorded the presence of scurvy in the prison and reported the problem to Lieutenant Loundsbury. Sanger listed 793 scurvy patients and requested, "More potatoes, cabbage and onions be included in the hospital diet and noted an acute shortage of hospital beds resulted in 593 scurvy patients being quartered in regular barracks."[34] Sanger was an extremely meticulous man who constantly sent reports to his commanders in the war department and kept amazingly accurate records for his personal

[27] Gray, pg 43
[28] Gray, pg 44
[29] Robertson states in his paper that forty men were dying and a number were unfit to travel. The other sources do not give me precise numbers.
[30] Gray, pg 46
[31] Gray, pg 70
[32] Horigan, pg 180
[33] Horigan, pg 53
[34] Horigan, pg 68

use. In fact, from August 13th to October 17th Sanger issued nine written reports that listed in great detail the life threatening shortcomings of the prison. [35] The following are some of the reports Sanger sent:

> Of 2,011 admissions to the prison hospital through the months of August, September and October and a death rate during that period of 24 percent. Between August 13 and October 17 he had submitted nine written reports [to the post commander] calling attention to the pond, vaults, and their deadly poison, [and] the existence of scurvy to an alarming extent and recommends a ration of fresh vegetables daily for the scurvy patients.
>
> …great delay in filling my requisitions for the hospital and the sickness and suffering occasioned thereby…In the administrative duties of a large hospital department the surgeon in charge must have direct communication with the commander, who is the only authorized executive officer…who enters my wards at all time, instructs my ward-masters and nurses, find fault to them of my management, and quizzes them in regard to the medical officers changes the beds of the patients, corrects and changes their diets, and directs the washing of my patients without regard to my rules… I have entered a written protest without avail. I cannot be held responsible for a large medical department of over 1,000 patients without power, authority, or influence.[36]
>
> …he averaged 1,052 sick men at the pen [nickname for the prison], more than half of whom were not even admitted into the hospital wards. At this rate the entire command will be admitted to the hospital in less than a year and 36 percent will die.[37]

However, there was a dark side to Sanger and many saw it. A case in point comes from prisoner Walter D. Addison: "…the surgeon-in-chief a Dr. Sanger was called in, he directed Dr. Van Ness to write four or five drops of Fowlers solution of arsenic. He [Dr. Van Ness] wrote forty-five and the patients in a very short time breathed their last. No investigation ensued."[38] In fact, Van Ness continued to work at the hospital until his own request for transfer came through. Even though Sanger himself did not administer the lethal dose to the prisoners, as surgeon in chief he was responsible for all of the actions in the hospital ward.

Another instance from prison comes from the account of Anthony Keiley. While taking the morning accounting of dead bodies (that was his job) he wrote:

> As I went over to the first hospital this morning early, there were eighteen dead bodies lying naked on the bare earth. Eleven more were added to the list by half-past eight o'clock!" A week or two before the first prisoner exchange in October, "The deaths yesterday were twenty-nine. Air pure, location healthy, no epidemic. The men are being deliberately murdered by the surgeon, especially by either the ignorance or malice of the chief.[39]

[35] Horigan, pg 131
[36] Horigan, pg 141 & 142
[37] Gray, pg 48
[38] Walter D Addison, "*Reminiscences of Walter D. Addison,*" September 1889, pg 6, Chemung Historical Society, from the green papers #289, Southern Historical Collection. The information from the Chemung Historical Society was photocopied and sent to the author from the archivist. (Will be cited as Addison).
[39] Gray, pg 51

> Sanger's systematic inhumanity to the sick, I do not doubt that many of those who died [at Elmira] perished from actual starvation in a country where food was cheap and abundant.[40]

In all fairness to Sanger, for an unknown reason Keiley took a dislike to the man almost instantly. Still Keiley was also a highly educated lawyer and teacher, not an impressionable youngster horrified by blood and war. Sanger wrote a letter to Brigadier General John L. Hodson. In it Sanger stated: "I now have charge of 10,000 Rebels a very worthy occupation for a patriot, particularly adapted to elevate himself in his own estimation, but I think I have done my duty have relieved 386 of them of all earthy sorrow in one month."[41] Could this man be admitting to murdering 386 people? Of course, it is difficult to say, and one must remember they spoke differently at that time, so what we would consider an admission of guilt could be a man saying he had done all he could for these men and now it is up to God. Any way one reads that statement one has to be taken aback by it. Adding to the mystery of Dr. Sanger and the deaths of the prisoners is a statement several prisoners including James Huffman overheard Sanger make, "I have killed more Rebs than any soldier at the front."[42]

