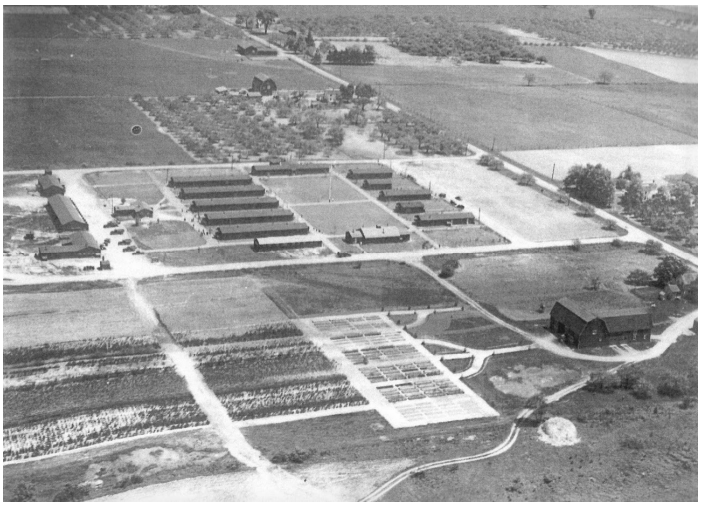
What Did Hamlin's WWII POW Camp Look Like?

Hamlin's WWII prisoner of war camp is best described as a modification of its Civilian Conservation Corps Camp. The Hamlin CCC camp was better suited for conversion to a POW camp than other CCC camps because it was built to be in operation longer than most CCC camps were. It was built in 1935 and didn't close until the summer of 1941.

Two aerial photos of the Hamlin CCC Camp exist. The most familiar one is the one I call the "Government Issued Photo" used on the cover of Mary Smith's 50-page booklet the Town of Hamlin published in 1985. That booklet was to commemorate the 1985 reunion of 40 plus CCC inductees Mary organized. Mary also, almost always, had that particular aerial photo in front of her when she talked to anyone interested in learning about the camp. [North in that photo is to the left.][1]



The other aerial photo of the CCC Camp is known as the Jacobs Aerial Photo. It does not look anywhere near as professionally done as the Government Issued Aerial photo and the photo was taken from an entirely different compass direction. [North is toward the top of this photo.] It looks a little "washed out" for lack of contrast and it was probably for that reason Mary never enlarged it when she did include it in articles she wrote. Mary dated that photo to the about 1939 or sometime shortly before the CCC camp closed.[2]



There are many dozens of snapshots taken at the CCC camp while it was in operation and Mary filed them in her History Center on Brick Schoolhouse Road. I came by some more photos of activity in the camp from people who have toured the site with me. But we have no photos of the POW Camp! None! Notta! Zilch! In order to get an idea of

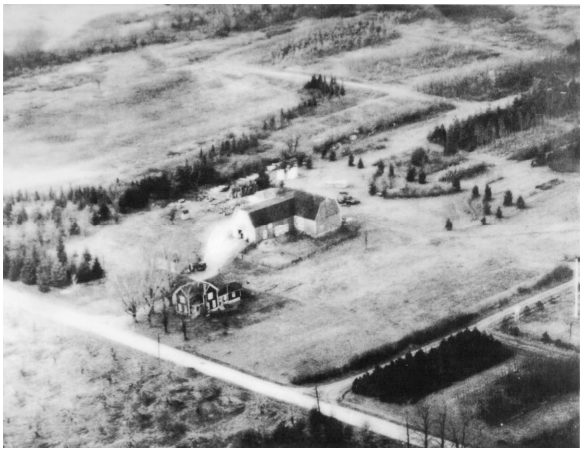
[1] Mary dated that photo "circa 1936" but I have updated it to circa 1938 because of the 80'x20' beginnings of the CCC Education Building shown in it. According to the Hamlin Special (the Hamlin CCC newspaper) the Education Building was begun in 1938.

