Hamlin CCC/POW Camp Update 2025

April 12, 2025 - E. Evans

The Park has undertaken the task of removing dead or dying ash trees and other dangerous trees from the site. In the fall of 2024, the Park hired out tree work to be done from the walkway in front of the barracks to the front of the camp until money ran out. During the winter and early spring, the Park crew set about cutting trees throughout the north end of the camp. Nick, his grandson and a couple of senior volunteers work to keep the site as neat as possible under the circumstances.

I wouldn't suggest giving a tour of the site yet because all 12 picnic tables placed around the site for tourists to rest at are all sitting together on the CCC Tool House floor.

The Barracks #1 sign board has fallen to the ground, and there are piles of sticks and pieces of tree everywhere. Some of the iron park benches need cleaning.

For the most part, the hired crew was careful not to harm artifacts and signs or leave deep ruts. They did, however, cut off at ground level several tree stumps that had been cited by Albany to be left standing eight feet high because they were from trees shown as saplings in early aerial photos. [They would help us determine exact locations within the camp.] They started and ended their work over a period of a few days.



From the parking lot looking northeast.



From the west roadway looking northeast.



Northwest corner looking east.



From west looking east across POW washroom.

The Park's work is on-going. As work continues, the site is looking more and more like it looked in the 1930s and 1940s!

Of particular interest is a three-and-one-half foot in diameter, seven-foot-long section of tree trunk we tried to salvage after the Park cut the tree down three feet above the ground. It was supposed to have been cut eight feet from ground level! So, Dan Wilson lopped off the bottom seven feet of the felled tree and built a pair of stands to hold the seven-foot-long section horizontally above the ground.



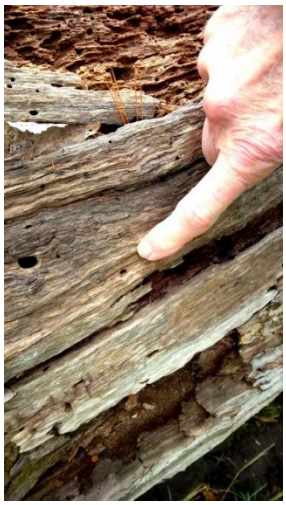
Tree trunk lined up with centerline of latrine - looking east.

We deemed this tree important because wire could be seen coming out of the tree at a point that would have been seven to eight feet above the ground, pointing north. We suspected that there might be more wire inside the tree but had no idea why there would be wire fastened to a tree in that area of the camp. We would have to wait for the tree to rot and expose the wire inside the tree to get an answer.

Last summer, the tree trunk Dan had built the stand under was still in pretty good shape. On this day, however, it was finally coming apart - big time! Slabs of it had fallen to the ground and the area behind the piece of wire sticking out of the tree had rotted away. Rain and snow had washed away much of the pulp to expose a bundle of wire about 28 inches long. The bundle of wire consists of four strands - two of twisted steel cable and two of what might be electrical wire.



Wire inside rotted tree trunk.



Hole where wire came out of the tree trunk.



Wire flag stuck in hole where wire came out.

Some small trees and one larger tree

appear on the west side of the latrine in the 1938 aerial of the CCC camp. This rotted tree is probably one of those trees, all grown up! It should be easy to determine exactly which of the trees in the photo this one is because it is on the extension of the east/west centerline of the latrine washroom - 37 feet from the west wall of the washroom. The discovery of the wire bundle (harness) inside the rotting tree (obviously a fast-growing softwood tree of some kind) brought to light some mysteries and some clues. One of the clues is the steel cable and electric wire working together. The cable suggests an electric line running from one place to another through the air - steel cable to take up the stress.



Tree trunk from floor of latrine looking West.

Another clue was the fact that the wire sticking out of the tree pointed to the north. After the latrine burned to the ground, the new POW washroom/shower was built to the north where the 13-bay garage once stood. Initially, it would have had no power line running to it. The rebuilt latrine could have provided that power line. Part of a power line from the west side of the latrine washroom to the tree and from the tree to the new POW washroom/shower could be what we found today.

One of the new mysteries is what would hold the wire coming out of the tree, horizontally with respect to the ground, as the tree grew? About a foot inside the tree from where it comes out of the tree, the wire bundle goes DOWN the tree! It is difficult to determine whether the wire inside the tree was cut by the saw that felled the dead tree or whether it was cut and left dangling a long time ago. Is it possible for a fast-growing tree to grow around a bundle of dangling wire instead of putting on the new growth BEHIND it?

According to the Planting Plan Map for the CCC camp, the tree we found the wire in was one of three Northern Cottonwoods planted west of the latrine when the camp was set up. The map shows one of the three trees 37 feet from the latrine on the latrine's center line!

The Planting Plan Map also shows that a line drawn due north from the tree with the wire in it ends up at the west end of the POW washroom/shower - precisely where you would want a power line to enter. The power line probably started at the peak of the latrine roof, went to the tree, and from the tree to the peak of the roof over the POW washroom. A pole might even have worked its way into the picture somewhere along the line.

I visited the site with a wand type metal detector the following day. I could not find any additional wire in the rotting tree trunk and I could find no wire in the rotting stump it was cut from.

One more thing caught my attention on that April 12 visit. While resting on the doghouse shaped cover over the floor drain in the cement floor of the new POW washroom north of the latrine, looking south, I got my best look yet of two tree stumps between me and the latrine. The remains of the trees themselves had been carted away, and it was easy to see the positioning of the two stumps.



The two stumps from the floor of the washroom. One right of the blue container. The other to the left of the blue container and a short log. [Toilet trench of the latrine can be seen above the blue container.] The two stumps are the same distance from the cement floor, and the pair is centered with respect to the section of cement the "doghouse" sits on.

I became more convinced than ever that those two trees had taken root in two holes that had been perfectly positioned and drilled into the hard packed gravel road behind the latrine. I think the holes might have been put there to hold posts that supported some kind of platform between the new washroom and the latrine that was being rebuilt after the famous fire.

The platform could have been a porch on the new washroom in front of the entrance or part of a connecting walkway between the latrine and the new washroom. [Note: My two German POW pen pals both told me that they didn't remember two separate buildings - a washroom and a latrine.] When the camp was taken down, the posts in the holes would eventually rot away and two trees could have taken root there and filled the holes.

Those two trees were of a species that could not have taken root on the surface of the gravel road. The stumps I was looking at were not the same size because they were two different species. But taking that into account, they were obviously centered with respect to the cement floor behind the entrance to the washroom and both were the same distance from it. And I could now get a good photo of the stumps to support my theory.