Yet, Dr. Sanger had made an even more powerful enemy than Anthony Keiley, and that was camp commander Tracy. On December 6, 1864, Tracy wrote Special Order #398: "The surgeon in charge and all medical officers on duty at prison camp hospital will remain at the camp from 8am until 12n and from 2pm until 5pm each day. The surgeon in charge will see that this order is strictly observed."[43] To make matters even worse, Tracy amended the order to read:

> The surgeon in charge will make requisitions from time to time on the commissary of subsistence, subject to the approval of the commanding officer for such article as are necessary-each requisition to be accompanied by the certificate of the surgeon in charge in the following form- 'I certify on [sic], that the above specified articles were purchased on my requisition for the use of the sick in hospital under my charge, and that the state of the hospital fund at the time warranted the expenditure.'

Their battle finally came to a head when Tracy issued Special Order #403 on December 11, 1864:

> Major Sanger the surgeon in charge will immediately take up his quarters at prison camp. Lt. Col. Moore (second in command under Tracy) will assign him quarters at the camp. There must be not time when he cannot be found at camp unless absent by permission of Lt. Col More. Other medical officers on duty at the camp will take up their residence at or in the immediate vicinity of the camp. It is expected that these officers will be on duty at least several hours each day and they will not be absent from camp between the hours of 8 o'clock am and 5 o'clock pm without the permission of the surgeon in charge and Lt Col Moore.[44]

In one order Sanger was placed under house arrest. On December 23, Brigadier General Barnes finally gave his consent to transfer Sanger and replaced him with Major Anthony E. Stocker of the US

[40] Burnham, pg 75. Keiley is referring to the apparently rumors of Andersonville atrocities.
[41] Eugene F Sanger, *Letter to Brig. Gen. Hodson*, Oct 11, 1864, Chemung Historical Society, copied from records of the office of the Adjutant General Regimental Correspondent, Maine State Archives.
[42] Robertson, pg. 91
[43] Chemung History Society. Special Orders were copied from the National Archives. (Will be cited as SO#)
[44] SP# 403

Volunteers.[45] Sanger was privy to all of the questionable decisions of the War Department and the poor judgment of Elmira prison's administers. He had firsthand knowledge of: 1) the delay to correct the unsanitary condition of Foster's Pond; 2) the late start of construction of additional quarters; 3) the questionable October transfer of one thousand two hundred sixty-four prisoners; and 4) the reduction of rations.[46]

However, there is one last interesting note about Sanger. Pastor J. S. Hutchison, a prisoner, wrote a letter to fellow pastor Rev. J. William Jones and said, "While there [Elmira] I was employed in the prison hospital, Dr. E. F. Sanger, Surgeon in charge of the hospital, showed me great kindness, for which I have ever been grateful. During a recent visit to Bangor, Maine, I had the pleasure of meeting with the doctor…"[47] Dr. Sanger is truly one of the great mysteries at Elmira prison. Was he a man that murdered prisoners and did all he could to not help them as Keiley and others have suggested, or was he a man that tried to do his best and met with resistance every step of the way from his bosses?

The final problem with the grounds was Foster's Pond which aided in the escalation of disease as did the weather. When the Union was preparing Elmira to become a prison, Charles T. Alexander, a US Army surgeon and official medical inspector of prisoners of war, submitted a report on July 14, 1864, to Hoffman after inspecting the grounds on the 11th and 12th. He recommended a drainage system to relieve the stagnant waters. Nine days later, Hoffman visited the prison and Foster's Pond was even worse. Still, he would do nothing about the drainage that Alexander had recommended. Even the local newspaper, the *Advertiser*, remarked about the conditions "were to be improved by letting a running stream of water through a ditch dug to the river…would relieve a deleterious miasma that might be otherwise unhealthful."[48]

Still Hoffman did nothing. Even Sanger stated, "Seven thousand men will pass 2,600 gallons of urine daily…A portion of this is absorbed by the earth, still a large amount decomposes on the top of the earth or runs into the pond to purify."[49] Four days later, Eastman sent a copy of Sanger's report to Hoffman and added:

> The pond inside the prisoner's camp at Barracks No. 3 has become very offensive and may occasion sickness unless the evil is remedied very shortly. [The remedy] is to dig a ditch from the pond to the river so that the water will run freely to it. I respectfully request that you give instruction in regard to this with little delay as possible, for if this work is to be done, it should be done immediately.[50]

