

Swallowing the Yellow Dog

Fort Delaware State Park

Dale Jones

August 10, 2010

NOTE: THIS INTRODUCTION DOES NOT NEED TO BE PRESENTED VERBATIM, BUT IS MEANT AS AN OUTLINE. HOWEVER IT SHOULD BE WELCOMING, BRIEF, ENGAGING AND COVER THE NECESSARY BACKGROUND FOR VISITORS TO UNDERSTAND THE SCENE.

Audience Introduction

Welcome to the Barracks at Fort Delaware! My name is _____, and along with my partner _____, we are going to give you a different look at the life of the Confederate prisoners here. We will present a short scene of about 10 minutes called “Swallowing the Yellow Dog.”

Have any of you been here before? GET ANSWER Good. Does “Swallowing the Yellow Dog” sound familiar to anyone? What do you know about it? GET ANSWER

This barracks you are now in has been reproduced to look like one in the 1860s – one of over (how many?) barracks that housed Confederate prisoners from Vicksburg, Gettysburg, Malvern Hill and other battles – over 12,000 at its peak.

As you might imagine this place was crowded. And it smelled. The toilet facilities, or privy, or retreat, or sinks, as it was called, hung over the canal with an open hole. Guards with guns patrolled and could look down on prisoners. Sometimes there would be lines of several hundred waiting to use them. And that canal water sludge mixed with the drinking and bathing water, resulting in disease and a rich, putrid smell.

Food was scarce, two small meals a day. But some prisoners could send letters out and receive food, money and supplies from the outside. With money they could buy goods from the sutler, or storekeeper, for greatly inflated prices.

Diseases were a problem – this was before knowledge of germs was common – and of the 33,000 total prisoners, about 2400 never made it out alive.

It was grim, and horrible. But even within that environment, some prisoners made life better by being barbers, shoemakers, sellers of food, makers of jewelry. There were occasional plays, debates, reading, and always gambling.

But some prisoners didn’t want to wait until they were exchanged for Union prisoners, which could take months or years. They wanted more food and they wanted out. They took the Oath of Allegiance to the Union and were no longer Confederate prisoners. They were called galvanized Yankees. Many of these prisoners were foreign born or Northerners who had lived in

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the South for a short time. But they ended up in a no-man's land, reviled by the South and not trusted by the North. That is, until the end of the War, when all prisoners had to sign the Oath to go home.

I am going to play John, a Northerner, and _____ will play Ryan, a Southerner. Both are prisoners here. This scene is about a prisoner thinking about taking the Oath before the War had ended. (Add: **The barracks are about to be whitewashed, a regular occurrence to control lice. All prisoner would have to vacate with their possessions and walk around the island.**)

The scenes and characters you'll see are based on the people and events of Fort Delaware and the Civil War. Much of the language, all of the incidents mentioned, and the overall topics come from a variety of sources, but all have to match the test of "historical plausibility," which means, "Could this plausibly have happened?")

We'll take our places and begin in a moment -- I would like you to try to immerse yourself in the lives of these characters and think about this: what decision should John make?

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CHARACTERS:

RYAN –BORN AND RAISED IN SOUTH. ENLISTED ENTHUSIASTICALLY. CAPTURED AT GETTYSBURG

JOHN – BORN IN NORTH. LIVED IN SOUTH FOR A FEW YEARS. DID NOT ENLIST. WAS CONSCRIPTED. CAPTURED AT GETTYSBURG

SCENE:

IN BARRACKS, ONE OF MANY ON THE ISLAND. THE BARRACKS IS ABOUT TO BE WHITEWASHED. AUDIENCE SEES ONLY ONE PRISONER HERE, SITTING ON A BUNK, CLEARLY THINKING ABOUT SOMETHING. PERHAPS HE WHITTLES OR DOES SOMETHING ELSE AS HE THINKS.

Ryan

COMES IN FROM END, CARRYING FOLDED BLANKET AND PERHAPS HIS OTHER BELONGINGS.¹ HE'S FRIENDLY There you are Reb. What are you still doing sitting there? You better get moving and get out. Everyone else is walking around the prison while they whitewash. Come on. You gotta get going. They'll be here to whitewash soon.

