

From CCC Camp to German POW Camp
[Hamlin NY - Spring, 1944]
by Ed Evans 02-19-14

Forward

The Hamlin CCC camp is very well documented with photographs and living witnesses to elaborate on what the pictures show. The POW camp, however, has been very difficult to even envision. The government did not allow any photos of the camp to be taken and the National Archives do not have any pictures of the camp on file either! None of the former guards are alive today and no one even remembers seeing the buildings going down the road after the camp closed. Those who were youngsters when the POW camp was in operation can't even describe what a guard tower looked like or how many of them there were around the camp. Family photo albums have been searched to see if a sneaked photo of the camp might still exist but even the offering of a \$100 reward has turned up nothing.

It was only after the efforts of a few volunteers began to rescue the site from runaway plant growth and careless dumping practices that information about the POW camp began to appear. The government had purposely removed most of the POW camp that could be seen above the surface but some remains of the POW camp could still be found once the invasive species and rotting trees were removed. As the site began to look more and more like a park the growing interest in project resulted in making contact with two former German prisoners who spent time in the Hamlin POW camp AND REMEMBERED THE EXPERIENCE. Closer to home, the memory of a seven year old boy who lived in the farmhouse next to the camp while it was in operation got better and better every time he visited the camp. He's in his 70s now. About the same time, barbed wire was found on the site! Two weeks ago, descendants of the family who lived on the farm to the east of the camp during WWII presented us with an aerial photo showing the POW campsite two years after it was razed!

All of the above, coupled with continued research into the entire National POW Camp Program during WWII, has finally made it possible to write the first installment of a history of Hamlin's POW camp. (As you read, keep referring to the diagrams on the last page.)

Sometime in the summer of 1941, Civilian Conservation Corps Camp S.P. - 53 in Hamlin (approx. 922 Moscow Road) was ordered to be shut down. The work it had been contracted to accomplish was not quite finished but the economy of the country had improved so much that it was difficult to find enough unemployed young men to man the camp.

In the six years the CCC camp had been in operation it had turned into a quite a compact little village, about 8 acres in size. It had a municipal water line and a state of the art sewer system that ran from one end of the camp to the other and a mess hall and commercial kitchen that could comfortably feed 250 people in one sitting. Three of the five administration buildings at the south end of camp had indoor plumbing and the five, 112 foot long barracks buildings could sleep a total of 200 young men. Three tall pot bellied coal stoves in each barracks provided ample heat in the winter. [Plywood was installed on the inside walls of almost all of the camps buildings in 1938, making the stoves even more efficient.]

Toilet facilities for those 200 men consisted of a latrine which housed 3 large sinks, 18 small "lavatories" (each with its own hot and cold water faucet), 12 shower heads pouring into two floor drains, a trough style urinal, a 500 gallon coal fired water heater, and a "sixteen holer" - 16 toilet seats positioned over a 20 foot long cement trench.

A building about the same size as the mess hall provided an indoor recreation area, complete with a stage and a camp store that could be closed off from the rest of the building. By the time the camp closed, two additional wings had been built onto the camp's education building (next door to the Recreation Building) providing a total of 7 classrooms occupying a little more than 2600 square feet.

To the north, part of the 8 acre village was taken up by five buildings associated with the mechanics of the CCC operation. They stood along the north edge of a 50 foot wide, heavy duty, gravel road that ran from east to west across the camp. There was a small oil storage building at each end of the road and in between there was a U.S. Army truck garage (5 bays), a Department of Interior truck garage (13 bays - 2 bays with cement floors), and a tool repair building/tool storage building/blacksmith shop complex built in the shape of an L (three separate buildings in other CCC camps).

Off by itself, beyond the northern boundary of the 8 acre village, was a large, fully operational saw mill. It was kept quite busy providing lumber for the construction of Hamlin Beach State Park. [Unlike some of the other smaller, miscellaneous sheds that occasionally served the stonecutters next door to the saw mill (to the west), the saw mill was still standing long after all of the other buildings in the camp finally vanished.]

In August of 1941, after the flag on the 60 foot high flagpole came down for the last time and the camp emptied, watchmen were hired to keep the premises free of vandals. The State Park probably used the garages, blacksmith shop, stone cutters sheds and saw mill from time to time but there appeared to be no hurry to move any of the buildings away as was previously thought. Letters from salvage companies in Rochester exist, inquiring about the availability of scrap metal in the camp. But the Park turned down the offers and the camp remained intact.

