

**DEN &
MISERY**

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INDIANA'S CIVIL WAR PRISON

JAMES R. HALL



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This book is dedicated to all of the young Civil War soldiers who lost their lives far from home and hearth in Northern and Southern military prisons.

It is also dedicated to my teachers at Pearson Elementary School in Shelbyville, Indiana, who helped to stimulate my interest in the American Civil War during centennial observances in the early and mid-1960s.

Finally, it is dedicated to my wife and best friend, Mary, who has somehow managed to put up with me all these years, a feat that certainly deserves special recognition (if not a medal).

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I want to thank my late dad, Russell Hall, for sparking my interest in Civil War history when he took me to Gettysburg the summer before I entered third grade.

Last, but certainly not least, I want to thank the Lord God, from whom all good gifts and all blessings flow.

Introduction

“(Wyeth) made clear for the first time how conditions in northern compounds, particularly at Morton and Elmira, were as inhuman as those at Andersonville.”

When I was a young boy growing up in central Indiana during the 1960s and 1970s, I was taught a version of American history that was a mixture of fact and mythology. In those days (and to a somewhat lesser extent now), children were taught a sanitized version of U.S. history that ignored unsavory elements from America’s past and often bordered on blatant nationalistic propaganda.

Back in the late 1950s, we were taught, for example, that George Armstrong Custer and other American “Indian fighters” were courageous men embracing a high calling of ridding the West of murderous barbarians.

The truth, as I later learned, was of course much different than what I was taught in public school back then. The atrocities America and Americans committed against Native Americans in stealing their land and sending them to “reservations” stand as a shameful blot on America’s historic legacy as a moral and ethical nation.

When I began my career as a professional journalist in the 1970s, I determined to “tell the truth” about America and Americans, even if the truth would be considered objectionable to some people who prefer a sanitized and mythological version of history.

During my Indiana public-school days, I had been taught in state history classes about a Civil War prison in Indianapolis, Camp Morton. This Union prison, located in what is now a part of the inner city of one of America’s largest cities, was considered during its time to be among the best of the Northern prison camps.

Hoosier public officials and military leaders boasted that prisoners were treated well at Camp Morton and that they were kept comfortable and safe by military personnel assigned to the prison with help from the general citizenry of Indianapolis.

Compared to legendary Civil War-era prisoner camps in the South (such as Andersonville) known for their cruelties and inhumane treatment of prisoners, Camp Morton has been represented in many contemporary, and some historical, accounts as a shining model of Christian virtue and humanism in the Indiana hinterlands.

But the real truth about Camp Morton is that it was a place of pain, suffering, brutality, and even murder. Far from its image as a kind of Waldorf-Astoria among Civil War prisons, Camp Morton was a place where young Southern soldiers struggled to survive with little protection against brutally cold winter weather and searing summer heat. It was a place where young men were often beaten, tortured, shot, and denied proper nutrition and medical treatment.

All of this was first brought to the attention of the nation a quarter-century after the end of the Civil War by a prominent physician and medical researcher, Dr. John A. Wyeth. A prisoner in Camp Morton during the war, Wyeth recounted the reprehensible conditions in the prison in an article in the April 1891 issue of *Century Monthly Magazine*.

Dr. Wyeth was responding to a Union propaganda campaign following the Civil War that decried dire conditions of Confederate prisons while ignoring those of its own.

“(Wyeth) made clear for the first time how conditions in northern compounds, particularly at Morton and Elmira, were as inhuman as those at Andersonville,” wrote historian Bradley Omanson.¹

Official estimates vary on how many Confederates died at Camp Morton, but some historians believe that close to two thousand prisoners never returned to their Southern homes, hearths, and loved ones.

Over time, the cruel legacy of Civil War prisons on both sides has been revealed and now the true historic legacy of Indiana’s Camp Morton will be revealed in the pages of this book.

America’s healing process from the Civil War continues with every passing generation. A full understanding of those times and the benchmark of suffering set during the Civil War continues to shape our national perspective on modern-day conflicts and events.

The truth about one of the North’s most prominent Civil War-era

prisons was a hot issue over one hundred years ago and it may still be a hot issue for some who prefer a sanitized and mythological view of American history. But while there is little, if anything, to be learned from pseudo-historic legend, much can be gained from understanding the truth.

It is to that end that I make every effort to present a true and accurate portrait of the sufferings and travails of multiple thousands of young Southern soldiers who lived—and who so often tragically died—at Indiana's Camp Morton during the turbulent years of the American Civil War.

I hope and expect that this book will reopen the Camp Morton controversy to further historical reflection, discussion, and debate.

Somewhere, the old Rebel from Alabama, Dr. Wyeth, must be smiling.

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