It should be noted that Eastman did try to begin the ditch, but the adjoining property owners would not allow their property dug up and fearing that it would lower the value.[51] Hoffman's response was to let the rain water flood the pond clean. Foster's Pond soon became polluted with excrement and cookhouse runoff. When disinfectants were thrown in to correct those problems the pond became further

[45] Gray, pg 52
[46] Horigan, pg 137
[47] http://www.angelfire.com/ny5/elmiraprison/hutchinson.html
[48] Horigan, pg 52
[49] James M Gillispie, *Andersonvilles of the North: the myths and realities of Northern treatment of Civil War Confederate prisoners* (University of North Texas Press, Denton, Texas, 2008), pg 198. (Will be cited as Gillispie).
[50] Horigan, pg 66
[51] Gray pg 27

contaminated. Even Private Berry Benson, during an occasional break from his tunneling[52], noted that, "When we first came, the water in the pool was clean; the men caught a good many fish there. But after a while the pool became so foul from the kitchen slops being thrown there that it began to stagnate and the authorities had some chemicals thrown in, which turned the water green and killed all the fish. Every morning the shore would be lined with the white bellies of dead fish."[53]

In mid October when Tracy was in charge of the prison, he quickly recognized the problem with Foster's Pond, as did Munger, who reported, "Forty-four deaths between October 11 and 15. The cause of this amount of sickness and death is a matter of deep interest. That the existence of a large body of filthy, stagnant water within the camp had much to do with it can admit of no doubt."[54]

In a memo to Hoffman, Tracy suggested an underground drainage sluice. This would protect the precious land for the neighbors if a pipe was laid for the water to flow through. Hoffman thought it was a good idea but cringed at the price. He thought the entire project could be done for $120 dollars with the use of prisoners as labor.[55] Tracy also reminded Hoffman of Eastman's August 17 recommendation of a drainage system. The recommendation had rested on Hoffman's desk for two months.[56] On November 20, 1864, the crew was half way done with the sluice and on New Year's Day 1865 it was completed; however, 1,263 prisoners had died up to that point. Hoffman's estimate was just slightly off though; it cost $2,000 dollars to build the sluice.[57]

Of course Foster's Pond aided in the contraction of diseases at Elmira prison. Scurvy was the first to break out as the rations of fruits and vegetables were cut in mid September. Nearly two thousand soldiers contracted it. Dr. Sanger counted 793 cases by the end of August. By September 11 the cases had more than doubled.[58] John King, one of the prisoners, became infected with scurvy and the nightmares that came with it. Since scurvy is a vitamin deficient disease, King endured a type of night blindness called "gravel". King described having scurvy, "…mouth and gums so spongy and sore that portions could be removed with the fingers. Others were afflicted in their limbs, the flesh became spotted and the pains were almost unbearable."[59] Another prisoner, Marcus Toney, also suffered from the night blindness, but one of the camp doctors wrote it was due to the "sun's heat and reflection from the water, the sand and the white tents."[60] Eastman, the camp commander, was authorized by the war department to purchase antiscorbutics for the prisoners generally whenever in the judgment of the Surgeon they are necessary.[61] Basically, the letter stated that the wellbeing of the prisoners was in the hands of Eastman. Yet no one saw fit to purchase the needed fruit. Of course, as the scurvy ran wild throughout the camp, another ailment plunged in due to the foul water: diarrhea. Prisoner J.W. Hentz wrote to his cousin in Boston that he "contracted chronic diarrhea over a year ago and am troubled much with it now."[62] Even the Union

[52] Benson had started one tunnel along with several other prisoners only to have them discovered. After waiting a short period of time, he started a new tunnel with some friends and they were the only mass escape of Elmira prison. There were a few single escapes done by a person now and then.
[53] Benson, pg 133
[54] Horigan, pg 104
[55] Gray, pg 57
[56] Horigan, pg 134
[57] Horigan, pg 135
[58] Gray, pg 28
[59] Burnham, pg 199
[60] Burnham, pg 202
[61] Horigan, pg 68
[62] J.W. Hentz, Letter to Paul Willand, Esq, Boston, Mass., February 28, 1865, Chemung Historical Society, Elmira, New York, folder 8. (will be cited as Hentz).

officers assigned to guard the Confederates were noticing the alarming rate of disease and death. One man wrote to his wife on October 1 saying, "The rebs are dying quite fast from 8 to 30 per day."[63]

