

# THUNDER FROM A CLEAR SKY

## STOVEPIPE JOHNSON'S CONFEDERATE RAID ON NEWBURGH, INDIANA

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### [Camp Morton, 1861-1865: Indianapolis Prison Camp](#)

by Hattie Lou Winslow & Joseph R. Moore

153 pages, published 1995

ISBN: 0-87195-114-2

Price \$14.95 (hardcover only)

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For more on Camp Morton, click [here](#)

### THE STORY

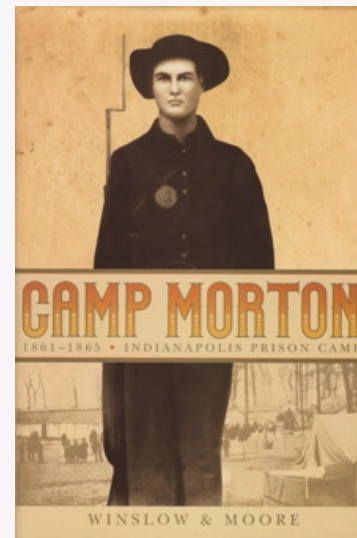
In 1837, a rambling bayou extending beyond the Indianapolis city limits had gotten the attention of local politicians. A creek bed in the wild, swampy area beyond Illinois and Twenty-second Streets, dry in summer, was prone to flooding and property damage in spring. The state government appropriated money to widen and deepen the creek bed, and by the 1850s the spot was eyed as a good location for "a place of universal interest." In 1859 the state of Indiana took possession of the area and turned it into the State Fairgrounds. From the simplest of natural beginnings would evolve a place of assembly, suffering, and death.

April 1861. The volatile brew that had fermented national dissent for decades finally ignited. The rumble of thunder trailing the cannonballs at Fort Sumter electrified Hoosier patriots. Within days, thousands of men from every walk of life had converged on Indianapolis with imagined expectations of what it meant to be a soldier. The former State Fairgrounds, now Camp Morton, became the center of all activity at the state capital. As quickly as the recruits came, they were followed by the practical concerns of preparation and sustenance. Every step in accepting, assembling, and activating an army had to be invented in the moments after the needs arose.

Despite the steady progression leading up to war, the impromptu army needed everything: uniforms, shoes, weapons, wood, tents, pots, pans, medicine, and more. The paramount issue at all times during camp history was food. Supplying thousands of daily meals from an uncertain infrastructure was an unrelenting challenge of dizzying proportions. The federal government, the state of Indiana, and volunteer groups stumbled along in an uncoordinated (and at times uncooperative) three-legged race to sustain and supply Indiana soldiers at Camp Morton during the initial months of the Civil War.

Expecting a short conflict, 30-day Indiana troopers were mustered, outfitted, drilled, sent to the field, returned, and re-enlisted throughout 1861. Camp Morton became the symbol of patriotic Hoosier zeal, and seemingly everyone at the state capital was involved with fueling the needs of the recruiting camp. However, with the Confederate surrender of Fort Donelson, Tennessee, everything changed.

On February 17, 1862, the day after the surrender of some 16,000 Confederate troops at Fort Donelson, General Henry Halleck was on the telegraph inquiring for places to put enemy prisoners. Indiana Governor Oliver Morton, unflagging in his commitment to the war effort, volunteered 3,000 slots at Camp Morton. He was sent an initial population of 3,700, which



quickly increased to nearly 5,000. Almost overnight, the compound was transformed from recruiting camp to prison yard. Fencing was overhauled, ramshackle bunks were compressed into hastily erected dwellings, the front gate was reinforced, and Union troops – formerly inside the camp learning regulation drill – were posted outside as armed guards. Like a bellows connected to the fortunes of war, Camp Morton's population expanded with captured soldiers punctuating each battle and contracted with their eventual exchange or transfer.

With the nation still optimistic about a short war, the first Rebel prisoners to arrive in Indianapolis were treated relatively well; so well that in 1911 former Confederate inmates erected a bronze statue in honor of the second camp warden, Colonel Richard Owen. Civilian hospitality formerly shown to Hoosier recruits was freely accorded to the first onslaught of destitute Tennessee POWs. But after Shiloh, and Colonel Owen's departure, Camp Morton began a downward spiral mirrored by most other prison camps.

By 1863, both sides had realigned their expectations to the uncompromising madness of war. The care of enemy prisoners fell to the bottom of a very long list of concerns. Despite the obvious lack of priority, perhaps the most interesting aspect of camp administration was how federal army administrators remained conscientious about the welfare of their charges. Many inspections were made, varying reports issued, and slow, incremental alterations were completed to adjust the most egregious deficiencies.

