

CIVIL WAR PRISON CAMPS



211,000 Northerners captured

1863 – 195,000 went to prison camps

30,000 – died imprisoned

464,000 Confederates captured

215,000 – went to prison camps

26,000 – died imprisoned

The Union and Confederate governments both relied on the traditional European system of parole and exchange of prisoners. A prisoner who was on parole promised not to fight again until his name was “exchanged” for a similar man on the other side. Then both of them could rejoin their units. While awaiting exchange, prisoners were briefly confined to permanent camps. Prison camps were largely empty in mid-1862 because of the informal exchanges. The exchange system broke down in mid 1863 when the Confederacy refused to treat captured black prisoners as equal to white prisoners.

The overall mortality rates in prisons on both sides were similar, and quite high. Many Southern prisons were located in regions with high disease rates, and were routinely short of medicine, doctors, food and ice. Northerners often believed their men were being deliberately weakened and killed in Confederate prisons, and demanded that conditions in Northern prisons be equally harsh, even though shortages were not a problem in the North. About 56,000 soldiers died in prisons during the war, accounting for almost 10% of all Civil War fatalities.

The following are excerpts from the diary of Henry J. Durgin. He was taken prisoner of war on April 8, 1864 and held in a Confederate prison camp at Camp Ford, Tyler, Texas. Durgin was paroled on September 29, 1864.

This transcription was copied from the original document and is representative of all spelling, punctuation, and grammar as written by the creator. The original document is housed in the Pearce Civil War Collection, Pearce Collections Museum, Navarro College, Corsicana, Texas. <http://www.pearcecollections.us>

Tuesday 5

A very exciting day, indeed! Telegrams were rec'd this AM. that Gov. ceases to pay large bounties after to-day, and all who wished to get them must enlist before midnight. Informal rolls (the only substitute for recruiting papers) were made out & signed by over $\frac{3}{4}$ of the reg't, and among which is the name of H. J. Durgin.

Wednesday 6

Rec'd hasty orders to march for N. O. last night, and I sat up until after midnight getting ready. However, we did not go, and I am much rejoiced. The weather has changed very suddenly, and the rain, has changed to sleet & snow. The ground is covered 2 inches deep, a rare sight for La. O the poor horses. How they suffer all covered with ice.

Thursday, January 7, 1864.

The storm is over but the ice & snow remain, terrible reminders of the last few days' suffering. Peremptory orders at last to march without fail to-morrow morning, so no doubt we go, muddy & cold, as it is. Spent the day in completing my preparations, and practising on the bugle. Am progressing slowly.

Friday 8

Played reveille at 4 o'clock, according to orders. The baggage train were to start at 5, but did not till 6½. Three companies, A. C. & F. started ahead at that time, intending to strike the afternoon train at Brashear, and the rest started at 8½. Marched 20 miles, and halted at 4. Comstock has gone to Brashear after a P. M.'s position in a negro reg't.

Saturday 9

Reveille at 5½, started at 7, and arrived at Berwick City at 9. Found Companies A. F. & C. there waiting for a boat on which to cross. We took up our quarters in the negroe buildings of a large plantation and waited till night when 2 or 3 boats arrived from New Iberia and as I write the reg't is preparing to leave.

Tuesday 16

All the buglers in the brigade were ordered up to the "band room" to be instructed by the leader this forenoon. We went, and took our first lesson, and were told to come every day at drill call. It is an idea of Gen. D's, he thinking we were not learning any thing. Rec'd a bundle of papers from home. Drew a pistol tonight.

Wednesday 17

The weather, which for some time past has been quite warm, changed last night, and is very cold.—Had another brigade drill on the "field of Mars," which occupied all day until 5 o'clock. Had a cold time of it, even with overcoat and gloves on. [Last 2 lines not legible]

Thursday, February 18, 1864.

Weather very cold, and a little squally to-day. Had a little snow this afternoon.—the second time since being in the state, but not enough to whiten the ground.—Went up to the tailors twice to-day, and got measured for a dashing suit the 2d time. In going up my horse fell, and sprained my ankle, from which I am quite lame.

