

World War II had ended. The American troops had locked the gates of Springtown Camp for the last time. It had been home to countless combatants during that global conflict. In a final ceremonial gesture they joyfully marched off towards Strand Road and the river, bands playing and flags flying. They were finally being released from grave inner fears and heavy burdens on their families and wider communities. At long last they would be homeward bound now that victory over Fascism had been won at a very high cost in human lives, both military and civilian. Several local women, hoping for a brighter future, would soon follow them to become their wives and raise their offspring in what was claimed to be "The land of the free and the home of the brave".

After the Camp was vacated all was far from quiet on the homeless front in this Maiden City on the Foyle. Almost immediately a few brave free-thinkers with the best of intentions put their plan into action. The wire fences surrounding the former military base were cut in what became a successful bid to secure desperately-needed accommodation. The base appeared to many less fortunate folk as a highly-desirable location. Families began to select "their" huts. These were initially intended only as temporary dwellings, during wartime. Tirelessly, for two decades these civilian residents engaged in what at times must have seemed an unrewarding struggle against the power-brokers, in the Guildhall and Stormont. Their collective demands were totally justified and truly modest- proper brick-built and insulated homes.

Quite early on the Unionist-dominated Corporation, with little alternative other than carry out mass evictions, softened their hostility somewhat. Evictions on such a scale would undoubtedly have resulted in major social unrest, so for the Corporation there was little room for manoeuvre. Previously the 'powers-that-be' referred to the new inhabitants as "squatters". The change in attitude and practice meant that the residents could no longer be ignored or openly treated with contempt. A new status was conferred whereby all became legal tenants. The physical manifestation of such took the form of issuing rent books, thereafter, to bear the official recording of five shillings a week, per hut.

The families' tenancy agreement stated that it was for temporary occupancy for around six months or so. That was more than a hint that evictions had not been totally ruled out, and suggested a blunt, if not menacing message, "We your masters are still in control". The word "temporary" used by local officialdom certainly did not conform to the meaning described in any English language dictionary. But then other very precisely explained words that supposedly created social, economic and political duties and obligations on us all, had long ago lost any real value or meaning in this deliberately ignored corner of the Empire [Long-standing 'Convention' -N. Ireland affairs must not to be discussed at Westminster].

The Struggle

By walking or driving past the Camp one might have assumed that there were a mere score or

so huts. In fact, at its peak there were 304 huts - about 90% corrugated tin and 10% wooden. At first each hut could best be described as a large empty space with neither toilet nor heating facilities. After much pressure the Corporation carried out a renovation scheme turning most into 3-bedrooms, a small living room which had a range, a minute scullery with a "jaw box" (sink) and a tiny toilet. As there were no back doors in any of the huts, such created very obvious dangers if fire was to catch hold at any time. Such did in fact occur in several huts, with the wooden structures burning like a bale of hay in a matter of mere minutes.

These dangers increased because conditions were so severe in the winter some families were forced to install coke-burning stoves in the largest bedroom. These required frequent trips to the Gas Yard on Lecky Road, a considerable distance away. The stoves were often referred to as 'life-savers' which was no exaggeration in such harsh conditions.

The 304 huts were occupied by close to 400 families. The reason for such overcrowding was due to the fact that young couples, after being married had nowhere else to go. It was considered "normal" practice for their parents to give them a room, if such a "luxury" could be offered. The sons or daughters were now registered as "sub-tenants" and so it was not uncommon to find as many as 16 persons per hut. Such created problems when it came to maintaining personal hygiene and washing garments, not to mention answering the call of nature.

As for Corporation employees there were three, one "rent-man" and two caretakers. Their office has been described as a "half-hut" located at the gate at the top of the Camp.

An early mini-campaign secured a bus link provided by the Ulster Transport Authority into the city-centre. This was of great importance especially for children attending local schools. While at home they could at least enjoy the scenery and ample space surrounding the Camp, which alas is often denied children of to-day, who live in high-rise flats in many towns and cities. In addition, when the fields were wet and soggy, which in our climate was frequent, there was always the hard surface that made up "the Square" where football, hopscotch or other games could be played. It was also the assembly point when the occasional protest meeting was deemed necessary. Audible was the sound of the "Buncrana Train" as it rattled along the rails. Such was a daily reminder that not too far away was what passed for our local Riviera with its beaches, amusements and other attractions across the Border, for those lucky enough to afford such excursions.

