



the

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Illinois' Civil War Camps

When the Civil War broke out in April, 1861, President Abraham Lincoln called for Union volunteers to fight. Lincoln's home state responded with fervor. (Illinois ended up sending a quarter of a million troops to the warfront.) Volunteers from all over the state, even the Confederate-sympathizing south, answered his call.

These Union recruits had to be trained, but where? "There were no actual facilities available for handling such large contingents of men," wrote Victor Hicken in *Illinois Civil War Sketches* (number 9), titled "Illinois Camps, Posts, and Prisons" (published by the Civil War Centennial Commission in 1965).

Makeshift Camps

Eager volunteers met and trained wherever they could, often in county seats or large towns that had buildings where they could organize, and nearby fairgrounds or parks where they could train, according to Hicken.

"At Galena, the 45th Illinois, a unit later to become famous at

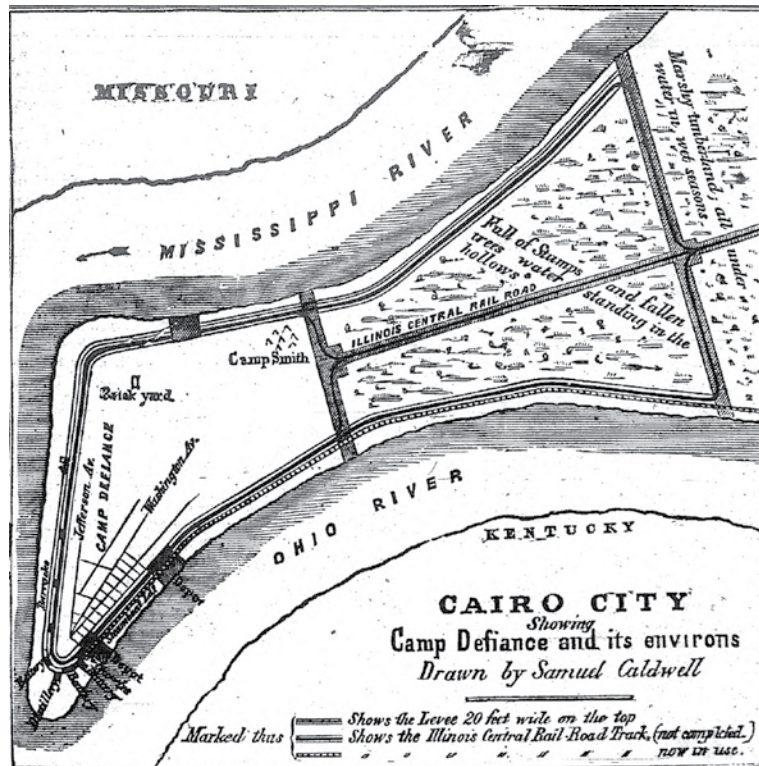
Vicksburg, Mississippi, gathered on a piece of open land called by the men of the regiment 'Camp Washburne,' in honor of the local representative in Congress, Elihu B. Washburne," he wrote.

Life was relatively cushy at these impromptu camps because the men's sympathetic families would congregate and do everything possible to make a home away from home for their patriotic boys. In addition, there was no real war training because the

military wasn't organized enough yet to provide it. "Regimental drills were performed with nothing more than hickory sticks," Hicken wrote.

The hastily organized Camp Defiance, located at the junction of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers in Cairo, had some weaponry. Camp Defiance and the smaller, nearby Camp Smith were set up within weeks of Lincoln's call for troops. By May 10, Camp Defiance's troops were drilling with weapons, ac-

According to the June 1, 1861 "Harper's Weekly." It reported: "There are four regiments stationed here now, with about thirty or forty pieces of artillery. Six forty-pounders arrived this A.M.... At the present time fully five thousand men are concentrated in and about Cairo. They are constantly drilled and instructed in the duties of a soldier's life, and have already attained an efficiency which is truly astonishing." Of course, Union patriotism ran high at that time and journalistic hyperbole did, too. So, whether