Saturday 5

Had reveille at 4½ and all started at 7. Marched an hour and then halted and dismounted, and walked half an hour on foot, leading the horses. This we did 3 times during the day, to rest the horses and men. Reached Bayou Lafourche at 5, and bivouacked just outside Donaldsonville.

Friday 11

Left Berwick at 6½ this morning, and bivouacked just above Centreville about 1 P. M. Are to stay here several days. My knee is so badly injured had to ride in the ambulance. Can not walk without the aid of two canes. this is the second sprain I have got by a horse falling with me.

Tuesday, March 22, 1864.

The storm cleared off this morning, and it is quite pleasant now. The force which went out last night got hold of the rebel countersign, and thereby captured their whole force, consisting of about 400 men, and 4 pieces of artillery. The great hurry of last night movements is now explained. Got us a cook yesterday, but he proved unfaithfull, and today I got another.

Wednesday 23

The prisoners and cannon were brought in this morning. They were a pretty stout set. The battery was the 1st Texas, light artillery. It was quite cheering to see such results of our trials and labors. Got a pass this P. M. & went to town. It is full and completely surrounded with troops.

Friday, March 25, 1864.

The rest of the reg't were paid this forenoon. We only got two months' pay, which was only an aggravation as none of the veterans, scarcely, could pay all their debts with that. We were expecting our bounties and advance pay. Could not collect Comstock's bills, so wrote him a line, and returned them.—Orders to be ready to leave at an hours notice after 4 in the morning.

Sunday 27

Reveille at 5, to start at 7, but were delayed till 8. Our reg't was brigade rear guard. At 11 we reached a point on Red River where the dense piney woods commence and halted to wait for re-inforcement. It is said the rebs have 56 pieces of artillery and from 30 to 35 thousand troops. We shall exceed that.

Saturday 2

We were routed up from our quiet slumbers at 4 by hasty orders to march in an hour. We "flew around" in a hurry and got ready, but did not leave till after 6 o'clock. Marched till about 3 P.M. without incident, when the rebs showed themselves in a clearing & got shelled out. We then advanced 2 miles further, had a short skirmish and fell back for the night ½ miles. We are nearly down to Pleasant Hill.

Sunday, April 3, 1864.

Were routed up at 3 o'clock to saddle up and feed preparatory [note: vertical pencil line down rest of entry] to repeling any attack which might be made by the enemy. We waited till 6½, and seeing nothing of them, advanced a short distance without discovering them, and then commenced our retreat. We marched back to "White's Store" and there our brig. bivouaced. Have had nothing to eat and we are terrible hungry.

Thursday 7

Had reveille at 2½ o'clock, and at daylight were on the road. Marched without interruption till about 11, when the rebels showed themselves in force just beyond Pleasant Hill. The 2d La. & 87th Ill. engaged them for an hour & were driven back, when re-inforcements turned the tide of victory in our favor. Pursued them several miles & after dark went into bivouac in the rain.

Friday 8

Kept our horses saddled all night, and at 7 o'clock, moved on again. Our reg't was sent into the woods to protect the right flank, and [note: vertical red line from here through and as] though the infantry was skirmishing all the forenoon we did not fire a shot. At 12 we (that is our reg't) came in sight of the enemy and charged, but they had 10 to our 1. The regt fled, and as I was thrown, got captured. My spurs were taken away & I was marched with 12 others through Mansfield 10 miles beyond.

Saturday, April 9, 1864.

A prisoner of war! Can it be possible! O! I cannot realize it. It seems as if it could not be. And [note: vertical line from here through entry of the 11th] And all through the ignorance & blunders of Maj. Connolly. O! that I were back within our own lines! Went to sleep last night supperless, and but for the kindness of Capt. King (also prisoner) who bought a blanket of the rebels for \$10.00 should have had no cover. Rose at daylight, cooked a coarse corn cake, started at 8, marched 23 miles, & halted.

