

# Building a Cantonment

A WORKER WHO HELPED TO BUILD IT TELLS HOW ONE OF OUR MILITARY CITIES WAS RUSHED TO COMPLETION IN SIXTY-EIGHT DAYS

By Nelson Robins

"IT took me a whole month to spend the first million, five days to spend the second million, and three days to spend the third million. Now I believe I can dispose of a million almost any day I choose, and not strain myself. It just shows how a man can get used to things."

The speaker was the auditor who looked after the accounts of the contractors in charge of Camp Lee, the National Army cantonment at Petersburg, Virginia. He was explaining the ease with which a million dollars of government money can be spent when one has had a little practise.

"The boss came around the other day," put in the chief bookkeeper, "and complained that it took too long to settle accounts—wanted to know if I couldn't put out money a little faster. I told him the only way it could be done was to haul money to camp in bills of large denomination and give me a shovel to work with."

The auditor and the chief bookkeeper were talking to a group in the Hotel Petersburg, and a bystander could not fail to observe the interest their remarks attracted. It is a familiar fact that "government money" is not held so sacred as other and more difficult coin, but there is a limit to the careless distribution of Uncle Sam's funds, and, judging by what those in charge of those funds were saying, one's natural impression was that they were being handled mighty carelessly.

That this lavish distribution of money was really governmental economy can be shown, I believe.

To begin with, Petersburg, Virginia, has had the extraordinary experience of being struck twice by industrial lightning. Two

years ago the Du Ponts, casting about for a location for an enormous explosive-manufacturing plant, selected City Point, a short distance from Petersburg, as a point of release for millions of dollars. Hopewell, the result of the Du Pont enterprise, evolved within a year from a well-nigh worthless tract of swamp and scrub to a city of twenty thousand people—twenty thousand people who drew big wages and who spent their wages like sailors on shore leave. And they spent their wages in Petersburg. They still spend the greater part of their wages there, despite the progress of Hopewell.

Petersburg grew fat with profit, and those who saw what was coming with the Du Ponts became wealthy. To-day Petersburg and Hopewell, connected by trolleys and jitneys, are practically one city. Citizens of each declare the other to be the suburb, and because Du Pont money is boosting their bank-accounts every week Petersburgers don't trouble to argue the question.

Then industrial lightning struck again when the War Department decided to build an army cantonment on the road between Petersburg and Hopewell. Petersburgers, remembering Hopewell's beginning, gasped, swallowed hard, and prepared to meet the invasion. Within a month there were eleven thousand men working at Camp Lee at an average wage of forty-five dollars per week.

Even a water-boy got forty-five cents an hour. Being government work, and the government having declared itself regarding the eight-hour day, fifty per cent extra was paid for overtime, and double time for Sundays. Thus a man working ten hours

a day seven days a week was paid for eighty-six hours' work—eleven hours each week-day and twenty hours for Sunday. At fifty-seven cents an hour, a carpenter would earn forty-nine dollars and two cents in a week.

And every man who asked for a job got one, if he had his tools. Every man was a carpenter until he proved himself otherwise—then he became either a carpenter's helper or a water-boy.

#### THE AUTHOR BECOMES A CARPENTER

Several men from my county had gone to Camp Lee, and the tales they told on their return persuaded me to see what it was like. I went there, taking with me a saw, a hammer, and a hatchet. Later, after I had been assigned to work, I borrowed a square from another man.

A weary-looking foreman hailed me as I strolled through the first unit.

"Carpenter?" he asked.

"Yep," I replied, making a mighty effort to be professional and look the part.

"Come in and go to work!"

That was all there was to it. Ten minutes later I was up on a scaffold, nailing strips to the rafters, to which I subsequently tacked beaver-board. From the next pay-car that came around I drew a check at the rate of fifty-seven cents an hour.

But that foreman saw to it that I worked. He saw to it that the men under him put in ten hours of activity. Much of the work might have been criticised for its lack of finish, but that foreman saw that it was solidly done, and that the men worked. That was what he was for.

After two weeks putting up strips and beaver-board palled. My back had acquired a permanent ache from driving nails above my head, my thumb was blistered from the hammer, and oh, how sore were my left thumb and forefinger from the blows which failed to land on the nail!

I went to the foreman.

"Look here," I said, "can't you put me on something else? I've got a bellyful of beaver-board."

He grinned.

"What would you like to do—some of the finishing work?"

"Surely," I answered, willing to try anything to get off the beaver-board.

"Naw, you wouldn't!" he said, as a nurse would refuse a bottle of carbolic to an infant. "It takes a carpenter to do that."

"Well, I'm drawing a carpenter's pay." I thought that clinched it.

"Carpenter's hell!" he retorted. "I'll bet you never drew a carpenter's pay in your life before I gave you a job. You're a 1918 model carpenter!"

There was no argument I could put forth, but I was curious to know. He satisfied my curiosity.