[2] However, careful examination of that photo shows that the CCC camp has closed when the picture was taken. The camp looks deserted. There are no trucks in front of the garages, there are no people milling around, and the rock crusher is gone. The photo was most probably taken some time during the autumn of 1941.

what the POW Camp looked like; we have to make mental adjustments to all those CCC Camp photos.

There were two aerial photos taken that did catch a piece of the POW campground AFTER it was dismantled and AFTER every little bit of the POW Camp was removed from the site. One of those photos is called the Leverenz Photo and the other is the Grimm Photo.

The Leverenz Photo was supplied by Gary Leverenz who, as a nine-year-old, lived in the farmhouse next to the POW camp. The pilot who took the photo was careful to miss most of the POW camp but accidentally caught some of the SW corner showing a flagpole and a basketball backboard used by the POW camp guards. Clues in the photo date it sometime shortly after the POW camp disappeared - probably the spring of 1946 or 47.



The Grimm Photo was supplied by a descendent of the Grimm family who owned the farm to the east of the POW camp. It is a beautiful shot of the Grimm farm in the mid 1950s and in the background, you can see about two thirds of the area that used to be occupied by the POW camp. All of the buildings are gone but the power poles that surrounded the camp are still there. The sawmill operated by the CCC camp - well to the north of the POW camp - can also be seen in the photo to add perspective to the memory!



The very first published mention of what was done to the CCC site to turn it into a POW camp is found in Mary Smith's 1985 fifty-page CCC reunion booklet. On page 38, Leon Randall, the State Park Manager at the time, contributed a full-page article titled "THE C.C.C. CAMP AND HAMLIN BEACH STATE PARK." In it he says, "A few buildings were taken down before the Prisoner of War camp was started (including the recreation hall) but the majority were not moved until 1946." But based on that, don't start 'photo-shopping' (aka - air brushing out) any buildings from your two CCC aerial photos quite yet!

The part of Leon's sentence that says "(including the recreation hall)" seems - to me - to be a sort of after thought that should have come after the mentioning of a list of the specific buildings that were removed. But he mentions no other buildings! It is almost like he made the addition to settle a

previous on-going debate he has been involved in. And he does not give a source for his information. I'll leave it at that for now.

The next published mention of what was done to turn the CCC camp into a POW camp comes from Mary Smith's book entitled "Remembering Hamlin." On page 135, Howard Robinson (a POW camp guard) describes the POW camp as he saw it when he arrived there. He says, "Those buildings that were part of the C.C.C. camp on the north weren't there then." That fills in the missing information in Leon Randall's article before the parentheses but he makes no mention of the Recreation Hall. Howard Robinson does go on to say that "the big building was there, our quarters and the officer's quarters, and the Mess Hall was there." Was the "big building" the Recreation Hall?

It most probably was there if Howard Robinson was sitting with Mary Smith as he dictated his account of the camp, Mary most likely had the Government Issued Aerial photo in front of him. The only "big building" in that photo not already mentioned by him is the Recreation Building. The Education Building was only 1600 square feet (80'x20') in that picture and the Recreation Hall was 2400 square feet. The Education Building didn't become a "big building" until shortly before the Jacobs Aerial was taken in 1941 and Mary seldom had that photo out.

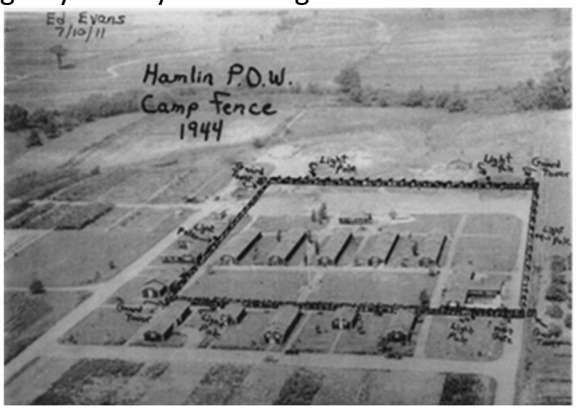
At this point, on Howard Robinson's say-so, it is safe to go ahead and photo-shop out the long CCC Garage, the shorter Army Garage, the two oil storage buildings, the Tool House, and the Tool Repair Shop. (Those buildings would provide hiding places for prisoners!) A local farmer by the name of Fred Rockow is responsible for the on-site evidence we found that supports Howard's claim. But leave in the Blacksmith Shop in the picture for now and "the big building(s)" on the west side of the camp.