Monday 11

Spent the day in this old lousey building without hardly going out doors. We are very strictly guarded, and there is no possible chance for escape. O, this is a most wretched hole! The lice are without number, and it is awfully filthy. Found a union man here imprisoned for his opinions. O! the horrors of this system of slavery.

Tuesday, April 12, 1864.

Changed some of my "greenbacks" for confed. notes 1 for 10, and spent 15 or 20 of them for bread. We get but half rations of corn bread & beef, and have to buy to keep from starving. Bread is only \$1.00 per loaf, gingerbread only 50 cents a small sheet, and sugar \$2.00 per lb. At 2 o'clock we were ordered off, and marched to "the 4 mile springs," en route for Tyler, Texas.—We hear all kinds of bad rumors from the front.

Wednesday 13

Started at 8½, and marched till 6 P.M., making 18 miles. Halted an hour at noon, just outside Greenwood—a small village of half a dozen houses, one hotel and a mechanic's shop—and I had a sharp discussion on the policy of the war &c., with an old South Carolina "fire eater." Crossed the Texas line just before we halted.

Wednesday 20

Spent the day in working on our tent, or rather cave. We dig 2 or 3 feet into the ground and put on a shed roof. one end resting on the ground and the other 4 feet high. Over the poles which compose the roof we spread several coatings of clay, and plaster up the sides in the same way. The weather is fair.

Thursday, April 21, 1864.

Worked part of the day on our shanty, but the great number of men who are doing the same thing keep the guard so constantly employed, that only at long intervals can we pass out. Have got the rafters nearly all on. Last night we had a chance to send letters home by flag of truce, and so I wrote a line to Mother. Expect she is very anxious about me.

Sunday, April 24, 1864.

Got our shanty—or rather "cave"—so near finished yesterday, that an hour or two's work this morning completed it, or as much of it as we can do at present. The clouds disappeared last night, and the weather is now delightful. We had Divine Services three times to-day, and I, of course, attended. It was like an oasis in the desert of life, and did me incalculable good.

Monday 25

Fair weather to-day. Not much to do now we have got our "cave" so near done, except to wash up & build our bunks. The former I did, but could not get out after the material to build the bunks, as there are so many more than can possibly get out constantly at the gate. Made us a checker board, & passed off an hour or two in that amusement. Am getting terrible hungry.

Tuesday 26

This has been a hot, lazy day, and we could hardly get around. Went all day yesterday without meat, but drew more "ham" this afternoon. Our rations consist of a pound and ¼ of ground corn, which, if sifted, would not make over a lb., and 5 ounces of ham, with about ½ a pint of beans and perhaps a pint of rye for coffee, once in 10 days, and a little salt.

Thursday 28

Glorious news to-night! The camp is all excitement and joy! The exchange agent arrived by stage, and is to make out our papers for exchange to-morrow! O! how the hearts of every one of us leaped for joy! To get out of his state of privation and almost starvation is quite enough to make us shout for joy. Thanks be to God for this!

Monday 2

Weather quite cool & comfortable. Spent the day in reading, walking around, looking in at a game of "Base Ball" by the officers, and in distributing rations. We drew our 10 days rations of salt and beans today in addition to the small allowance of meal and ham.—Have been so fortunate as to find a copy of "The Prince of the House of David" and a testament, which are a great treasure to me.

Tuesday, May 3, 1864.

The paroling progresses finely. I believe it is nearly completed. We probably shall not leave here for some time yet. Spent the day in reading, cooking, and washing my clothes. Lice are as numerous as the sands of the sea-shore, and it is impossible to keep clear of them. Gave all mine a thorough scalding, but suppose shall soon have another crop. Attended meeting as usual this eve.

Thursday 5

Spent the day in making a set of Chess-men, and in drawing rations, dividing, and cooking them. We are now getting fresh meat—1¼ lbs. to a man. Do not like it as well as the ham, as we have no way of cooking it except boiling, which makes it insipid. Two men died in camp yesterday—one bleeding to death at the nose and the other from some unknown cause.

Friday, May 6, 1864.