By November, pneumonia had invaded the prison and nearly reached plague proportions followed by a horrific outbreak of smallpox. Wilbur Grambling a prisoner from Tallahassee, Florida wrote in his diary on Monday December 19, 1864, "Good many cases smallpox. Three have died. Prisoners are very sickly as a general thing. My bedfellow Cay is sick with pneumonia." About a week later (December 23) he noted, "Smallpox still raging. Some 30 cases and about 5 have died. Cay is worse today." A month later (January 12) he wrote, "Smallpox still raging. Carry new cases to the hospital every day."[64] In the first week of the outbreak 140 men were struck with the disease.[65] Prisoner Thomas Jones remembered, "a great deal of sickness. I have seen as high as twenty-five or thirty laid out in a day in the dead house."[66]

How did the officials at the prison deal with the epidemic? They put the sick and dying men with smallpox in "A" tents across from Foster's Pond until another part of the hospital could be built. The surgeon had smallpox vaccines brought in, but those were even worse. The vaccines were infected with bacteria and caused huge open sores on the prisoners arms.[67] In all over four hundred men died from smallpox during February and March alone. One of those men was Mary Avent's father. She received this letter from Thomas Wills dated January 14, 1865:

> It becomes my duty as a friend and tent mate of your father to inform you of his death. He died 12th of December last after an illness of some weeks. We were intimate friends and I can sympathize with your and family in your great loss.[68]

One could only imagine the difficulty of the loss of so many people in such a short span of time and what toll it took on these men mentally.

Finally, the weather was the catalyst for most of the diseases. For the first several months the weather seemed to be the only thing that was agreeable at Elmira prison. However, that too would change. W. A. Bavis wrote to his friend Mrs. Richmond in September that the weather was very disagreeable, cold, rain and wind.[69] Berry Benson noted that "the snow (which had started falling before Benson left on the night of October 6) didn't let up for five months."[70] In fact, at least twice during the winter the temperature plunged to eighteen below zero and the wind chill factor made it even worse. Doctor G. T. Taylor from Bismarck, Arkansas remembered, "Snow and ice several feet thick covered the place from December 6 to March 15, 1865."[71] James Huffman recalled that "From the first of December, 1864, to the last of February, all the snow that fell lay on the ground packed down, three or four feet deep. The weather was

[63] Horigan, pg 97
[64] Wilbur Grambling, Diary. Chemung Historical Society donated by Edward F. Keurbel, History Dept, Florida State University, Tallahassee. (will be cited as Grambling). There is no other mention of Cay the bunkmate in the copy of the diary that I have.
[65] Robertson, pg 90
[66] Thomas C Jones, Memories of, January 1904, Chemung Historical Society, Folder 2. (will be cited as Jones).
[67] Burnham, pg 200
[68] Thomas B Wills, Letter to Mary Avent, January 14th, 1865. Chemung Historical Society, folder 15.
[69] W. A. Bavis, Letter to Mrs. M.A. Richmond, September 28, 1864, Chemung Historical Society.
[70] Burnham pg 221
[71] G. T. Taylor, excerpt from book *Confederate Veteran*, pg 327, Chemung Historical Society, Mc 02I Folder 19. (will be cited as Taylor).

so extremely cold that some of the men froze their feet wile standing on the snow and ice at roll call of mornings."[72]

Prisoners would awake to find corpses frozen in grotesque poses. Prisoners that were still arriving to the prison had to stand in about four feet of snow while they were processed. To make matters worse, on February 7th and 8th eighteen inches of snow paralyzed the community. The *Advertiser*, Elmira's local newspaper, reported "snow in the wooded areas near the town was two and a half feet in depth."[73] However, Anthony Keiley summed it up the best when he wrote, "in the hyperborean regions of New York, where for at least four months of every year, anything short of a polar-bear would find locomotion impracticable."[74]

Yet, the worst was yet to come. In another moment of foreshadowing, Commander Tracy wrote on January 9, 1865:

> I am convinced that a mistake was made in locating the prison camp. It is divided by a pond of waters, about twenty five (25) acres being north of this pond [Foster's], on high ground and fifteen (15) acres south, on low ground, which overflows in times of high freshets. A fence similar to the present one was washed away from this place a few years since. All old citizens agree that probably this fence cannot be maintained here in the spring.[75]

If only Tracy had taken action or forced his superiors to grasp the situation. Due to the extreme snow fall the spring runoff was intense. In March of 1865, the Chemung River flooded. They still had smallpox victims in the "A" tents and they had to be moved to higher ground. Prisoners remembered the water rising to the second row of bunks and the hospitals also had to be evacuated since they were built on the lower ground. Granted, the weather did not come out with a knife or another weapon and kill the prisoners; however, if the powers-that-be had thought about all of the possibilities, like the region being in a drought situation for months which usually gives way at some point to extreme storms, and not rushed into making this a prison perhaps there would have been fewer deaths due to cold and rains which escalated disease.