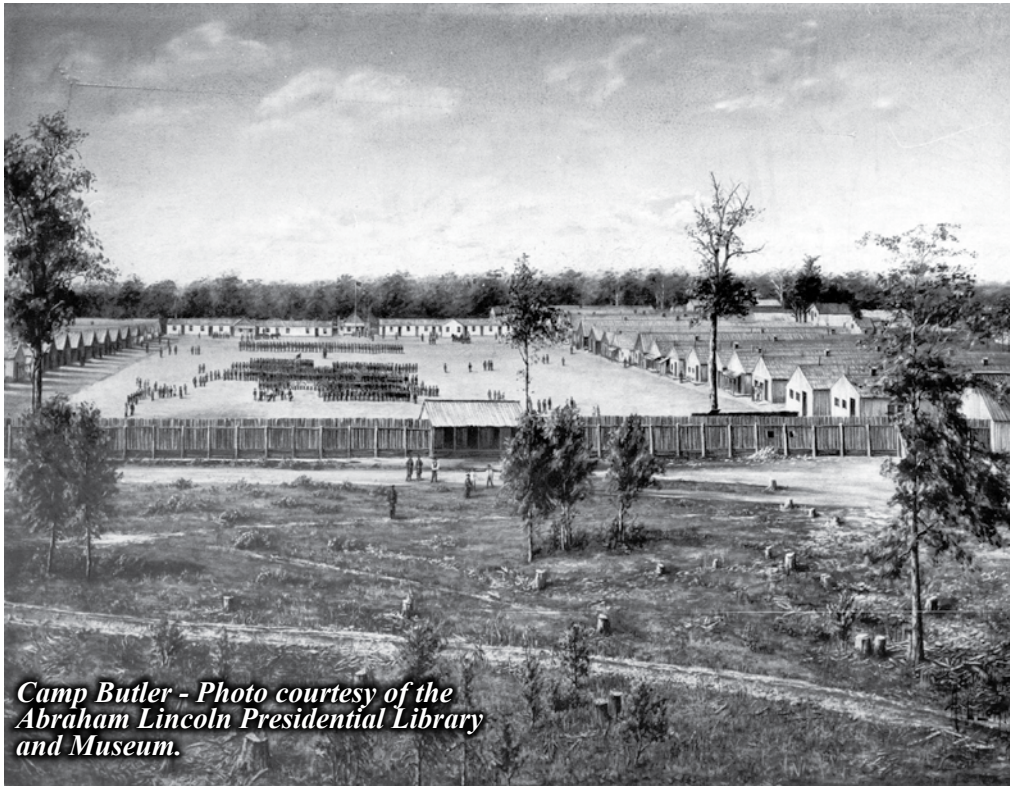
the soldiers were truly "efficient" is questionable.

Months later, better-planned and larger training camps were created in Springfield and Chicago. Springfield had two, the small Camp Yates (which only operated a short time) and the larger Camp Butler, which replaced it. Chicago had Camp Douglas. While camps near Cairo remained a crucial transportation and supply hub, the U.S. War Department abolished the state's smaller training camps and sent troops to Camps Douglas and Butler. However,

continued on page 2

Illinois Civil War Camps

Continued from page 1



Camp Butler - Photo courtesy of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.

smaller camps still existed until the end of the war, according to Hicken.

Camp Butler

In 1861, U.S. General William Tecumseh Sherman traveled to Springfield to pick a location for a Union training camp. Accompanying him was Ozias M. Hatch, former Illinois Secretary of State, and the state's treasurer, William Butler (for whom the camp was named).

They selected a spot six miles northeast of Springfield, near present-day Riverton (then known as "Jimtown"). The farm land had high ground for camping, low ground for training and burying the dead, and the nearby Sangamon River for swimming and bathing. Troops arrived on August 3 and by August 21 the camp housed 5,000 men "with hundreds more arriving daily," according to the Camp's written history.

"We have plenty to eat and drink," wrote 18-year-old William James Green, a 2nd Regiment Illinois Volunteer Cavalry private from Eldorado, in an August 21, 1861 letter home from Camp Butler. "We don't know how long we will stay here but I think we will stay here 6 weeks or 2 months until we are drilled well, as they intend to make the second regi-

ment the crack regiment of the State... We will not have to recruit any for they keep coming in all the time to join us."*

The men were trained in fighting with swords, bayonets and rifles, and drilled from 5:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. Soldiers received "fifteen dollars per month, a bounty of one hundred dollars and the promise of a quarter of a section of land at the end of the war and clothing, provisions and medical attention free," its history says.

Women's volunteer organizations helped many Civil War camps and Camp Butler was no different. Springfield's Ladies Soldiers Aid Society members visited the

soldiers and took them treats, clothing, and supplies. Mercy Conkling was one such volunteer, she was also the wife of James Conkling, a prominent Springfield attorney and friend of Abraham Lincoln.

Conditions in the training camps could be difficult. On November 17, 1861, Mercy wrote her son (her letter is from the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library's Conkling manuscript collection.): "If we see destitution here at a camp of instruction, what must the case be in other camps..."

After the Union's victory at Fort Donelson, Tennessee in February, 1862, Camp Butler, like many Union training camps, also became a prison for captured Confederates. Two thousand prisoners arrived that month. About three thousand more followed throughout the 15 months the camp served as a prison.