In the summer of 1863, a great tumult struck Indiana, and Camp Morton became a source of anxiety for the entire state. General John Hunt Morgan's Rebel cavalrymen had crossed the Ohio River onto Indiana soil. As Morgan moved northward, rumor spread that the raiders were headed for Camp Morton to release Confederate prisoners and burn the state capital. Indianapolis seethed with frothy speculation as Union men of all ages organized for the defense of the city. Eventually, Morgan's men made it all the way to the gates of Camp Morton – only to be ushered in as prisoners.

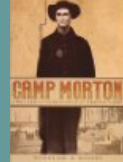
In the winter of 1863-64, all mundane concerns were forgotten when the temperatures dropped to 20 below zero. With prisoners clad in fraying rags and disintegrating shoes, and with only a small allowance of hay for personal bedding, the prison compound in Indianapolis became a death camp. During the miserable winter months, the toll of expired soldiers averaged three men per day.

Allowing for the best in camp care, Civil War POW compounds were dicey environments. Disagreements between captured units, poor food rations, ineffective medical care, harsh weather, tumble-down dwellings, open camp sewers, disease, boredom, and the occasional trigger-happy guard conspired to limit the lives of many formerly vigorous farm boys. By most accounts, Camp Morton was better than many prisoner camps, but this fact was no comfort to the nearly 1,600 men who died there during the three-and-a-half years the camp was active.

## THE BOOK

Like any book produced by the Indiana Historical Society, this is a wonderful work, delightfully rendered. Its primary sources are the Official Records and the Indianapolis newspapers. The Official Records build the context, and the newspapers build the camp's everyday life. The authors cleverly keep the focus on the people who populated and administered the camp, and the story is filled with human details that keep the reader anticipating the next page. One such vignette concerns the very last handful of Camp Morton prisoners to be released at the end of the camp's life-cycle in 1865. A group of seven hapless Union soldiers took the Confederate oath of allegiance after being captured by the Rebels in the South – only to be recaptured by the Union Army and incarcerated in Camp Morton as traitors. In the spirit of reconciliation after the end of the war, they were simply set free to find their way home. By the end of the book the authors have also created an intriguing portrait of the enigmatic Lieutenant Colonel William H. Hoffman, Commissary General of Prisoners – a man whose problems started after each battle had ended.

[Camp Morton](#) is a book well worth reading and, at only \$14.95 for the hardcover, a book worth owning.



Camp Morton, 1861-1865

Hattie Lou Winslow...

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## CONNECTIONS

When I decided to review this book, I had no idea of the connections between [Thunder From a Clear Sky](#) and the goings on at Camp Morton. For example, the first commander of Camp Morton was none other than the irascible Captain Ben Nicklin, the restless commander of the Henderson-bound 13th Indiana Battery during the run-up to the Newburg Raid. Later, a successful Rebel jailbreak is discussed which may correspond to the escape of Adam Johnson's first recruit, Frank Owen. Also of interest was the fact that many of Morgan's Raiders wound up at Camp Morton after the failure of the Great Raid before their eventual transfer to Camp Douglas in Chicago. How many of Adam Johnson's Partisan Rangers spent time at Camp Morton before being transferred to Camp Douglas to die? We don't know.

### [Den of Misery: Indiana's Civil War Prison](#)

by James R. Hall

160 pages, published 2006

ISBN: 1589803515

Price \$16.50 (hardcover only)

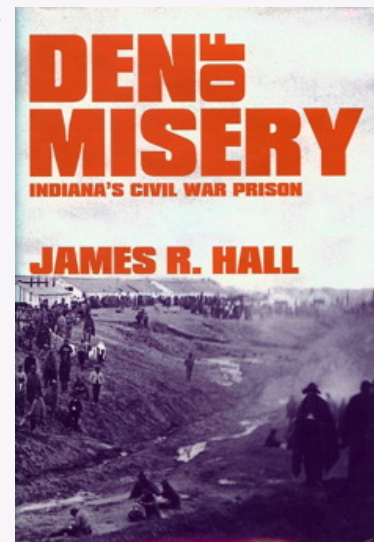
## UPDATE

I've just finished a once through of James R. Hall's [Den of Misery: Indiana's Civil War Prison](#). In short, it makes a nice companion piece to [Camp Morton](#). Although the first 50 pages or so are a restatement of the background as documented in [Camp Morton](#), the focus of the book is the dispute between Dr. John A. Wyeth and the Indiana GAR regarding the conditions at the camp and the treatment of rebel prisoners in the years 1863-1865.

