

Camp Devens in the Great War



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By Keith Ruenheck

GHS

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Harvard – The many faces of Devens

Ten years ago, the largest military base in New England closed its gates forever. Today, the former Fort Devens represents something different to each of us. Some see a recreation area, others a business opportunity, and others a new train station. For voters it's a cash cow, or a can of worms, with scenarios like 1A, 2B, or not 2B...

This is the first of four articles looking back at the many faces of Devens - faces like those belonging to more than a million soldiers passing through its gates, and those of the base itself, as its role in defending our country changed through the years.

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The Camp through World War I

Camp Devens, carved from land in Ayer, Harvard, Lancaster and Shirley, trained and processed over 250,000 troops. It also suffered the nation's first Spanish flu epidemic, and prepared men for the Boston Marathon. Built on 9,000 leased acres, the camp was named after Gen. Charles Devens. A distinguished son of Massachusetts, Gen. Devens served in the Civil War and was attorney general under President Rutherford B. Hayes.

The camp was constructed by the largest labor force ever assembled in the United States, which completed more than 10 new buildings every day. At its peak, Camp Devens had almost 1,500 buildings. Two complete divisions were trained there, the 76th (Onaway) and the 12th (Plymouth), totaling more than 100,000 men.

The first draftees started arriving from all over New England on Sept. 5, 1917, to form the 76th Division. After intensive exercises through the winter, the soldiers were given an opportunity to demonstrate the strength of their training. In April 1918, the annual Patriots Day Marathon was canceled, and a relay race for military personnel was held instead.

Four teams from Camp Devens competed, wearing their khaki suits, leggings, and standard GI shoes. Each team consisted of 10 men, with every man running 2.5 miles. Two of the Devens teams placed first and second while Boston Navy Yard, the original favorite, came in third. A Boston Globe article at the time said training on the hills at Camp Devens helped the Army teams, "while the sailors found hill-climbing difficult."

Having finished their training, the 76th Division was sent to France in July 1918. At that time, soldiers were also completing their tour of duty, and Camp Devens was used as a demobilization center. Troopships arrived at Commonwealth Pier, in Boston, and the men traveled 95 miles inland to Devens before going home.

As the war continued another draft was instituted, and the 12th division started forming at Camp Devens in August 1918. While these men were arriving at Devens, the Spanish flu arrived at Commonwealth Pier. Carried by soldiers returning from war, it quickly spread to Camp Devens, where the first case was reported on Sept. 8. Built for 35,000 men, the camp held 45,000 at the time, and this overcrowding proved the perfect environment for spreading disease.

In late September, the U.S. attorney general sent four distinguished doctors to investigate the influenza outbreak at Devens. They found the camp hospital, which was built for 2,000 men, was overflowing with 8,000, and many more were shivering outside in the rain, clutching blankets. One of the doctors, Col. Victor Vaughan, said he saw "... hundreds of stalwart young men in the uniform of their country coming into the wards of the hospital in groups of 10 or more. They are placed on the cots until every bed is full yet others crowd in."

No one had witnessed flu so bad, and many cases were diagnosed as pneumonia. Besides having fever and aches, a victim's lungs filled with fluid, and their fingertips turned blue from lack of oxygen. Another doctor at the camp wrote, "... it is simply a struggle for air until they suffocate. It is horrible. We have been averaging about 100 deaths per day, and still keeping it up."

Even though soldiers were desperately needed in Europe, an October draft of 145,000 men was canceled. The disease also spread to civilians. Major cities like Boston and Philadelphia ordered all churches, theaters, and dance halls closed, and sporting events were banned. In Chicago and New York City, people caught coughing or sneezing in public faced fines up to \$500 and imprisonment.

Despite these efforts, 28 percent of Americans caught the flu, and 600,000 died, causing the 1918 U.S. life expectancy to drop by 10 years. It also killed between 50 and 100 million people worldwide. More American troops died from Spanish flu than in combat during World War I, and nearly 800 died at Devens. The flu oddly went away when the war ended.

Next week: Camp Devens after the War

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