"I knew you weren't a carpenter," he told me, "but I knew I could teach you how to put up beaver-board. That's what you're hired for, and that's what you're going to do."

I continued to put up beaver-board.

#### UTILIZING UNSKILLED LABOR

This little episode gave me a new light on the situation. No doubt thousands of men, who knew little of carpentry beyond the sawing of boards and the driving of nails, were wondering how they "got by" with their work, living in constant fear that they would be laid off, and working hard at what they were doing; and all the time they were doing tolerably well the job the foreman had taught them to do.

I put up beaver-board; others, working in squads, laid flooring; others put up studding or laid joists, and so on. Each step in the erection of a building was performed by men who had quickly become experts in that particular step. Bill Mann, who told me privately that he was "a roughneck bricklayer of thirty years' standing," sawed rafters for two solid months, and cursed fortune because he had squandered good money in the purchase of a hammer which he had never used.

In the mean while the experienced and skilled carpenters were saved for jobs which required knowledge of the trade. There was work enough of this kind to keep them busy—to keep all the carpenters in Virginia and North Carolina busy. As a matter of fact, other construction work in Virginia and North Carolina was at a

standstill while Camp Lee was in the building. Contractors went wild and tore their hair and wrote letters to the newspapers—but the big cantonment went steadily forward.

Naturally, there were hundreds and hundreds of men who loafed on the job, and who drew pay without giving a fair return; and just as naturally the cantonment cost the government a great deal more money than it would have cost if the contractors had had plenty of time. But here we come to the root of the matter. Time was all-important. Each day of delay meant a day longer before the soldiers trained at Camp Lee would get at the enemy. Each day's delay meant another day of war, and the expense of a day of war will pay the whole bill for the construction of Camp Lee several times over.

With this in view, the question whether a man who did only half a fair day's work should receive the wages for a full day was lost in the fact that the man had done half a day's work, and had pushed the camp forward that much toward completion. In view of the tremendously greater expense which was to be stopped by the function of the camp, the money paid for constructing the camp lost its value—it was too slight to figure.

#### A CITY BUILT IN SIXTY-EIGHT DAYS

When it is considered that up to the middle of June, 1917, Camp Lee was a wilderness of scrub growth, swamp, and farm-land, that within sixty-eight days an army cantonment of sixteen hundred buildings, giving quarters to fifty thousand men, had been completed, and that men were already being drilled in the art of war, besides being comfortably housed and cared for—when all this is taken into consideration, one realizes what a wonderful work was accomplished.

No construction problem has ever been known like that of the sixteen cantonments built last summer. All the plans were made by the War Department in Washington before the land on which the cantonments were built had been acquired. Each contractor got the necessary plans and was told to have his contract completed by Sep-

tember 1. Seventy-three days was allowed for Camp Lee. It was finished according to the original plans five days earlier. The contractors afterward had to build additional units, but the original cantonment was completed in sixty-eight days.

To perform this feat, the surrounding country was combed far and wide for carpenters. Wages were offered which could not be met by other contractors, who, as a result, practically ceased operations. The following story was told in the *Manufacturers' Record*, to illustrate how Camp Lee put an end to all competing work:

A furniture manufacturer in North Carolina entered one of his departments, in which, in normal times, one hundred and fifty men worked. Only the foreman was left.

"Where are all your men?" asked the manufacturer.

"Gone to Camp Lee," answered the foreman.

"Why the devil haven't you gone, too?" sarcastically inquired the angry boss.

"Well, do you know," replied the foreman, "I was just asking myself that same question. I believe I will!"

Whereupon he picked up his hat and was gone.

In spite of the howls of rage from other builders and manufacturers, despite criticism of contractors and paymasters who, the critics alleged, handled money as if it had no particular value, despite the "1918 model" carpenters, despite complaints about crooked foremen, despite all the lack of orderly system, the cantonment was built. That, after all, is the great outstanding fact.

#### THE CAMP WAS READY FOR THE SOLDIERS

It was the common report at Camp Lee that the actual cost of construction was about four times as much as the amount originally contemplated. Whether this estimate was correct or not, I cannot say; and in any case the main fact is that the camp was built, and built on time. When the date for the entrance of the National Army arrived, Camp Lee was ready and waiting. Cots and blankets were ready, water was running in the lavatories, fires

were in the kitchen ranges, and food was ready to be served.

The method of payment for the construction of the camp was calculated to make the average man look with some suspicion upon the free-handed manner of hiring and paying the workmen and those who handled supplies. There was, for instance, something of a howl when it was discovered that certain lumber-checkers were measuring car-loads of lumber by dividing the capacity of the car in cubic feet—marked on the outside of the car—by twelve, to get the number of feet of lumber in the car. As a large percentage of the cars were only half filled, the contractors discovered that they were being charged for several hundred thousand feet more lumber than the shippers were sending. It so happened, however, that the firm which shipped most of the lumber for Camp Lee discovered and reported the cause of the discrepancy, and received correct payment on the evidence of their bills of lading.