The final problem with Elmira prison was that of the treatment of the prisoners by the guards and the inept way in which the government used retaliation methods in the dictated use of food and clothing. In every prison there are consequences for breaking the rules. In Elmira, for instance, a misdemeanor would have a prisoner wear a barrel shirt. The top and bottom lids were removed and leather straps were fastened inside. The offender had to walk around the yard for two hours in the morning and afternoon with a sign stating what he had done. Even though it does not sound too terrible, a barrel is extremely heavy and in the heat or freezing cold it can be miserable.

For slightly stronger offenses like drinking or swearing, the prisoners were placed in the "sweatbox." It was a long wooden box about seven feet tall and twenty inches wide. When an offender was put inside, the door was shut by a cranking device that made movement not only impossible, but also unbearable as the prisoner sweated and lost his breath from its tight grip.[76] Wash Traweek, one of Benson's escapees,

[72] James Huffman, "*Prisoner of War"*, Atlantic Monthly No. 3, April 1939, pg 538, Chemung Historical Society, folder 23.
[73] Horigan, pg 165
[74] Burnham, pg 45
[75] Gray, pg 141
[76] Gray, pg 125

not only suffered the sweatbox, but also solitary confinement living on nothing but bread and water for digging tunnels.[77]

Another torture was bucking and gagging. The guard would bind a prisoner to a horizontal rack by the hands and legs. A wood block was lodged in his mouth and cords attached to the ends were pulled back and tied around his head. Some were tied so tightly that the prisoners' mouth would split. The final assault was hanging by the thumbs. Each thumb was tied to a rope and the rope thrown over a tree branch. The prisoner was then pulled upward until his feet barely touched the ground: his thumbs supporting his weight. One Tennessean wrote, "There is no way to relieve the pressure. If he tries to relieve the thumbs, the toes get it; and if the toes are relieved, the thumbs are in trouble."[78] Only when the prisoner fainted was he allowed to be cut down.

There were also physical assaults on the prisoners. Berry Benson remembers going up to talk to another prisoner in line and a Yankee officer came up and struck him.[79] A member of the Alabama Third Infantry committed to memory a lieutenant who beat and stoned prisoners to the point where most of them would cower in their barracks. Finally, Anthony Keiley recalls "one with a nasty habit of pistol-whipping."[80] There are no reported deaths from the abuse of the guards, but in truth would the doctors have noted that a guard had abused the prisoner or would it have to be put down as death by something else?

Lastly was the heavy-handed way the government dealt with the food and clothing problems, which have brought speculations about policies of retaliation. When the Civil War began the North felt that most Southerns would come back to the fold once they saw Northern armies in their midst, so a conciliatory policy was adopted. As the war progressed and the North realized the Southerns were not in awe of their armies. A heavy-handed policy came into effect in 1864. Historian Mark Grimsley stated in his book, "there were actions against Southern civilians and property made expressly in order to demoralize Southern civilians and ruin the Confederate economy, particularly its industries and transportation infrastructure. Secondly, they involved the allocation of substantial military resources to accomplish the job."[81] In 1862, Edwin M. Stanton became Secretary of War when Simon Cameron became the Russian ambassador. Once in office he formed a "war board." These men controlled everything including seacoast defense, ironclad vessels, officer and enlisted personnel management matters, quartermaster function and prisoner policies.[82]

In May of 1864, Stanton felt that the South could do more and he wanted the prisoners to suffer like those in the South were suffering. He penned a memo to the president stating:

> That precisely the same rations and treatment be from hence-forth practiced in reference to the whole number of rebel officers remaining in our hands that are practiced against either soldiers or officers in our service held by the rebels.

[77] Burnham, pg 101 & 213
[78] Gray, pg 125
[79] Burnham, pg 100
[80] Burnham, pg 129
[81] Mark Grimsley, *The Hard Hand Of War*, (Cambridge University Press, New York, 1995) pg 3 (will be cited as Grimsley).
[82] Herman Hattaway & Archer Jones, "The war Board, the Basis of the United States first General Staff," SMU Library, March 1982. Found on JSTOR.