We had the best meal at dinner I have eaten since I have been in the Confederacy. It was a soup made of an ox's head. I spent all the forenoon in cooking it. This afternoon took my first lesson in playing Chess. Think I shall like it much, though it is a difficult game.—Glorious news! Gen. Taylor tried to cut off Banks retreat and lost a whole division—5000

Wednesday 11

Have had a good time to-day. Kept myself employed all the time in one way or another. Dyed my Chess-men, and made a board out of my handkerchief by dyeing the spots with oak bark steeped. I find the time passes much faster, and I enjoy myself much better, to keep busy every moment.—My thoughts constantly wander homeward, and O, how I long to be there, free once more!

Friday 13

Weather quite warm now. Am going to build me a bunk 2 or 3 feet from the bottom of the cave, so as not to be drowned out again. Got my poles and cut them the right length, and have only to get some boughs for the top now. The news of yesterday is confirmed, and we now learn that at Pleasant Hill we took 18 pieces of artillery. It may not be true.

Wednesday, May 18, 1864.

Have been reading nearly all day in "Combe's Constitution of Man." It is a very profitable work.—Lost my knife this afternoon by lending it to an acquaintance. It was stolen from him.—Deaths are getting to be very common among us now. Two occurred to-day—one in camp and one in hospital. Have had nearly 20 since we came here.

Saturday, May 21, 1864.

Over 500 more prisoners arrived to-day. They are partly soldiers and partly men who worked on the transports on which they were taken. It seems that the rebels got round in the rear of our forces at Alexandria and attacked these boats 20 miles below. Some escaped, and some were killed. Banks was superseded soon after by Sherman.

Tuesday, May 24, 1864.

Washed all my clothes, and scalded the lice out to-day. The news of the fall of Richmond is not yet contradicted, and we begin to hope. Col. Allen, com'd'g here says it is so. God grant it may be.—Another of the 29th Me died to-day, very suddenly, of sun-stroke. He has been for some time quite unwell. Sunday a member of the 77th Ohio was shot by the gaurd, without cause.

Monday, June 20, 1864.

Hot and sultry.—Made three stools for chairs to avoid sitting on the ground so much. Spent part of the day in mending my old, rotten clothes, & have not finished yet.—We are getting so short of wood for cooking that we have to burn parts of our shanties. O, what a government! Only one team to haul wood for over 4000 men. Drew only 1 lb. of meat & meal.

Saturday 25

It is reported that 17 men escaped last night, and that 3 of the gaurd went with them, but I do not much credit it. Some few, no doubt, got away, but it is not so easy a matter for large numbers to go together. Have made up my mind to try it in the course of a few weeks, if not exchanged, of which we have strong hopes.

Friday, July 1

A member of the 18th N. Y. dropped away quietly this morning. His companion awoke & found him dead, without having spoken a word or made the least noise. He had been ailing, but nothing serious, & not the least prospect of death. We are now losing at the rate of one or more every day, & to-day the number reached 5.—cooked for Melendy this afternoon. Considerable air stirring.

Tuesday, July 5th, 1864.

The "4th" is over, and the regular celebrations all over the country are over with it. How little has it seemed like our great national birthday to us! Little did I ever think of spending such a "4th" as this! But hope, sweet hope springs up in my heart, for there is now a fair prospect of an exchange. The paroling officer arrived, & says from 600 to 1000 are to leave forthwith.

Thursday 18

It rained nearly all night, and part of the forenoon thus preventing roll-call, & preventing the escape of Capt. King & party being detected. Two days have now passed since they left, & they are not missed, there not having been any roll call either day.—Have had the "blues" all day. O, how lonesome I at times feel! It is almost beyond endurance.

Wednesday, August 31, 1864.

The camp is all excitement to-night with exchange news, & every face looks decidedly more cheerfull. A Houston paper, copies a statement from the "N. O. True Delta," that Gen. Canby has ordered an exchange commissioner to take measures to liberate us immediately, & another report says the order to send us forward has come. Hurrah! Hurrah!