The wiseacres who could have done the job so much more easily and cheaply naturally expressed themselves as suspicious of the ten-per-cent payment plan, by which the contractor received a commission of ten per cent on the cost of the work. As a matter of fact, the ten-per-cent plan only worked within a certain limit, and as the cost went up the percentage went down. When the contractor's commission reached \$250,000 it stopped, and that was the high-water mark of profit.

As I understand it, the Camp Lee contractors got that amount. Whether it was or was not an excessive profit is not the main point. The government hung up a reward of a quarter of a million, and seems

to have been quite willing to pay it. The big fact, as I have already said, is that the cantonment was ready when the draft began to trickle in. The method by which the work was done may have been wasteful, but it was the only method by which it could possibly have been done in the breathlessly short time allowed.

And, oh, it was some job! Sixteen hundred buildings in themselves are a task calculated to stagger the common or garden variety of contractor. Just imagine a great horseshoe of buildings reaching two-thirds of the way around fifty-five hundred acres of land. The boundary of the camp tract is a rough circle, and the buildings lie in an irregular horseshoe around the edge of the tract. The barracks, each one fifty by one hundred and fifty feet, and two stories high, are four deep, with lavatories, storehouses, and officers' quarters between and on either side. A year would usually be allowed for such a contract, even on rush orders. Just to give an idea of the enormous size of the job, thirty-seven million feet of lumber were used, and twenty car-loads of nails.

Besides the buildings, however, there was a year's work in clearing and grading the tract, road-building, sewer-construction, and water-supply. On September 1 fourteen miles of roadway and ten miles of railroad trackage had been constructed, and the gangs were still at work. Great ditching-machines were gouging into the earth at the rate of—but what's the use of statistics? They really don't tell the tale.

In fact, there is so much to tell of that wonderful piece of construction that even those who have worked down there for months can scarcely realize how big it is.

### A STORY

WHEN the story ended badly,  
And you found me bathed in tears,  
You would seize the book and mock me  
With your teasing, boyish jeers.

Now no printed griefs can move me  
To the semblance of a sigh;  
You are at the front, and only  
Happy endings make me cry!

*Eunice Ward*

# The Parallel of Paraguay

HOW A SOUTH AMERICAN WAR-LORD RESOLVED UPON "WORLD-RULE OR RUIN,"  
AND THE FATE HE BROUGHT UPON HIS COUNTRY AND HIMSELF

By Victor Lauriston

"CONCEDING that Germany must eventually be beaten—that the odds against her are decisive—how long can she keep on fighting?" I asked.

My tanned adventurer-friend with the wax-tipped black mustache puffed a while at his cigarette.

"*Quien sabe?*" he answered—which is a habit he seems to have contracted in his twenty years and more of adventuring south of Panama. Not content with this question, he launched another.

"Is Germany sure to be beaten?" he counter-attacked.

"*Conceding*," I repeated with emphasis, "what, as a man who has seen war, is your expert opinion?"

"There are two answers to that. First, expert opinions nowadays are generally given by men who haven't seen war. Second, in the world's eyes, the stuff I have been through south of the equator isn't war; it's just opera bouffe. Are you answered now?"

I wasn't.

"South America's great, outstanding war," he added, "was before my time. If I had lived under the rule of Lopez II of Paraguay, I'd not be living now. I got my information, though, from probably the only European who did live through the Paraguayan war—Dr. Stewart, I mean. The last I heard he was still living at Asuncion, having returned there after winning his suit with Mme. Lynch."

Just about there the conversation got away from Germany and into the Paraguayan tragedy of fifty years ago. I had

heard only a little of it, and probably most Americans have heard still less. It's pretty well a forgotten episode, that grim five years' war that desolated the country about the Paraná and practically wiped out the Paraguayan people.

## A SOUTH AMERICAN NAPOLEON

"I dare say Mme. Lynch was the start of all the trouble," pursued the narrator. "Mostly, women are. I guess, too, the Napoleonic idea had a bit to do with it. The younger Lopez was fed on absolutism from the cradle, and when he visited Paris about 1853, Napoleon III—Napoleon the Little, as Victor Hugo called him—had just come to his own in a blaze of tinsel glory.

"Francisco Solano Lopez was then twenty-seven. His father, old Don Carlos Antonio Lopez, had been dictator of Paraguay for a dozen years, taking up the reins when the terrible old Francia dropped them in 1840. Young Lopez was named after the patron saint of the benighted country, but he lived to be its patron devil, if there is such a thing.

"You've never been there, I suppose. Few Americans, even the most traveled sort, have ever seen Asuncion. Asuncion is a queer, Spanish old town that would be lost in a suburb of Detroit. It's just south of the tropic of Capricorn, and has a hot climate that makes its people take life easy. Much of the soil of that region is red, a queer red that makes you think of blood—yes, of the blood of a million Paraguenos who died for nothing. It's rich soil, and with the subtropical climate