> My reasons for selecting the officers instead of privates for retaliatory punishment are…[83]

In fact the very next day (May 6th) came an emissary from an association of pro-southern Britain, who had collected a $75,000 fund and wanted permission to spend it in providing comforts for Confederate prisoners in northern hands. Stanton's reply, "Almighty God! No!"[84]

Yet, when the prison first opened the men would get pork, on certain days beef, bean soup for dinner and sometimes vegetable soup. If there were leftovers the men could have extra if they wished. There was even a camp sutler that sold dried or fresh fruit, cakes, pies, several kinds of dried or canned fish, cheese, crackers, nuts, lemonade, cigars, and chewing tobacco. The prisoners could purchase any of these goods by either working at the prison or if they were lucky enough to have friends and family send them money. In fact the *Advertiser* claimed a good harvest and apples were of fair quality.

Interestingly enough, after seeing some Northern prisoners that had been released, Stanton stated, "There appears to have been a deliberate system of savage and barbarous treatment and starvation."[85] Stanton gave Hoffman and other prison commanders the approval to reduce rations by twenty percent and forbade the sutler inside the prison. However, it must be reiterated that the North had already begun the "hard-handed" policy. The South was being brought to their knees with a lack of any provisions to feed the civilians let alone prisoners of war. The blockades had cut them off and most of the South was starving.

With this order, scurvy was sent out of control. Munger's report listed one hundred twelve dead, twenty-nine on a single day. "There seems little doubt; numbers have died both in quarters and hospital for want of proper food."[86] Yet, Tracy described the food the prisoner got, "eight ounces of bread, eight ounces of meat; for dinner, eight ounces of bread, one pint and a half of soup of excellent quality, made from the meat, potatoes, onions and beans."[87] However, the bakers stated that, "the bread was so thin that they could read the *New York Herald* through it."[88] Prisoner R. B. Ewan noted "Many hundreds of boxes of provision were brot [sic] in camp, but unless we were in the hospital, or could furnish a certificate of sickness, the ham, cheese, bread and pie were put back in the wagon and hauled out to fill other stomachs."[89] Keiley wrote in his diary, "The restricting of the prisoners to a uniform diet of bread and meat, and denying them the privilege of purchasing other food, are showing their effects in an epidemic, almost, of scurvy."[90]

Remarkably, the *New York Times* wrote about the horrific conditions in the South, but reassured its readers: "No such disgrace, thank God, touches the North! Everything that our own soldiers are allowed by law is cheerfully given to our prisoners. Such clothing, such food as the poor Southron never enjoyed at home, is heaped before him when in our hands…None suffer from want."[91] It should be noted that no

[83] Edwin M Stanton, "Memo to President Lincoln," May 5, 1864, Chemung Historical Society
[84] Fletcher Pratt, *Stanton: Lincoln's Secretary of War*, (Greenwood Press, Westport Connecticut, 1953), pg 357. (will be cited as Pratt)
[85] Benjamin P. Thomas & Harold M. Hyman, *Stanton: The Life and Times of Lincoln's Secretary of War*, (Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, 1962), pg. 373.
[86] Gray, pg 30
[87] Gray, pg 30
[88] Gray, pg 31
[89] Horigan, pg 87
[90] Horigan, pg 87
[91] Horigan, pg 94

one was allowed inside the prison unless they had written permission from the commander. No newspaperman ever saw inside until the war ended.

Then on October 3, 1864, Tracy issued Special Order #336:

> Whereas the fresh Beef now being furnished at this Post is in the opinion of the Col Comdg unfit for issue, and inferior in quality to that required by contract. Therefore: Col. S. Moore, 16th Regt. Vet. Reserve Corps and Major Henry V. Colt, 104th N.Y. vols [the officers in charge of the prison camp] are hereby designated to hold a survey upon said Beef and to reject such parts or the whole of the said Beef as to them appears to be unfit for issue, or of a quality inferior to that contracted for.[92]

Not only were the rations cut by twenty percent, but now the prisoner would not receive any beef. In fact, the rejected beef was sold to the citizens of Elmira. Many of the prisoners complained of the lack of food from that point on. James Hardaway wrote to a sympathetic northerner asking him to send a few vegetables.

The soup even suffered. It was now more water than anything and if there were vegetables in it, they were not washed and the soup had dirt and rocks in it. It was at that point the prisoner turned to their only other meat source: rats. Berry Benson remembered before his escape:

> It was a usual sight at dusk, when the rats would be scampering about, to see men down on the bank with stones watching for a rat to come out, and when he appeared, such a hurrah and such a chase and such a volley of stones! You would have thought it was our Battalion of Sharpshooters in a charge. Most of the boys followed this kind of chase for excitement. But I think there is little doubt of the truth of the stories told that some broiled and ate them.[93]