In 1942, when it became obvious that the farmers would need to have extra help brought in to harvest the crops and work in the local canning factories, migrant workers arrived in Hamlin from Jamaica and the Bahamas. That first year, makeshift housing was provided for those workers (refurbished barns and outbuildings, etc.) while the CCC camp sat idle! In 1943, a light went on somewhere and the CCC camp was opened up to the migrants. By the fall of that year, the Prisoner of War Program on U.S. Soil was in operation and about 110 Italian POWs moved into the old CCC camp shortly after the migrant workers moved out.

The Italians POWs were considered somewhat 'docile.' In other words, very little had to be done to the camp to make it POW safe - no gun towers, no fences, no searchlights, etc. Just some armed guards and some rules to be followed! The POW population was so small, the Recreation Building did not have to be opened up. The Mess Hall was large enough to take care of the food and the fun and there would be plenty of extra beds in the barracks.

The Italians, however, only helped out in Duffy Mott's canning factory for about two months. By the end of December, 1943, the war was over for the Italians and they became our allies. You don't keep allies in a prison so the camp was empty again.

In the spring of 1944, plans were drawn up to modify the old CCC camp to house German POWs but the Germans were NOT considered 'docile.' To safely handle the Germans, the government had very specific rules and regulations regarding everything from the height of the guard towers, the number of guards per 100 prisoners, the number of strands of barbed wire in a specific style of fence, how far apart the strands of wire had to be, and on and on. Grower's Associations and Food Processing Companies all over NY State desperately needed laborers and worked together to build branch camps near the base camps closest to them so that they could borrow workers from this POW labor pool. The farmers and the factory owners, however, had to pay every cent of the cost of building their "branch camp." That tended to make each 'branch camp' slightly different from the other 'branch camps.'

[Note: When the German POWs arrived here from Europe, the government sent the German POWs to camps in the interior of the country where the hard core Nazis were pretty much separated from the ordinary enlisted men. Some of the German enlisted men were then sent back to the east to be housed in large 'base camps' like Fort Niagara and Pine Camp (later known as Fort Drum). The farmers and canning factories would put in orders for workers and the base camps would send enough POWs to cover the job lists. Until the work was done, the POWs would be housed in the branch camps built by the Growers Associations and Food Processors. There were 14 branch camps in Western NY.]

One of the first undertakings for the designers of a branch camp would have been to determine the boundaries of the camp - e.g. the exact location of the barbed wire fence surrounding the camp. The first strand of barbed wire in that 8 foot high fence (with a three foot top slanted in towards the interior of the compound) had to be buried a foot in the ground. [Actually, the first *two* strands were required to be buried but somehow Hamlin got away with one.]

Local legend has it that the cost of burying that first strand was to cost nearly \$2000 but two local farmers decided they could do it with a tractor and a plow. There is no record of who did the surveying but the two farmers succeeded in plowing a furrow around the parts of the CCC camp that the prisoners would be confined to. The buildings outside the furrow would be used to house the guards.

A perfectly rectangular shaped camp was not possible. The plowed furrow had to miss concrete floors. The huge 20 foot by 20 foot by 10 foot deep cesspool at the north end of camp also had to be avoided. The trench ended up tracing out a four sided camp 507 feet x 420 feet x 490 feet x 370 feet. (See the diagram on the last page.) The Army Corps of Engineers approved the trench and the first strand of barbed wire was placed in it - saving the Growers Association and the Food Processors a lot of money! [Almost all of that first strand of wire is still in the ground, all the way around the camp!]

To save even more money, the Duffy Mott Company provided some of their 3 inch by 5 inch tongue and groove warehouse roof planks to be used in place of the government required 2 x 6 inch fence posts to nail the barbed wire to. [Over 300 would be required and all *but one* were pulled up after the war. That one - broken off near ground level - still has the buried wire stapled to it.]

At the north end of the compound and inside the barbed wire fence stood the L shaped blacksmith/tool complex, the 13 bay Department of Interior Garage, the U.S. Army 5 bay garage, and an oil storage building. They had to go! Prisoners could hide in them!

[Note: Earlier accounts have suggested that these 4 buildings, and a couple more, disappeared from the site shortly after the CCC camp closed but there is no proof of that at all. There is also no reason for them to have been removed earlier because nothing definite had been decided as to the fate of the old CCC camp. It wasn't until it was officially decided to allow the camp to become a German POW Branch Camp that a need to remove the buildings arose. The cement floor of the blacksmith/tool complex, the cemented floor of the two center bays of the long garage, and the cement floor of the oil storage building are still in place.]

