

The Sandy Hollow Line

Episode 3.

There were about 30 children, of all ages, in the Camp and as there was no school nearby, they just ran wild around the Camp. Most of them had sores on their arms and legs and all were suffering from *Sandy Blight*. This was a very painful eye infection caused by the many flies.

The children's eyes were very swollen and their eyelids were stuck together, causing temporary blindness.

The children were also very dirty as the only place to wash was in the river and it was very cold in winter.

The women all sat around on boxes all day and seemed to have lost all interest in life. Their faces were bitter and they were old before their time.

On that first day I made a vow that I would never give in. I was on my own now for the first time in my life, with no Mum to help me but I knew that my Mum would have made the best of it.

My man had a job, a full time job, and we were still young and we were healthy. We were much better off than a lot of other people.

I searched around the camp and found a couple of old corn bags which I cut open and lay them between our two blankets for extra warmth.

I found a clump of brush and I picked enough to make a broom with a stick and some twine that had been used to wrap our goods. I set to work sweeping out our tent and then I did the area around the tent. I picked up the rubbish with a flat piece of tin and threw it into a gully away from the camp.

The next day there were several other women doing the same and within a week most of the area was clean.

I became friends with two women, Gwen and Mary who were sisters who had married brothers and one had ten children and the other had eight children. They were unable to manage and the children were filthy.

My Mum had given us a large cardboard box filled with things that she said we may need. There was a box of *boracic acid*, a couple of bars of *Sunlight Soap* and a supply of *home-made* ointments and medicines, for every ailment.

Two little girls were sitting outside their tent and both were suffering from *Sandy Blight* and could hardly see so I dissolved some boracic acid in warm water and gently bathed their eyes and soon they both could see. Their mother said that she had been told that there was no cure and to wash the eyes in cold water from the river.

The word soon got around and that afternoon I had treated twenty other children. After three days all the children had fully recovered.

I also treated their sores with Mum's ointment and it worked wonders. Took over a week but fixed most of the sores.

I also discovered that all the children had *nits*.

The best way to treat this was a bath day down at the river. We took kids, towels, *Sunlight Soap*, a couple of kerosene tins and a few blankets down to the river and lit a fire to boil the water. We hung up the blankets between two trees for a bit of privacy. The kids had a great time, what with being bathed for the first time in weeks and having their hair scrubbed until it was bright and curly.

We then dabbed their heads with kerosene and used all the combs that we could find to get rid of the *nits*.

These bath days became a social event as the weather became warmer and were enjoyed by mothers and children alike.

While I was getting on well with the other women Frank and Dad were making friends with the men. This was very important as it enabled them to share each other's tools. Items such as hammers, nails, axes and saws were scarce and not all the men were handy with tools.

It was important that beds, cupboards and seats were built out of any available wood for the families to have a few comforts in their tents.

Many of the men had never done any hard work in their lives and they had to keep going because if they were unable to report each day for work then they were sacked.

It was pitiful to see some of them limping back to their tents at night with every bone in their bodies aching. Some of the stronger men would cut firewood for them and help to care for their families.

My Dad was the *Powder Monkey* and he was the one to set the charges for blasting through the rock. He was paid £3-19 shillings a week and the *labourers* were paid £3-3 shillings a week.

A warning siren was set off when there was going to be a blast and we all had to run down to the river out of the range of falling rocks. Large rocks would often fall around the tents. Three men died in the blasting in the tunnels and many others were injured. The men were not paid any *Danger Money*.

After a blast, the rocks were loaded onto a skip which was pulled by a horse to be dumped away from the site. These horses were given rest periods on the very hot days but not so the men who had to work from 7am to 5pm with half an hour for lunch.

.....More next week I hope. (John Imrie 5/4/2020)