To make matters worse, in December Tracy issued Special Order #400 that gave thirty pounds of potatoes and ten pounds of onions to one hundred men three days out of five. In January he modified the order to thirty pounds of potatoes and sixteen pound of onions to every hundred men two days out of five.[94] With these orders, men saw starvation in a new and horrifying light. For example, Erastus Palmer remembered seeing a man pick up a discarded mush poultice and began scraping off the side used for treating lesions. He did not see the man eat this however. Walter Addison saw men "fish scraps from barrels containing hospital refuse and [devour] it ravenously…" Anthony Keiley saw scavengers picking out bones in barrels filled with fatty offal. He watched a mob of hungry rebels attack a bone-cart and beg the driver for bones.[95]

Then in January of 1865 retaliation not only became Stanton's pet but the governments as well. Indiana Senator Henry Smith Lane proposed retaliation which became known as the Lane Resolution to the 38th Congress. He had received requests from citizens to retaliate "until the rebels exchange all of our men in their hands, or treat them with that degree of humanity that the rules of war require."[96] The resolution suggested that the prisoners be at the mercy of their captors. The preamble to the resolution stated:

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[92] Horigan, pg 98
[93] Benson, pg 134
[94] SPO #400 & #24
[95] Gray, pg 42
[96] Mauriel Phillips Joslyn, *Immortal Captives: The Story of Six Hundred Confederate Officers and the United States Prisoner of War Policy*, (White Mane Publishing, Shippensburg, Pa, 1996), pg 37. (will be cited as Joslyn).

> Rebel prisoners in our hands are to be subjected to a treatment finding its parallels only in the conduct of savage tribes and resulting in the death of multitudes by the slow but designed process of starvation and by mortal diseases occasioned by insufficient and unhealthy food and wanton exposure of their person to the inclemency of the weather.[97]

On the other hand, some of the senators wanted to reinstate the policy of exchange. Even Senator Hendricks of Indiana brought up investigating the Secretary of War. Amendments were presented and voted on, and the debate raged through January 1865, when it passed the Senate. Luckily, a few months later they reinstated the 1862 cartel.[98]

The final dilemma for Elmira prison was the clothing. It must be remembered most of these men had been fighting for three years and the South was not able to re-supply a lot of the soldiers with clothing. If they were able to make it home for a visit, then usually family members either mended or made new clothes. However, that was not the case most of the time. As John King put it, "The pants I had when arriving at Elmira were in such a bad condition that for a long time I wore nothing but my underwear."[99] Hoffman finally gave Eastman permission to issue clothes that had been sent to the newly arrived prisoners, but the clothes had to be grey in color. This, of course, eliminated nearly all of the clothes which were promptly burned.[100]

However, private citizens were more than willing to aid in clothing the prisoners. Noah Walker & Co, a Baltimore clothing retailer informed the commander they had an abundance of clothing packages. The war department then restricted all deliveries of clothing to prison camps.[101] A John Van Allen tried in vain to see the commanders of Elmira prison to get clothes to the prisoners, but to no avail. He even went so far as to write the war department. "I was actually forced to give the matter up in despair. The brutal Stanton was inexorable to all my entreaties, and turned a deaf ear to the tale of their sufferings."[102]

The quartermaster was issued orders in August to supply: 350 blankets, 200 pairs of shoes, 1000 shirts, 400 pairs of trousers, and 400 coats and jackets. Once again, the orders had to be modified due to more prisoners arriving then originally planned for. The new orders were for: 200 coats and jackets, 400 pairs of shoes, 400 pairs of pants and 1000 shirts.[103] In September they were still issuing more clothing to the arriving prisoners.

In October Munger warned, "Another supply of clothing is needed, as weather is becoming cold and many are still poorly clad."[104] Another month later and the request had yet to be filled. December, Munger again stated that clothing was "'insufficient for this climate' and counted one thousand six hundred sixty-six prisoners 'entirely destitute of blankets.'"[105] The prisoners would send letters requesting anything they could get. James Hardaway again requested clothes from Mr. Booth.[106] J. W. Hentz told his

[97] Joslyn, pg 37
[98] Joslyn, pg 39
[99] Burnham, pg 197
[100] Robertson, pg 87
[101] Horigan, pg 150
[102] Horigan, pg 152
[103] SPO # 299 ½ & 301
[104] Gray, pg 64
[105] Gray, pg 64
[106] Hardaway letter

cousin "I cannot buy any clothing here at all…would send me an overcoat (not fine) one more under shirt and two pair drawers (woolen)."[107]

Late in the year 1864, exchange talks had started--not prisoner exchange, but supply exchange. The South would allow packages to arrive for the prisoners and the North would allow a southern soldier or two to sell cotton and take the money and purchase much needed clothes. While awaiting the delivery, the boat had been delayed for several months; Tracy was battling Washington. He had sent a request for more clothes on December 1 and it still had not been filled. On January 9, General Wessells informed Tracy that "December clothing requisitions for Elmira could not be forwarded until Tracy had responded to a December 12 letter from the commissary general of prisoners 'which explained the necessity of strict economy in the issue of clothing to rebel prisoners at the present time, and requested that you would report your views on the necessity of such issue at Elmira, N. Y. No reply to this letter has been received, and the requisitions are still in this office.'"[108] Six days later, Tracy received word the cotton had finally arrived in New York.