On page 138 of Mary's 'Remembering Hamlin' book, Fred Rockow describes the installation of the bottom strands of barbed wire fence that surrounded the POW camp. That was the first construction work done to convert the CCC camp into a POW camp. Fred doesn't mention any building removals, but he is very proud of the furrow his brother and he plowed around the outline of the POW camp. He doesn't give the specific location of the furrow but the barbed wire that was dropped in that furrow remained there after the camp was dismantled in1946.

I found that wire in 2011 or 2012 and Shawn Lessord and I followed it around the entire camp on our hands and knees with a metal detector and a garden trowel. [For the record, Shawn's daughter helped us find the wire along the north side of the camp.] I drew in the exact location of that barbed wire on a copy of the Jacobs Aerial Photo and have included a copy of my drawing.

Also 'for the record,' a portion of my sketch of the buried barbed wire near where the Education Building ends and the Recreation Hall begins had to be "guessed at." The wire was missing. In 1983, Park Manager Leon Randall had the entire area from the

flagpole to the roadway behind the Recreation Hall bulldozed to make a clearing for Mary Smith's CCC reunion. A section of the buried barbed wire and anything that remained of the Recreation Hall foundation ended up in a mound of dirt on the west side of the access road into the camp. Leon denied that it had ever happened, but Mary Smith gave me a photo of the bulldozer in action and the driver of the bulldozer showed up at the site one day and marked out for me the entire area he cleared! I think that accounts for Leon's mention of the Recreation Hall near the top of page two of this report. I think he reasoned that if he declared the Recreation Hall "gone" before the POW camp was set up, he wouldn't feel guilty for any bulldozing!



Since this was written, the removed buildings have been photo-shopped out of the picture.

In my modified version of the Jacobs Aerial Photo, the row of buildings at the north end of the POW camp behind the barbed wire fence - to Howard Robinson's credit - should have been "photo shopped out" by me but I don't know how to do that. And as far as I know, no other buildings need to be removed from the picture to show what changed when the CCC camp became a POW camp. I did add labels and arrows to the Jacobs Aerial Photo as we continued to clear 75 years of overgrowth from it.

The lady who drove a guard car (her own 1941 white, Chevy convertible) behind a truck taking POWs to a local canning factory in the summer of 1945 stopped by the site in 2010 and showed Marty Howden and me where the main gate and guard tower were located. Two WWII German POWs who "were guests in our POW camp" became my pen pals in 2010 and added-to and verified some of the other additions you see on the Jacobs photo.

It will be interesting to see how closely my doctored-up photo of the POW camp compares to a National Archives photo of the camp if one ever shows up. It is also possible that a local resident might someday discover a snapshot in an old family album showing the POW camp in the background. In either case, there are only a few areas where I might be found to be a little lacking or a little bit off. One of those areas is the latrine area.

We did discover evidence of the fire that local lore and one eyewitness say burned down the latrine/washroom shortly after the POW camp opened for business. We also found the cement floor and plumbing of the auxiliary washroom that was built 50 feet from the latrine at the same time the original washroom/latrine was being re-built. I didn't draw it in on the Jacobs photo because I have no idea what it might have looked like. My German pen pals who used the facility always mentioned it as one building. Could the new structure have been

joined to the re-built structure with a walkway or canopy of some kind?

Another area of my doctored-up photo to check out when a better photo comes along is the little building labeled "Guard's Washroom." The building was definitely there just before the CCC camp closed but it had no name.

Official documents say that originally the little building was built to be moved around the CCC camp. I have a photo showing the building in a field way to the north of the camp, parallel with the sawmill. I have another photo taken just before the CCC camp closed that shows the little building where it is labeled "POW Washroom" in my doctored-up aerial photo.

