

Seneca Army Depot –Then and Now

All people are affected in some way by the nation's involvement in a war. Seneca County was affected by World War II, however, more than most sections of the country because the county was the site of two new military institutions in the early 1940's. One was the Sampson Naval Station. The other was the Seneca Ordnance Depot, the subject of this article.

Although the United States had tried to stay out of World War Two, by 1940 the United States government was taking actions to "be prepared" should this county enter the war. In spring 1940, Congress had passed a National Defense Tax Bill and a Selective Service and Training Act. On June 11, 1941, the War Department announced official approval of \$8 million to start a munitions project for five hundred igloos to store munitions that, presumably, could be used on planes guarding the Atlantic coast from Maine to Washington, D.C. The site selected in the townships of Varick and Romulus had some very favorable qualities. Like the 10 other selected sites, it was remote from major population centers. It was 8 miles long and 4 miles wide and lay between two sets of existing Lehigh Valley Railroad tracks. The shale layer only two to three feet below ground level would serve as a cushion to absorb the shock of any explosion. There is some speculation that it was "good politics" for a Democratic president to reward a key Congressional Republican—John Taber of Auburn--for his support of this nation's military build-up.

The chosen site of approximately 11,000 acres would disrupt quickly the lives of about 150 farm families. Options on the farm lands were signed between June 12 and July 26, with August 1 as a deadline for complete exodus.. The displaced families would have to move rather quickly. Farmers were able to harvest about 50% of their wheat crops, but some crops left standing in the fields were purchased by the government. Some buildings, including houses and barns, were moved off the Depot area to new locations. Some farmers only had three days' notice to vacate their property. The Baldrige farm of 600 acres got cut to 345 acres with the major problem that 235 of these acres were 12 to 15 miles from his home—he would have to go around the Depot (not through the Depot) to reach the eastern portions of his lands. The New York Defense Relocation Corporation, a subsidiary of the Farm Security Administration, had \$750,000 available to help relocate families displaced by this Depot and the new Pine Camp Military reservation (now Fort Drum) being built near Watertown. Nearly 80% of the families, however, relocated without assistance. By September 10, 1941, 100 displaced farm families had been relocated. Of these, 50 had purchased other farms, 38 rented farms, and 4 moved to properties they owned elsewhere. Two families had taken temporary location and 6 rented from the Relocation Corporation. Interestingly, there was difficulties in documenting "clear titles" to many of these properties. Fortunately, Charles Dunlap, the 84-year great grandson of Andrew Dunlap, one of the earliest settlers in the Town of Ovid, signed affidavits based on his clear memory, so that farmers could be paid for their land. The displaced farmers didn't start receiving their checks until November. Eventually 162 farmers would receive about \$700,000 for their property. Many felt the amount the government offered for their property couldn't begin to compensate them for their personal losses, such as having to leave behind the farm and house that had been in the family for several generations, but only a few sought a higher amount through legal means.

These farm families were hastily removed because construction work needed to go as fast as possible. The initial target date for completion of May 1, 1942 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, 1941 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).

The impact on the community by an influx of so many temporary workers was also very great. The proprietor of Kendaia's General Store reported his business increased 400%. In the nearby village of Romulus, there was an increase in sales of 150 to 200%. Five new businesses were opened, including a 24-hour restaurant. The Romulus Post Office's mail volume doubled, much of it due to workers sending money home by postal orders. Geneva's population doubled within a year. The children of the workers enrolled in area schools and often switched to another school as their dads found a new temporary residence.

The towns of Varick and Romulus suffered a loss in their taxable property base. The Depot took 4,128.9 acres in Varick, causing a \$2,414,600 loss in tax assessment. The 6,006.8 acres in Romulus caused a loss of \$1,802,580 in tax assessment. Even the Seneca County Board of Supervisors had to delay its budget preparations for 1942 because of the sudden loss in taxable property.

Completion of the Depot construction hardly came just in time. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, brought the United States actively into World War II. In July 1943 there were 2511 civilian employees at the Depot, coming from 60 nearby communities. There were more than 600 women Ordnance workers (called "wows") operating trucks and fork lifts, etc. Beginning in May 1944, over 260 Italian Prisoners of War were employed at the Depot, one of 184 such war-prisoner units at 60 stations in the U.S. These war prisoners were paid wages provided for all POWs, according to the Geneva Convention.

The end of World War II led to a sharp decrease in the civilian employment at the Depot. There were only 595 civilian workers in November 1946. The Depot was maintained as a permanent post for storage purpose. At the start of the Korean War in June 1950 there were 803 civilian employees. In July 1952, however, there were 1821 in the workforce. Two large General Services Administration warehouses were constructed in 1953 and 1954. In July 1956, came the North Depot Activity, apparently the site of nuclear weapons or their components. In 1959, 120 Capehart housing units were built along Route 96 as housing for military personnel and their families. In the mid-1970's there were about 300 to 400 military personnel and 600 to 800 civilian workers at the Depot. IN 1961, the North Depot Activity was consolidated with the Seneca Ordnance Depot. In August 1963 the facility was transferred from the Chief of Ordnance to the U.S. Army Supply and Maintenance Command, and the depot facility was renamed the Seneca Army Depot (SEAD). On July 1, 1966, the Seneca Army Depot was reassigned to the U.S. Army Materiel Command.