Guard towers were erected at all four corners of the compound but staggered around the corners so that gunfire from one tower could not hit another tower when directed along the fence line it was charged with monitoring. e.g. The SE tower was placed to the right of the main gate where just enough State owned land remained before you hit the Grimm Family property line. The NE tower was placed just around the NE corner. Its legs sat on top of the north/south gravel road surface. The NW tower was placed a little to the south of the NW corner and the SW tower was crowded between the corner of the Supply Building and the SW corner of the fence. [The machine guns in the towers were on turrets that would not allow the guns to be turned to shoot into the compound. That was comforting to the prisoners but it was actually just another measure taken to prevent the guns from firing into the other towers.]

The pretty white, very tall, flag pole at the center of the CCC camp was now useless (there would be no flag raising ceremonies in the POW camp) so it was sawed off. It was hauled away and re-erected near the center of the patch of ground to the west of the Supply Building. The original flag pole was in cement but this one was planted like a modern telephone pole, in dirt. That would make it noticeably shorter. [Sometime later, a basketball backboard on two poles was placed near the SW corner of the same patch of ground for the enjoyment of the guards.]

The single beds were moved out of the CCC barracks and replaced with iron, double decker bunks - beds for 400 POWs. In case more workers were needed at busy times in the growing season, 17 tents were on hand to be erected NE of the barracks to house an additional 68 men. [And that happened at least twice during the one and a half years the POW camp was in operation.]

The five buildings outside the barbed wire fence to the south were not quite enough to house the 40+ guards mandated by the government. The old CCC Officer's Quarters and the Department of the Interior's Quarters together provided about 3000 square feet of space which included 4 flush toilets, 4 small sinks, and 4 tiny shower stalls. That would probably be adequate for 25 guards. The CCC Infirmary would remain an Infirmary and the little building about the same size two buildings to the west would become the Commandant's Quarters (though it had no water service). Quarter's for at least 25 more guards would have to be provided elsewhere.

The Education Building had, by then, grown to over 2700 square feet and contained 7 rooms heated by 3 of the same style coal stoves that heated the barracks. Twenty five more guards could easily be billeted there. To provide toilet facilities for those 25 guards, a new 18 foot by 40 foot latrine was built especially for them directly to the north of the Education Building - kind of like a locker room complete with flush toilets and showers. [Half of the cement floor and some of the plumbing for that latrine is still there. The other half was bulldozed away, probably sometime in the 1970s.]

That left the CCC Supply Building to become the POW Supply Building and with twice the number of men depending on its inventory, it would probably be quite crowded. There is some evidence that at least two permanent "supply clerks" were quartered in that building. A temporary water line of some kind (e.g. a one inch iron pipe buried on the surface from the Department of the Interior's Quarters) appears to have provided a single faucet emptying into a French drain - still there - under a hole in the floor. A chemical toilet may also have been supplied. [It is quite likely that the same temporary water service might also have been provided at the Commandant's Quarters next door. A sandstone water fountain - "borrowed" from the CCC stash left in the neighboring barn - was later assembled under the faucet in the Supply Building. The remains of that water fountain "kit" are still there.]

The Mess Hall remained pretty much the same as it was during the CCC era. But the German prisoners probably had to eat in shifts. The POW population of the camp was almost always way over 250 and there is no evidence to indicate that the building was ever enlarged.

After the camp opened in June of 1944, some major "fine" adjustments had to be made. The first batch of POWs assigned to the Hamlin branch camp from the Niagara Falls base camp staged a sit down strike a few weeks into their 6 month stay. They complained about no place to borrow books, no indoor recreation area, no camp store, etc. Guards rushed into the compound with loaded guns and listened to the complaints. Eventually, the guards left without incident.

A short time later, the CCC Recreation Building, containing ping pong tables and a camp store, was wired into the POW camp - probably by cutting the fence south of the Education Building (the new guard's quarters) and re-routing it. From a point near the new guard's quarters, a section of fence was run to the NW corner of the Recreation Building and nailed to the building. More fence was nailed to the SW corner of the

building and patched into the fence at the foot of the guard tower. (See diagram on last page.) When the original fence between the new guard's quarters and the guard tower was removed, the Recreation Building, in effect, became part of the fence line. (There were no back doors in the building to escape from!)