I labeled the little building "Guard Washroom" after we found half of a cement floor with plumbing in it where the little building last sat. Since you can't drag a building around that is hooked to the ground with cement and water pipes, it is obvious that during the POW era a need arose to modify the little building. The cement and plumbing were probably added in 1944.[3]

I think the 'new need' that arose for the wandering building had something to do with providing for the 40 to 50 guards required for a POW camp of this size. The Education Building was the perfect size for a guard's barracks, but it had no plumbing. Partnering the Education Building with the little building and its new cement floor and plumbing would solve a very big problem with little extra cost involved.

And cost was super important. Every penny required to turn the CCC camp into a POW camp had to be supplied by the farmers and the canning factory owners. The government did not contribute a cent! The farmers had to become innovators. Already mentioned were two farmers (saving $1800) using their own tractors to plow a trench for the first strand of barbed wire to be dropped in. And the Duffy Mott canning company saved the price of 2"x6" lumber for the fence uprights by loaning their stock of 3"x5" tongue-and-groove warehouse roof supports. The farmers tore down or dragged away nothing that might be of use later for something to keep the POW camp running smoothly! That thought should be kept in mind when you compare my sketched in west-side fence line with the one that might show up in a National Archives photo.

In 1944 a German POW by the name of Heinrich Willert helped organize a sit-down strike of prisoners in front of Barracks #3. They had recently arrived at the camp - part of the very first group of POWs to live in the camp - and they were protesting the fact that there was no recreation facility in the camp. Heinrich described for me the guards approaching them through a gate in the south-side fence with rifles in hand. The prisoners expressed their concerns, and the guards went back to where they came from. A few days later, Heinrich said, "We had a Recreation Hall." In Mary's Remembering Hamlin book, Mr. "S," another POW,

[3] Half of the floor with the plumbing in it was bulldozed away sometime after the war was over. Fortunately, a huge tree in the way made it impossible for the bulldozer to complete the job assigned to it.

describes the Recreation Hall as having four ping pong tables and two stoves to keep it warm in the winter.

How was a fully equipped Recreation Hall added to the POW camp so quickly? How did the farmers and canning factories come by the money on short notice to build one? I think the CCC Recreation Hall was already standing-by ready to be used for something. It might have been scheduled to be used as another guards barracks or a warehouse for supplies. But when the POWs "requested" a recreation facility, the west-side fence was simply re-routed to take in the CCC Recreation Hall!

While clearing the entire site, we did not find the remains or hint of any building added to what you see in the CCC aerial photos. Gottfried Schulze told me he remembered "turning left after leaving the back door of Barracks #3" to go to the Recreation Hall. Another left-hand turn after passing Barracks #5 and he'd be headed for the Recreation Hall! That suggests to me that the west-side barbed wire fence was probably cut and directed to the northwest corner of the CCC Recreation Hall. A wire from the southwest corner back to the original fence line would close the breech. That maneuver would keep the cost of the camp down for the farmers and provide for a quick response to the prisoners' needs!

Finally, I have not been able to find any written reference to the fate of the CCC flagpole. Gary Leverenz did mention it to me when he gave me the Leverenz Aerial Photo mentioned above. He told me as a matter of fact that the CCC flagpole had been taken down when the camp was turned into a POW camp. That conforms to a Geneva Convention rule that says in effect that our ideology could not be crammed down the throats of the prisoners. To continue the Army's American flag rituals, the flagpole would have to be moved to another location.

The aerial photo Gary gave me does show a re-located flagpole site. But I think that is one of two flagpole sites established after the super tall CCC flagpole was taken down. I think a twin of Gary's flagpole was put up at the other side of the camp - outside the barbed wire fence - near the main entrance to the POW camp. I also think both locations are the same number of feet in from the side and the southern property lines. If I ever get around to re-doing my doctored-up aerial photo of the camp, I plan to draw in those two flagpoles. In the meantime, feel free to photo-shop them in on your copy.

Ed Evans

September 22, 2022