Hundreds of Camp Butler prisoners died from illness; 700 died from small pox alone in 1862. Conditions at the camp were often filthy.

Camp Butler served as a training camp and mustering-out facility until the end of the war. It closed June 19, 1866.

continued on page 3

* This letter is available for viewing - contact Cook-Witter, Inc. to make arrangements.

Illinois Civil War Camps

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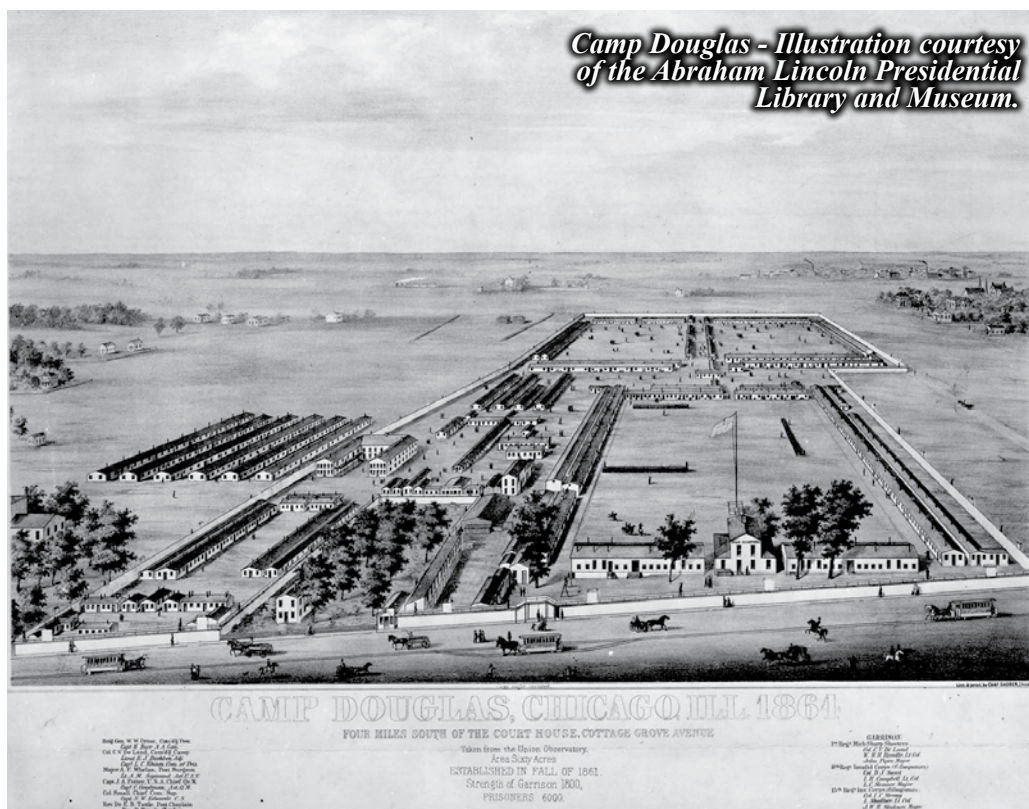
Camp Douglas

In the fall of 1861, the estate of Stephen Douglas (who had been a U.S. Senator until his death in June that year), donated property south of Chicago for a Union training camp named in his honor. Camp Douglas became the state's largest camp.

It had parade grounds, hospitals, and buildings for governance, according to "Illinois Camps, Posts, and Prisons." The one-story barracks held a kitchen, bunks, tables, benches, stove, and a company of men.

Like Camp Butler, Camp Douglas became a prisoner-of-war camp in 1862. Unlike Camp Butler, it remained a POW camp until the end of the war and at one time was the largest such camp in the Union. Its reputation as a prison was infamous; some called it the "Andersonville of the North," referring to the Confederate's horrible POW prison in Andersonville, Georgia, where thousands of Union soldiers died. Camp Douglas's low grounds were often muddy or flooded and contributed to its unsanitary conditions. The camp's overcrowding did, too. At one time Camp Douglas held twice as many prisoners for which it was built.

In February, 1862 nearly 8,000 Confederates, captors from the Union's victory at Fort Donelson, were dumped at Camp Douglas. Soon after, prisoners began escaping at an alarming rate, according to Lonnie Speer's "Portals to Hell: The Military Prisons of the Civil War" (Stackpole Books, 1997). Prisoners would dig tunnels in their barracks' dirt floors, so wooden floors were installed and the buildings were raised off the ground. Captured prisoners went to the "dungeon," Speer writes. Initially, security at the prison was lax enough that prisoners' friends were able to slip weapons and money to them in gifts of food and clothing.



