

## **Seneca Army Depot Story – Construction of 500 Igloos** **by Seneca County Historian Walter Gable**

The Seneca Ordnance Depot had been chosen on June 11, 1941 as the site for 500 igloos to be built to store munitions that, presumably, could be used on planes guarding the Atlantic coast from Maine to Washington, D.C. Construction work needed to go as fast as possible. The initial target date for completion of May 1, 1942, but was soon shortened to April 1. Between August 21 and November 13, 1941, nearly 500 igloos were completed.

These igloos were mostly concrete—saving as much steel as possible for other parts of the war effort—about ten feet high, eighty to one hundred feet in diameter, covered with earth and seeded to grass. Construction started with two work shifts and then about mid-August a third work shift was added. The heavy construction work—building the igloos as well as connecting rail lines and new roads and 20 miles of steel fence around the perimeter--was to be completed by December 1, but because of upcoming winter weather concerns the on-site command felt November 15 would need to be the target date.

By August 25 there were some 2954 workers. The general contractors tried to give preference to local unemployed as well as young men on vacation from school or college. By early September there were nearly 4000 workers employed at the Depot—3100 on the construction phase. About 50% of these came from Geneva, and about 80% from within a 50-mile radius. There were even some potential African American workers from as far away as Buffalo. By early November 1941, over 7000 were employed on the Depot project.

Providing housing for all these workers—and their families—was a major task. The military made appeals to area residents to rent bedrooms to the construction workers on the Depot project and the nearby Sampson Naval Station project that was being built also at this time. Some workers commuted as much as 100 miles roundtrip daily to their nightly sleeping place. Many workers and their families were living in tents and trailers nearby. There were serious concerns about the health of these people, especially because of the limited supplies of water and no sewer system. After October 2, 1941, a trailer camp for over 110 families was established at the Maple Grove Fairgrounds in Waterloo, with new water and electric service added.

By November 28, construction was 80% complete and 3600 men were still employed. Colonel Paul B. Parker, the construction quartermaster, claimed that two national and world records were set in the construction of this depot—the greatest number of igloos (78) poured in a single week (the week of October 22) and completion of 500 igloos in the shortest time (August 13 to November 13).