On February 28, 1865, thirty-six cases of clothing arrived at Elmira. The boxes contained 995 jackets, 1530 pants, 550 shirts, 780 drawers, 1000 pairs of socks and 1040 pairs of shoes. It was still not enough. All of the prisoners suffering from smallpox had to have everything burned to rid the camp of the disease. On March 6 an additional 454 blankets, 980 jackets, 900 pants, 950 shirts, 1200 drawers, 500 pairs of socks, 1020 pairs of shoes and a bonus of 196 packages of tobacco arrived and it still was not enough. [109] More shipments came, but it was never enough to relieve the suffering. Interestingly enough, while Major Printup (the southern soldier issuing the clothes) was waiting for their arrival he met J. Gladke, local clothing merchant, who had over five thousand dollars worth of clothes he had made for the prisoners. He had been told he could sell it to the prisoners, then told he could not.[110] Of course, one has to remember "any issue of substance needed to appeal to the commissary-general for prisoner at the Department of War, Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, DC. Any out-of-the-ordinary request-to build barracks, make sanitary improvements, expand cemetery facilities, or even permit a civilian to enter camp-needed to be routed through the commissary-general by telegraph or letter, and the post required three days to arrive in the capital."[111]

Yet, there is one author who feels that Elmira is unjustly accused. James Gillispie relies on the 1912 study by Clay Holmes to prove Elmira was not all that bad. He quotes several soldiers that Holmes had received letters from regarding the prison. A.F. Perkins' said: "I think the intentions of the U.S. Government were good, and they did the best they could under the circumstances." J. R. Mills stated: "My treatment was very good there." J. S. Johnson claimed his experience was "as good as I could expect in any prison." Gillispie feels there was no retaliation involved, yet after reading much of the material it is difficult to conclusively state that everything that happened was just unfortunate circumstance. However, Holmes' book must be looked at in a unique light. Holmes lived his entire life in Elmira, so he has a reason to defend the city. Plus, Holmes states that the citizens did everything they could to help the prisoners. Again, true, but they were not allowed inside the prison and their help was limited due to that fact. Holmes also gets a lot of his facts from the local newspaper. This is one of the worst sources to use in the fact they too were not allowed inside the prison so they had to make things up. In fact, Horigan, Gray, and Burnham show that most of the stories were wrong.

[107] Hentz letter
[108] Horigan, 157
[109] Gray, pg 68
[110] Horigan, pg 161
[111] Burnham, pg 35

Finally, if one asks any officer of the law what is the one thing they hate when dealing with an accident, the officers will say eyewitnesses. If there are ten eyewitnesses they will get ten different stories. In this case, Holmes took letters from most of the prisoners who were the last ones to arrive. They only spent a few months in the prison so they did not have to deal with a lot of the hardships those that spent the entire year there faced. Plus, some of them worked for the prison and they had it easier and always received their rations.

In the end, Elmira prison existed for one year. During that time period 2,945 men died. It is easy to see how the deaths escalated:

	Sick Prisoners	Dead Prisoners
	1864	
July	177	11
August	394	115
September	563	385
October	640	276
November	666	207
December	758	269
	1865	
January	1,015	285
February	1,398	426
March	823	491
April	647	267
May	509	131
June	218	54
July	---	16[112]

These deaths were caused by gross negligence due to horrible housing, hospital and medical conditions, elements that caused disease to run rampant through the prison and a lack of basic needs such as food and clothes due to a vicious retaliation policy. In fact, Stanton states in his memoirs, “To crush the South might have been my personal slogan. ‘To lead the North in crushing the South’ was the way I felt.”[113] This is why Elmira prison is considered the worst Civil War prison in the North. In fact, a Texas soldier summed it up: “If there was ever a hell on earth, Elmira prison was that hell.”[114]

[112] Gray, pg 153
[113] Ben Ames Williams, Jr. *Mr Secretary*, (The Macmillan Company, New York, 1940), pg. 287
[114] Robertson, pg 80

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