Friday 2

Made a "hash" this morning,—a new dish for us. I took the cold roast beef left yesterday, cut it fine, & put in a little bacon also cut fine, & stewed it about an hour, till it was nearly dry. It is quite rich, & a decided improvement over roasts. We have not been able to get any flour yet, but expect to next week. Have put off running away for a few days.

Wednesday 7

It requires the patience of more than a Job to endure this horrible life. When, O, when will the day of our release come! I play chess, read, cook & eat, and cook eat read & play chess till I have got so sick of the whole thing I can hardly endure it. Have got a good book now, however, which is great help in passing off time. The title is "Salad for the Solitary."

Monday, September 12, 1864.

The most uncomfortable day I believe of the season. It is a hungry day for the men here. No meal has been brought in at all since Saturday up to the time I write—nearly sunset—and of course many have not had a mouthfull all day. O, when will all of these trials be over?—Gilbert is making soap, I am reading “Salad for the Solitary, & the rest are making drinking horns.

Sunday 25

Have “lived like fighting cocks” to-day. Had sweet potatoes for breakfast, with roast beef & kidneys both roasted & fried, & for dinner sweet potatoes & baked beans. It was a treat. The beans were 35 cts. per quart, & the potatoes \$4.00 confed, or \$7.00 Green-backs. Let our people at home talk about costly living!

Wednesday 28

Joy! Joy! We are almost beside[s at end of word crossed out] ourselves to-day. Several men escaped last night, through the tunnel, & were detected, & of course we were all feeling terrible blue over it; but just after roll-call, a joyous shout announced the arrival of the “paroling officer, & soon we found that our reg’t was amongst the fortunate 700 who are going.

Friday, September 30, 1864.

Had a great fuss this morning about the vacancies caused by Serg’t Carleton’s desertion, & Abbotts & Blaisdell’s deaths. Their names were signed by 3 other men yesterday—strangers--& now they refuse to wave their supposed right to the places. But Capt. K. went out & told the paroling officer the facts, & he changed the names, thereby forcing our own men in. They are much rejoiced thereat.

Saturday, October 1

Sat up till after 10 o’clock last night, cooking up our rations, & got up at 4 to get breakfast ready by day-light. That over, we packed up, waited a short time, & at last were called out, counted over & over, & about 9 started. The clouds which given us frequent showers the last few days, cleared up & it became very warm. Marched 18 miles & halted, stiff & sore.

Monday, October 3, 1864.

Marched ahead of the column nearly all day, & find it much easier than marching in the crowd. Hit my little toe against a snag so violently that I put it out of joint & walked about 2 miles before I got it set. It has been swelling & growing sore till night & I can hardly walk. Made about 22 miles & halted at Marshall. Very tired & sore.

Thursday, October 6, 1864.

Have been laying by to-day, at work cooking, playing chess, cutting wood for the fires at night, &c. Our prospects look dubious. First it is said we will probably have to march all the way to our lines, & then that Szymanski says he is determined not to be cheated out of transportation for us, but may not be able to get it before 2 or 3 days &c. It looks bad.

Saturday 8

Heard last night that Grant has whipped Lee badly. Glorious news, if true.—This afternoon some 30 or 40 men of the Miscellaneous squad who have been in prison near Shreveport, joined us. Captain Moffatt & Lieut. Minifie joined our mess, making us 11 in number. The latter rec’d 3 wounds in the arm last May & has not yet entirely recovered.—Drew corn meal & fresh beef to-day.

Sunday, October 9, 1864.

The nights are getting very cold, & we can only keep comfortable nights by building large log fires & sleeping close to them. We cut a tree or two every day for this purpose.—A dull Sunday for us. The 4th day of this delay, & it is wearing on our patience & spirits. Don’t like the looks of these long delays. It is reported, however, that part of us go to-morrow via the river.

Monday 10

Begun to feel pretty blue this morning, but about noon an order came in to send 150 of the sickest & least able to walk to Shreveport immediately, which inspired us with new hope. I was just fortunate enough to have my name added to the list after they were all ready to start. We got on board about sun-set, after much trouble, & started at 8 or 10 knots an hour.