John

SITTING ON BUNK, WITH FOLDED BLANKET AND PERHAPS HIS OTHER BELONGINGS
What are you doing here, then?

Ryan

I came back to get you. What are you sitting around for?

John

I just wanted to be alone for a few minutes. (HE'S THE CONTEMPLATIVE ONE)

Ryan

What in the devil for?

John

To think.

¹ Would they have had to carry all belongings when room is whitewashed, or would they put them somewhere.

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Ryan

Are you crazy? You know who's on duty now? Private Douglas! He'd as soon shoot you as look at you.

John

Douglas – he's the one that kilt Jones last week, isn't he?

Ryan

The very same. Colonel Edward Jones of Virginia. He was returning from the sinks and was slow in obeying an order, because he was lame from a war wound, and Douglas shot him for not moving promptly when ordered. He died a few days later.² And you know what happened to the sentry?

John

What?

Ryan

He was promoted! That's how much those sorry Yankees think of us.

John

It's not the only time they kilt someone. I heard about lots of time. Once a prisoner threw a cup of filth from a window. The guard shot at him, missed, and hit a poor fellow sleeping in his bed. It worries me. Seems like death is all around us. If the sentries don't kill you, the hospital will.

Ryan

You know what they say out in the Pen, "Those who go to the hospital seldom return."³

John

The grapevine is right about that. I see them carry 2-4 dead by here every day.⁴

² Excerpts From Swann's "Prison Life At Fort Delaware" (West Virginia Archives and History) Edited by Elizabeth Cometti. Volume 2, Number 2 (January 1941), pp. 120-141 and Number 3 (April 1941), pp. 217-230. He died on July 9, 1864

³ John Swann Prison Life at Fort Delaware. Transcribed by Neil Allen Bristow. The Library of Congress, Manuscript Division <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~greenwolf/coombs/swann-js.htm>

⁴ Hamilton Journal 1864 June 10

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Ryan

Come on. Let's go. HE HEADS TOWARD DOOR

John

Hold on. Come here. I need to talk to you. Hurry!

Ryan

HE COMES BACK. I'm here. Now tell me what it is. SITS DOWN.

John

How long we been here?

Ryan

HE SHRUGS -- NO ANSWER

John

LOUDER How long?

Ryan

Not so loud.

John

It's been since Gettysburg – over a year now. And I don't believe I'm ever getting out of here alive.

Ryan

Of course you will. Just about everybody gets out when they're exchanged.

John

Hmphh. Not much chance of that. Cartel is dead. Or soon to be if it isn't. And even if I do get released, I don't want to go back to fighting.

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John

NEITHER SAYS ANYTHING. It wasn't like I thought it would be. (WHITTLES AGAIN)

Ryan

What are you talking about?

John

The fightin'.

Ryan

We did all think it would be glorious – we'd all be big heroes. War wasn't too glorious while it was going on.

John

I remember at Gettysburg. The Feds were lying down in the wheat. They rose up and resting on one knee fired the first volley. But they shot too high, and few of our men were hurt. We received orders to fire and charge. It broke their line and they retreated down the railroad cut... We poured volley after volley into them as they ran down the railroad cut. I think there never was such slaughter as we made.⁵ PAUSE It was not war, it was murder.⁶

Ryan

I remember. I could have walked a half or three quarters of a mile on the dead soldiers and not have put my feet on the ground.⁷

John

I can't do it again. LOOKS ALL AROUND I'm thinking of getting out.

⁵ Private Andrew Park 42nd Miss infantry, Davis's Brigade near Seminary Ridge, Gettysburg. P 234 Eyewitness to the Civil War Kagan, Hyslop

⁶ Confederate Gen DH Hill at Malvern hill, P 145 Eyewitness to the Civil War Kagan, Hyslop

⁷ Private Andrew Park 42nd Miss infantry, Davis's Brigade near Seminary Ridge, Gettysburg. P 234 Eyewitness to the Civil War Kagan, Hyslop P 234 Eyewitness to the Civil War Kagan, Hyslop