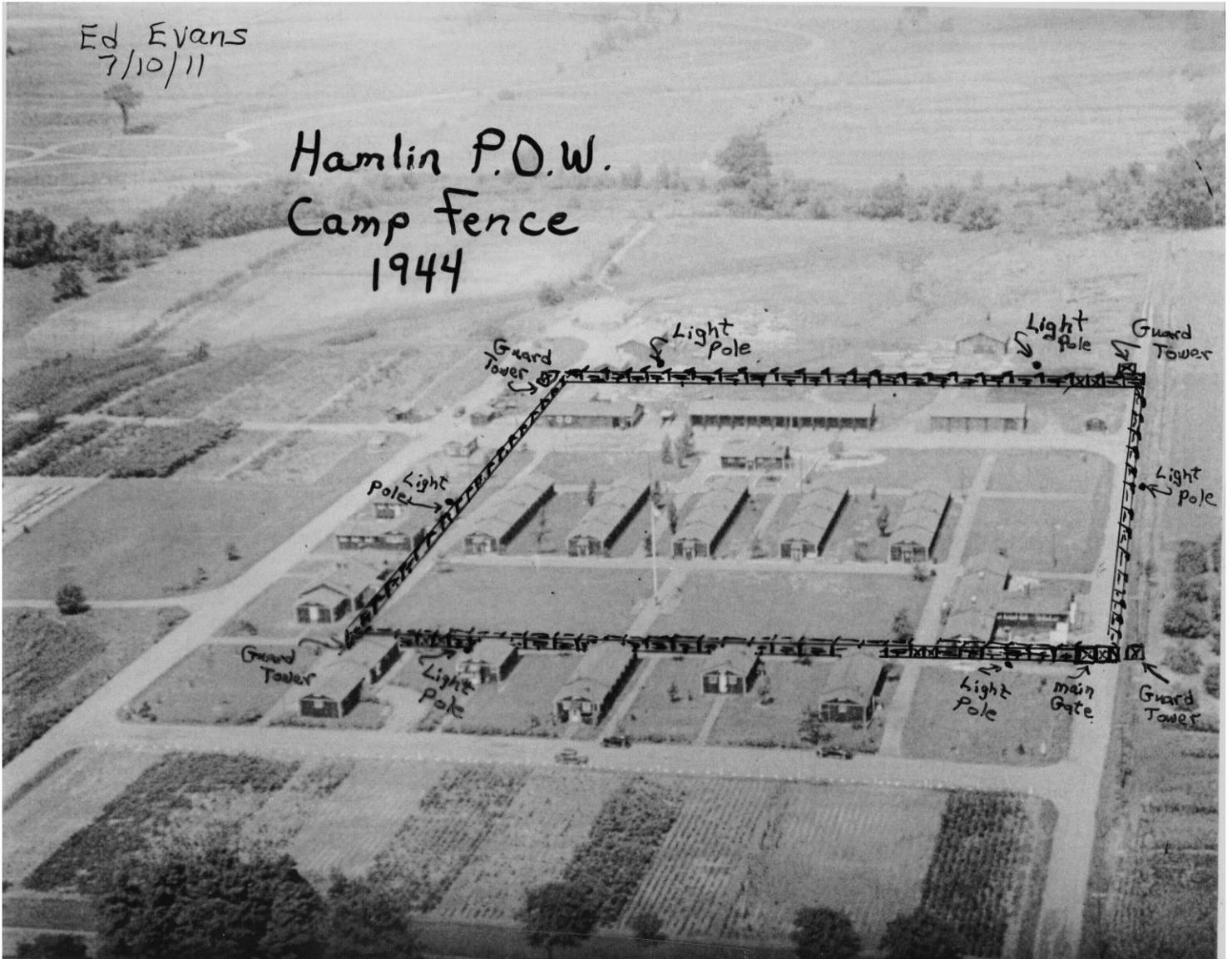
Shortly after that, the POW's latrine burned to the ground. Local legend has it that it was caused by a cigarette in a waste bucket but several obvious embellishments in the story causes one to raise doubts about the cigarette theory, too. A coal fired boiler designed to keep 500 gallons of water piping hot for 250 CCCers suddenly called upon to double that output seems the more likely culprit. At any rate, while the old latrine was being reconstructed, a new washroom was also quickly built to the north of the latrine - on the western half of the gravel floor where the 13 bay garage used to stand. It contained no toilet facilities but the new building did double the showering space, the wash basin space, and add a clothes washing area, complete with double laundry tubs and mechanical wringers. [Later, a gasoline powered washing machine was provided. Parts of the old washer are still there.]

And that was the POW camp that served the Hamlin Growers and the area Food Processors until January of 1946. It was here that the healing process for WWII began for Hamlin and a few hundred German "displaced persons."

CHANGES IN THE HAMLIN CCC CAMP

AS IT WAS TURNED INTO A POW CAMP

This aerial photo of the CCC camp was taken about 1940 or early 1941. Barbed wire fencing has been drawn in as it was before the Recreation Building was wired in. Other known features of the POW camp are labeled. To better represent the POW camp, the



buildings just inside the fence to the north should be air brushed out and a guard's latrine and new POW washroom drawn in. (See diagrams on next page.)