Tuesday 11

Run last night till the moon was nearly down, which was some after midnight. No accommodations, so slept cold in the open air on deck. Our mess are all here.—Had time before starting to make coffee on shore, which, with the gingerbread & pies we purchased in town yesterday made us a good meal. Run aground twice & spent 3 hours getting off, & 2 more repairing the wheel braces.

Saturday, October 15, 1864.

Had a great surprise last night, by being waked up from our early sleep by the strains of “Home sweet home,” from the confed. brigade band. It was the most delightful hour I have spent since I have been in the confederacy. We were taken from the boat about noon & marched about a mile, to a place on “bayou Rapides destitute of wood, where we found 150 more prisoners who arrived last night.

Sunday 23

Glorious day! The most happy one of my life! I am no longer a prisoner, thank God! After waiting at the Atchafalaya 24 hours, towards noon we got orders to get up steam, & in an hour Szymanski was on board & we were on our way to liberty. Reached Red River Landing in 2 hours, & O, how we cheered at sight of the old flag! Before dark the exchange was completed & the confeds officers came aboard our boat for a good time, which lasted till near midnight when we started down the river.

Thursday, October 27, 1864.

Drew our clothes to-day about noon, & were to have passes to go through the city but being so late in the day, postponed it untill to-morrow. I got a citizen’s suit however, & went out 3 or 4 hours in disguise. Failed in the object of my visit, however. Wrote a long letter home yesterday, & 3 more for friends in the stockade.

Saturday 29

Got measured for a full suit & received from Capt. King \$70.00 to pay for it, which, added to my \$40.00 makes my pile \$110.00. the suit is to cost \$101.00. A pair of Alligator skin boots is included. Bought me a hat, knife, looking glass, tooth-brush, suspenders, wallet, & pencil for \$8.25. Toward night we returned to the press.

Sunday, October 30, 1864.

Unhappy, unfortunate day! O when will my misfortunes cease! My pants, containing all my money, were stolen about 11 o’clock last night, & after passing a sleepless night in watching, found the pants in the next partition of the press, robbed of all the money. Watched all day for it, but could get no satisfactory clue to the thief.

Monday 31

Have had a drizzling rain all day. Orders came this morning to our reg’t, the 48th & 19th to leave this afternoon at 4 o’clock. Accordingly I got a pass, & went down town, arranged to have my clothes sent to-morrow, & returned & marched to the boat with the rest. Then I was sent back after some missing men, & when I returned with them the boat was gone.

Monday 7

Got hold of a work of Mrs. Grey’s, entitled “Sybil Lennard” and spent the day in reading it. It is a very interesting work, some parts painfully so. The moral is excellent. It is a tale of English Life. French Novels & other works of immoral tendency, worked the ruin of the Heroine, and her condition is most pitiable. No prospect of leaving yet.

Thursday 10

Spent the day in playing ball & reading the "Continental" I bought the other day.—This is the 10th day since the rest of the boys went up the river, & it seems as though we could not possibly wait much longer. I fear they will all get paid, & be on their way home before we get there. Nothing but bad luck for me, continually.

Friday, November 11, 1864.

A glad day for us, indeed! Our patience is rewarded at last, & we are on our way up the river. Got orders just after dinner to be ready at 3½, and at that time we left for the boat. Did not get started until half past 8, as the boat was not loaded. St. Clair and Woods are either left again, or have smuggled themselves on another boat.

Tuesday 22

Midnight

Have just been paid. The Pay Master commenced with the reg't this forenoon, & as they all go on picket tomorrow had to finish to-night. We prisoners came last, & have just got through. Did not get our old bounties as expected. Was agreeably surprised at receiving a contribution of over \$70.00 to "mitigate my loss, from the officers & musicians

Wednesday, November 23, 1864.

My pay for 10 months & first 3 instalments of bounty, was \$373.90. The old bounty could not be paid except on Final Statements, which I had made out to-day. But on presenting them the Pay-Master refused to have any thing to do about it, saying we could not get it without sending to Washington.

Tuesday, November 29, 1864.