In the early 1980's it was publicly disclosed that the Depot was a major nuclear weapons storage site. The 1982 FOIL documents suggested that the Depot was probably the Army's large storage area for nuclear weapons and possible storage site for neutron bombs if they are produced. It was also learned that the uranium for the Manhattan Project (to develop an atomic bomb during WWII) had been stored at the Depot before shipment to Oak Ridge, TN. A February 8, 1982, *New York Times* article said the Depot employed 800 civilians, and that about 400 troops were stationed there, including 250 military police trained as anti-terrorists and reportedly authorized to kill any intruders approaching the bomb bunkers. These revelations led to anti-nuclear groups picketing the Depot. A Women's Peace Encampment set up its residence on a farm just north of the village of Romulus in late July 1983. That summer nearly 12000 women visited the Encampment and demonstrated against the deployment of the Pershing II and Cruise missiles.

The steel fence about six feet high around the Depot led to a major growth in the deer population on the property. It was estimated that there were 1000 deer in 1953. Some of these had undoubtedly been "fenced in" when the steel fence was first constructed in summer 1941. Other deer had probably jumped the fence to live in a safer environment within the enclosed fence. There were concerns that the deer population was becoming greater than the figure of 300 that considered the healthy target number of deer for this amount of area. The State Conservation Department undertook a program of trapping deer and removing them. In two years, 318 deer were removed. But the safe confines of the Depot was leading to more deer breeding. In 1957 it was estimated there were about 2000 deer. That year hunting permits were issued and 881 deer were shot. None of these could be the growing strain of white deer within the Depot. The first

white fawn was noticed in 1956. By 1969 there were 220 white deer leading to a limited number of permits to hunt white deer.

Construction of a LORAN-C Transmitting Station was started in 1977 and dedicated on August 2, 1978. This U.S. Coast Guard facility would be used by ships and aircraft as far away as 1000 miles to guide them in their flight and navigation. It was the first LORAN-C station to use solid state components rather than vacuum tubes. In 2003 it continues to provide important navigation assistance.

The end of the Cold War about 1990 led to the closure of the Seneca Army Depot. In October 1995 the Seneca Army Depot was approved for the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) list. Final base closure can in 2000. The base closure meant the loss of many civilian jobs and concerns about the economic vitality of the mid-Seneca County area.

Prior to the actual closure, plans were underway to find alternative uses for the Depot area. One such alternative can be found today in a northern portion of the property--the KidsPeace Seneca Woods Campus. Seneca Woods Campus was opened in 2000 to treat as many as 1200 New York children who are sent out-of-state for specialized treatment. At the Campus there is a residential program for children with clinical emotional problems and history of delinquency, educational/vocational training and a comprehensive after-care program consisting of supervision and support networks. In December 2004, the Seneca Woods Campus of KidsPeace was taken over by Hillside Children's Center.

Another alternative use is the Five Points Correctional Facility located at the extreme south east end of the former Depot property. This 750-cell facility opened in summer 2000 and has created over 600 new permanent jobs and about 200 spin-off jobs. Other projects on former Depot property that are already underway are a NY State Police training center for state police and local police agencies, and a new fire training tower for local volunteer firefighters. There are plans to transfer by December 31, 2003 the 26 acres near the former main gate entrance to the Depot for a new county jail site.

As recently as September 30, 2003, about 7000 acres of the former Seneca Army Depot was transferred to Seneca County, in addition to the more than 1100 acres that had already been transferred to the county. The county's Industrial Development Agency continues to seek out uses of this property for the economic viability of the county. The delay in transfer of these acres and other acres has been due to the necessary clean up of contaminated portions of the Depot. Since 1978 the Seneca Army Depot has been participating in the Installation Restoration Program (IRP). Under this program, the Defense Department seeks to identify, investigate, and clean up contamination from hazardous materials. The Depot's demolition of munitions for forty years had consisted of open burning of fuses, projectiles, explosives and propellants directly upon the ground surface. These activities adversely impacted the soil at the OB Grounds and sediments in Reeder Creek. Some of the remedy includes excavation of soils with high lead concentrations. There continues to be some concern about radioactive waste that was back filled and buried, perhaps adversely impacting the soil and groundwater. It is anticipated that the 4-acre airfield parcel will be transferred to the county early in 2004. Five other parcels are scheduled for transfer in 2005, 2006, 2007, 2010, and 2012.

Interestingly, none of the uses for the former Depot property includes returning it to what it was before the Depot—farmland. All of this underscores that what is the most important use for a particular area is relative to the needs of the time. In mid-Seneca County in 1941, farmland was deemed more important to be used as a munitions facility for American involvement in World War II. Then came a similar need with the Korean War. Then came a needed storage site for nuclear weapons materials during the Cold War. We are still experiencing the post-Cold War Era reality that this Depot is no longer needed and suitable alternative economic uses need to be found.