



To Die in Chicago: Confederate Prisoners at Camp Douglas 1862-65

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"Did Wirtz, the commandant of Andersonville prison, ever do anything as inhumanly brutal as was inflicted on Confederate prisoners in Camp Douglas?"

--Sgt. T. B. Clore, Camp Douglas survivor

The Chicago doctors who inspected the prison in 1863 called Camp Douglas an "extermination camp." It quickly became the largest Confederate burial ground outside of the South.

What George Levy's meticulous research, including newly discovered hospital records, has uncovered is not a pretty picture. The story of Camp Douglas is one of brutal guards, deliberate starvation of prisoners, neglect of the sick, sadistic torture, murder, corruption at all levels, and a beef scandal reaching into the White House.

As a result of the overcrowding and substandard provisions, disease ran rampant and the mortality rate soared. By the thousands, prisoners needlessly died of pneumonia, smallpox, and other maladies. Most were buried in unmarked mass graves. The exact number of those who died is impossible to discern because of the Union's haphazard recordkeeping and general disregard for the deceased.

Among the most shocking revelations are such forms of torture as hanging prisoners by their thumbs, hanging them by their heels and then whipping them, and forcing prisoners to sit with their exposed buttocks in the ice and snow.

The Confederate Camp Andersonville never saw such gratuitous barbarity.

To Die in Chicago: Confederate Prisoners at Camp Douglas 1862-65 Details

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Author : George Levy

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The Celtic Rebel (Richard) says

This book brought so many mixed emotions to me as I read it. I sat there in wonder at how any knowing government could sit back and allow such atrocities to happen. I had always heard about Andersonville in the South and how back it was, but no one ever talks about Camp Douglas in the north. There were so many things at Andersonville that were inexcusable but they were equaled in many ways at Camp Douglas.

Men were hung from their thumbs, made to ride a mule type wooden structure for hours on end, made to walk naked to the "sinks" at night in sub-zero temperatures, lower their underwear and trousers and sit in the snow for hours, shot at for spitting on the floor, killed and punished for rules that were often just made up or the prisons were never informed about, and on and on it went.

The saddest things to me were the food situation. In the South they were so poor, much poorer than the North, and the money wasn't there to feed the prisoners or even their own soldiers at times. At Camp Douglas there was an abundance of money in the accounts for food but often the commanders of the prison refused it esp. vegetables that caused many many cases of scurvy to run rampant. Also wealthier prisoners or with wealthy relatives were spared many of the problems because they had money. Sutlers were allowed to operate inside the prison, and wealthier prisoners could buy the things they needed -- often at 3 or 4 times the cost from outside the prison.

I sought out this book because in my genealogical studies I have found several of my ancestors who spent time in this prison, and one of my grand-uncles died there. I also very much love Civil War history so wanted to get a full picture of the prison systems on both sides.

This book was very educational, historical, and filled with so much information taken from both primary and secondary sources. I loved how Levy looked at it in complete detail following the opening all the way until it was closed, and then even looking at how sad the dead from Camp Douglas were treated.

This book is one that will stick with you long after you finish reading it.

T.M. says

The added information was enlightening. I read the first edition about 8 years ago. Camp Douglas was where one of my ancestors died. Worth the read.

T.M. says

Amazing book about a little known union POW camp. Great for research for projects involving the Confederate POW experience if that is what you are writing (or studying family histories.) Learned about this book for that reason. I lost two 4 times great uncles at Camp Douglas IL.

Carlton Mansfield says

What a great subject and what a poorly written book. Very disjointed and hard to follow. The author clearly learned much before compiling his knowledge; however, that knowledge is not conveyed to the reader in a coherent and flowing fashion. If I didn't have ancestors that died there, I would have quit reading.

Marilyn Lagier says

I read this book for one purpose only: my Confederate ancestor survived this Union prison camp in Chicago and walked home to Mississippi at the end of the Civil War. Knowing nothing about it, I decided to read it. A bit dry, full of lots of information about corrupt camp commanders, poor management, lots of death, and lots of statistics. Last Friday (July 12, 2013), I saw the "Confederate Mound" in the Oak Woods Cemetery where some 6,000 Confederate soldiers are buried--victims of Camp Douglas. The actual camp itself no longer exists--covered by a strip mall and funeral parlor. It's very near to the University of Chicago and President Obama's home in Hyde Park.

Krista says

Because I will be going to Chicago to pay homage to my GGGGrand father, I wanted to have a better understanding the year he spent in this prison.