Had another drill this P.M. Practised "Kingdom Comin," "Sultan's Polka" Village Quick step, &c. Intend to get up a new Tattoo. Took out my Clarionett to try it but the reed was so thin could not do any thing with it. Spent the evening in playing chess with Smith. Wrote to Mother.

Tuesday, December 20, 1864

Spent the day in playing the flute & reading "Nicholas Nickleby," & the evening in chess with Marshall. Beat him every time to-night, though last night he got two games. The storm rages with unabated fury, and is fast growing colder. It is very uncomfortable indeed.

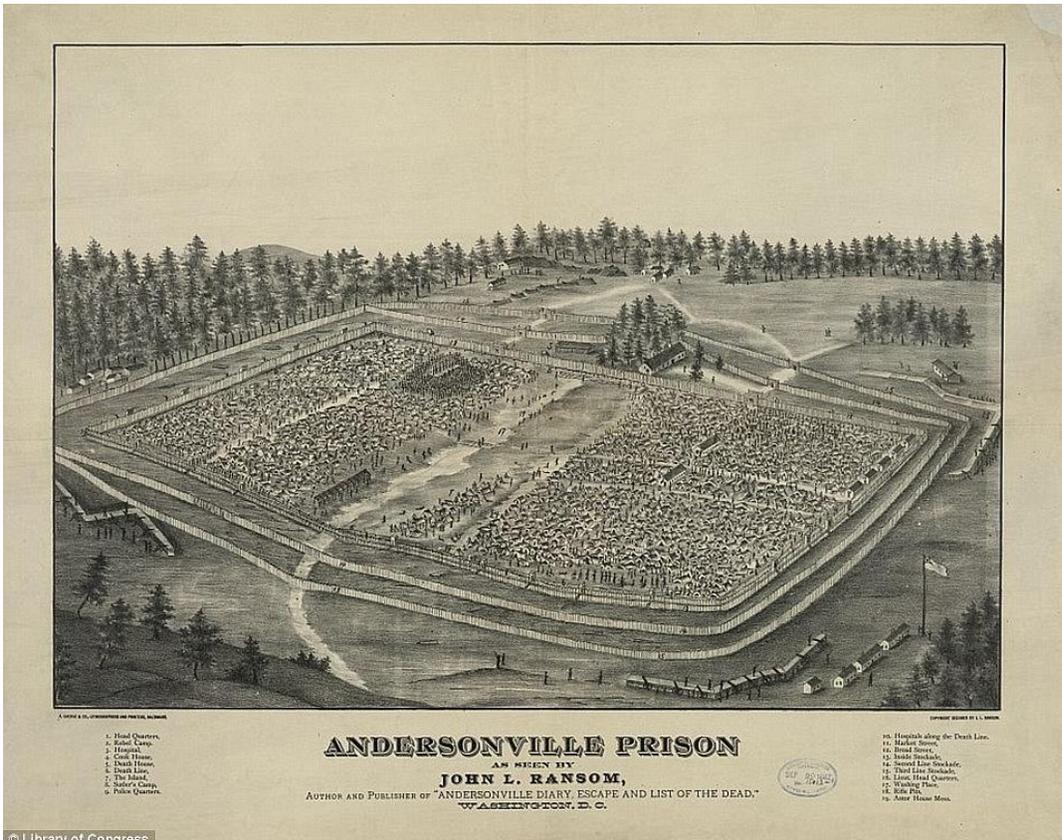
Discussion questions:

Briefly review the life of this prisoner of war. What were the living conditions, food, and activities to pass the time?



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Prisoners at Andersonville, 1864, had only the clothes they were wearing when captured. In their tattered Union uniforms the men were forced to sleep in makeshift tents or holes dug in the ground.



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REVIEW OF CIVIL WAR LETTER

Who wrote this letter and what was the occupation?

What side of the Civil War did the writer support? Provide evidence.

What was the purpose of the letter?

What important details are provided in this letter?

What is the mental state of the writer? (ex: anger, despair, empathy, joy, sympathy)