Wyeth was a young Confederate soldier who was captured and imprisoned at Camp Morton. Almost 30 years after his imprisonment, Wyeth wrote an article that appeared in *Century Monthly Magazine* which severely criticized the treatment of Confederate prisoners at Camp Morton. Wyeth's article stimulated an outpouring of denials, confirmations, and rebuttals from Union officers and administrators on one side and former Confederate prisoners on the other.

Hall has done a service in collecting some harrowing stories about rebel treatment at Camp Morton told by the victims in their own words. If you are going to pick up [Camp Morton](#), you need to follow it up by reading [Den of Misery](#).

After all is said and done, nothing in [Den of Misery](#) should be surprising to the reader. While former Governor Oliver Morton's personal secretary, W. R. Holloway, touts the camp's humane treatment, the collected accounts of rebel prisoners rings too true. Is it any wonder that high-ranking Union officers and officials who were not present during everyday camp life



deny wrongdoing, while the men who were subject to cruelty and harsh conditions every other moment have a different story to tell? We need look no further than the headlines in our own daily newspapers to see again that a dark seed in the breast of humanity is forever ready to take advantage of those in powerless positions. Indeed, some Civil War prisoner descriptions could surely be written by almost anyone taken prisoner in any war since that time.

**Following is a short e-interview conducted June 1, 2006 with the author of *Den of Misery: Indiana's Civil War Prison*:**

**RM:** Sometimes motives are questioned when people come forward with shocking information years after traumatic or criminal events. What is your thought as to why Dr. Wyeth waited thirty long years to publish "Cold Cheer at Camp Morton" in *Century Monthly Magazine*?

**Mr. Hall:** My thinking is that Dr. Wyeth may have needed some time to put things into perspective. He was just a kid when he was in Camp Morton. Also, he became extremely busy after the Civil War, earning two medical degrees, doing extensive medical research, etc. I guess another consideration is that perhaps he had *TRIED* to make public these revelations prior to the *Century Monthly* articles and found no publication interested in his stories. This is pure speculation on my part – I don't know if he had tried to publicize his story previously.

**RM:** Many of the prisoner descriptions in *Den of Misery* are either published for the first time or resurrected from old, long forgotten sources. How long did it take you to research and write the book and what were some of the unusual challenges? Feel free to elaborate on the process.

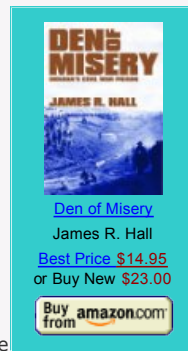
**Mr. Hall:** All told, after revisions suggested by the publisher, etc., it took me about three years to write the book. Thank the Lord for the internet. I was able to find some of these prisoner testimonials on the internet, and the internet set me on track to find others. The hardest part, really, was in trying to find CSA soldier letters written from Camp Morton that weren't so heavily censored as to make them worthless. I was finally able to find a few of these types of letters in university libraries and had to spend a lot of time reading microfilm.

**RM:** Colonel Owen's tenure as Camp Morton commandant in 1862 put something of a halo over the camp for some time. Your book definitely makes the case that a more thorough examination is in order. In terms of severity, where do you think Camp Morton falls in the continuum of Civil War camps? Was it better than Andersonville, better than Camp Douglas, better than Elmira, worse than Johnson's Island?

**Mr. Hall:** It's kind of difficult for me to compare Camp Morton with other Civil War prisons because they were set up differently and maintained differently relative to geography and other such variable factors. At Andersonville, prisoners burned up in the summer heat; at Camp Morton, they froze to death in sub-zero temperatures in the winter. But the thing that is so inexcusable about Camp Morton – in my view, anyway – is that prisoners there endured near-starvation while they were in the middle of what was then a rural farming community which had plenty of food to distribute to the prisoners. As my book mentions, there is a distinct possibility that corrupt military officials sold some of the food and supplies which were supposed to go to the Camp Morton prisoners and put the money into their own pockets. This was not an uncommon practice in the Union Army, and there is a scene in the great film "Glory" about this kind of thing. Also, Camp Morton had some guards who were just out and out psychopaths. It was not uncommon for them to randomly fire into the sheds where the CSA prisoners were sleeping at night – for absolutely no logical reason other than sadism. Certainly, none of the Civil War prison camps were country clubs, but it seems to me that Camp Morton (after the humanitarian Col. Owen's exit as commandant early in the war) was

one of the worst.

My thanks to James R. Hall, author of *Den of Misery: Indiana's Civil War Prison*.



Go here to purchase his book.

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