In time a large concrete bridge was built over the railway lines linking the Camp to Buncrana Road. Almost every development, small or large associated with the name Springtown Camp; kept it constantly in the news over the years since the ending of WW II. Official neglect was a scandal that was not ignored by some local journalists. They reported the fact that little or no repairs were carried out and so these totally inadequate dwellings fell into a state of disrepair. It was noted that rain penetrated as the tin rusted and holes began to appear near ground level. This combination made for intense cold and damp to a life-threatening degree. Certainly poor health could almost be guaranteed for all occupants, especially the elderly, newly borns and young children.

Early Agitation

As the 1950s drew to a close there were still around 200 families living in 161 huts. As usual the Corporation was building very few houses so this fact was also of concern to many other homeless couples and families right across the city. Ironically, the Corporation continued to call 'housing meetings', undoubtedly a sham and a ploy to give the false impression that providing homes was indeed one of its social priorities.

A detailed study of this era reveals that while non-Unionist councillors spoke out when an opportunity arose, they always came up against a brick wall. The 'old guard' was not for turning even when in November 1959 Councillor Seamus Deeney, addressing his remarks to Alderman Glover, asked the question, "How in God's name could a young married couple with one child be given a higher degree of priority than a family of 8 living in Springtown Camp for the past 12 years?" The question was met by silence. The Alderman again offered no response when Deeney declared, "These people have a damned good case for the Human Rights Committee in Strasbourg".

On that occasion women were present in the Council Chamber of the Guildhall. Their leader politely requested permission to speak. The immediate response of the chairman was to declare the meeting abandoned after ensuring that the R.U.C had arrived and were on hand to remove these mothers from the public gallery.

That 20-strong protest was led by Mrs. Sadie Campbell, Mrs. Kathleen Porter and Mrs. J. Mc Brearty. Later the "Journal" reported "Round one for the women of Springtown Camp". They were back again to a reconvened meeting, undeterred by the probable return of the police. This time they more militantly demanded their rights of assembly and to freedom of speech, in a supposedly democratic forum.

Civil Rights' women

On Saturday May 31st 2008, Sadie Campbell, believed to be the last surviving leader of those earlier protests was conferred with a special presentation. She was introduced to an audience at the East Tyrone College in Dungannon by a younger former resident, Willie Deery. Willie is undoubtedly an authority on the Camp's history. He has contributed greatly to the residents' website, www.springtowncamp.com The site is a major reference point for this article.

He recalled the events of 1959 and how the determined, undeterred mothers were not going to be fobbed off by anyone until they had their say. The powers—that-be relented and so the women of the Camp actually became the first women in over 20 years to speak at a Derry Corporation meeting. Their spokesperson said, "We have lost some of our children due to the terrible conditions we have to live in. We appeal to the mothers of Derry to support us in our fight, and we ask this Corporation to remove this disgrace from our city."

As a direct result of the mounting protests more families were re-housed out of the Camp, but even more emigrated. However, as late as 1964 there were still over 150 families living there in conditions that were much worse than previously. Promises were made and broken on all too

many an occasion. Amid mounting despair the huts were literally crumbling around them.

Their situation could not be divorced from the political realities of those times when gerrymandering in Derry was rife and at its worst. In the Camp there were approximately 700 nationalist voters. The problem for key Unionists centred on where to house them without jeopardising their electoral superiority. They even attempted to wash their hands of housing any of these families by stating that they were just outside the city boundary, [which they repeatedly refused to extend], thus passing the buck to the Rural Council.

Last front door closed

Eventually, in October 1967, one year before Derry's first official civil rights march, the last residents, Charlie and Sarah Lynch closed the front door of their hut. Thus ended the tragic and appalling saga of Springtown Camp.

In Dungannon memories flooded back for Sadie Campbell and other residents as she was presented with a glass vase and flowers. On the vase was the 'Oak leaf' civil rights badge. It was designed in 1968 by a former art teacher, Sheila McClean. Also engraved under that circular logo was "Sadie Campbell - Springtown Camp, 1946-1967". It was specially commissioned from Derry Crystal by former civil rights leaders.

Those surrounding Mrs. Campbell during the memorable and moving presentation ceremony included several female champions of civil rights; the renowned journalist and author Susan McKay, trade union leader Inez McCormack, well-known playwright Anne Devlin [daughter of the late Paddy Devlin MP], and the human rights lawyer Pdraigin Drinan.

Sadie's short acceptance speech was recorded by two cameras, both appropriately operated by experienced female film-makers. This commemorative event in Dungannon focused on the heroic role played by women in the civil rights struggle in the 1960s and beyond. Billed as an 'inclusive discussion', men were not excluded.

By Fionnbarra O'Dochartaigh