Camp Douglas - Illustration courtesy of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.

Confederate sympathizers planned a mass POW escape for the eve of the presidential election in November, 1864, but federal informants thwarted it. The rebels' plan was "to release the prisoners of war at Camp Douglas, [set] fire [to] the city of Chicago, by force take possession of the polls, and inaugurate revolution in the north part of the State," according to Thomas Mears Eddy's "The Patriotism of Illinois..." (Clarke and Co., 1866). But Camp Douglas officers, with the help of Chicago City policemen, arrested "and confined" the plotters, foiling their plan.

Camp Douglas POWs enjoyed some amenities. They received censored gifts and letters, and could work for money. According to Hicken, some made "trinkets" to sell to outsiders.

Outsiders were fascinated by the rebels. So much so that one Chicagoan built a platform just outside the camp which curiosity-seekers could pay to climb and watch the prisoners through spy glasses, according to Speer's book.

Yet Chicago's extreme weather, unhygienic conditions, and illness contributed to the death of one in seven Confederate prisoners there. Out of the camp's total 26,060 prisoners, more than 4,000 died.



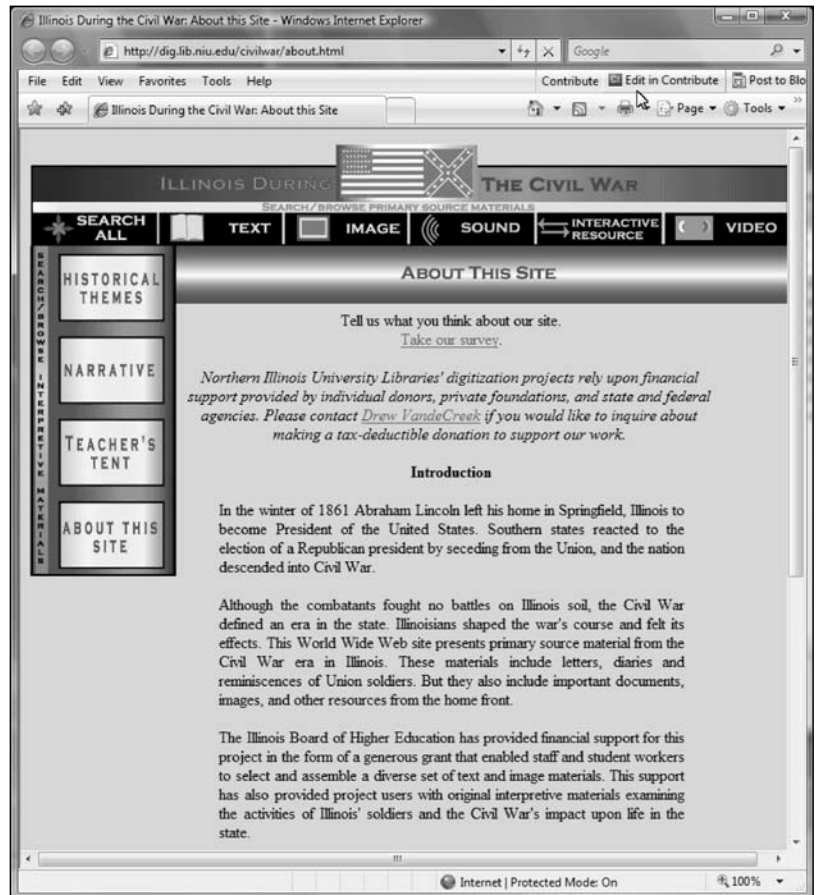
Web Sightings

Northern Illinois University has an interesting Web site full of information about Illinois during the Civil War. It lets you search through primary resource materials from the Newberry Library, the Chicago Historical Society, and the Illinois State Library. These include texts like Civil War soldiers' letters and diaries and Civil War era newspaper articles, as well images including illustrations, drawings, and photographs. Audio and video searches are available, too.

The site is for everyone from scholars to "lifelong learners," it says. There's a special section for teachers.

"Illinois During the Civil War" was developed by the Northern Illinois University Libraries Digitization Unit with a grant from the Illinois Board of Higher Education.

<http://dig.lib.niu.edu/civilwar/about.html>



Transitions

On April 13, former state **Representative L. Bruce Richmond**, from Murphysboro, passed away. He was a member of the Illinois House of Representatives from 1974 to 1993.

Janet Grimes was appointed head of the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency on April 14. Previously, she had been Director of the Capital Development Board.

Lobbyist Bill Anderson, of Springfield, died on April 19. He owned Anderson Legislative Consulting. Prior to that he served on Illinois House Speaker Michael Madigan's legislative staff.



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