

Springtown Camp from the Inside

Written by Hugo - Last Updated Saturday, 14 May 2011 16:30

The American Navy locked the gates of their base at Springtown Camp Derry for the last time. The war was over. They had won. Now they were on their way home. As they marched up the Strand road to their departure point, behind their regiment band little did they know the future that was in store for their former camp. It started when one night Philip Killen and Johnny Doherty approached a friend of theirs, John Mc Loone, and asked him for the loan of some tools. 82 years old John takes up the story. I asked them what did they wanted the tools for. Philip Killen replied, "We are going to squat in the huts at Springtown Camp." So off the three of them went. John Mc Loone brought his tools with him. They proceeded to cut the wire of the fence and entered the camp. John himself didn't take one of the huts as his wife wasn't keen on the idea. But both Phillip Killen and Johnny Doherty selected their huts and moved their families in the next day. The story of Springtown Camp had begun. Both of these families were soon joined by scores of other families that week. The flood gates had now opened. The word spread around Derry. Now families who were living in one room with their parents in wee houses moved in to Springtown Camp in their droves. It was common to see horse driven carts loaded with beds and what little furniture the families had, heading out the Northland Road to a new beginning in the camp. Soon the Derry Corporation made the "squatters" legal tenants and gave them a "rent book". They charged 5 shillings a week rent. Soon they started to house other families in the camp. Their tenancy agreement stated that it was for temporary occupancy and told the people it was for around 6 months or so. The Derry Corporation's term of "temporary" took on a new meaning as in some cases, it turned out to be nearly 20 years!

At its peak the camp had 304 huts, comprising of about 90% corrugated tin huts and 10% wooden huts. The huts at first were just one massive space inside with no toilet or heating facilities. The Derry Corporation then renovated them and made them in to mostly 3 bedrooms, a small living room which had a range, a small scullery with a jawbox (sink) and a tiny toilet. There was no back door in any of the huts making them extremely dangerous if a fire broke out. This happened in several huts.. The wooden huts burned like a bale of straw in minutes. In the biggest bedroom some families put in a stove which burned coke got from the gas yard, as they were very cold. Although there were 304 huts at its peak, there was close to 400 families living in the camp. The reason being, that when sons and daughters got married, and with not a hope in hell of securing a place to live in Derry, it became "normal" practice for their parents to give them a room. The sons and daughters then became known as sub-tenants. So you can imagine with as many as 16 people in one hut, the hardships that entailed, with one jawbox not only to wash yourself in, but to also wash your clothes in. At the start of the camp's existence things were ok. The corporation employed a "rent man" by the name of Bob Hutchman, a nice man really. Mr Hutchman, had two caretakers, Paddy "sauce" Moore and Mick Powers, both became very popular and well liked by the camp residents. They had their office in a wee half- hut, at the gate at the top of the camp. The residents paid the rent to him there. Soon the residents requested the UTA (Ulster Transport Authority) to put on buses too the camp. This they did and a direct route to the City was established. The scenery and space surrounding the camp was a joy for the young children growing up in. If the fields around it

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were wet and soggy with the rain, then you still had a spacious hard stand in the camp square, to play football, hopscotch or whatever you felt like playing..Plus the added attraction of the Bunrana train which passed the bottom of the camp on its way to and from Derry.



Mick Powers and Paddy "sauce" Moore ?caretakers of Springtown Camp.

A large concrete bridge was built over the railway at the bottom entrance of the camp which took you on to the Bunrana Road. Over the years many a word has been spoken and written about Springtown Camp. Some true, some untrue. Without doubt, it was the most talked about place in Derry during the late 1940's, 50s and 60s. Seldom out of the news .? As the years rolled by the huts with little or no repairs done to them fell in to disrepair and the huts with the rain penetrating through the tin parts became rusted and holes began to appear at the base of the corrugated tin, making the huts very cold , and damp, thus becoming a very serious health risk to the residents, many of whom had new born babies and small children. ?When some of the families were lucky enough to get a house or they emigrated, the Derry corporation auctioned off their hut to local farmers. The bids were in the region of £15 to £25 per hut. The farmer's workmen then proceeded to dismantle the hut and load it on to a trailer. They bought the huts to house their cattle or pigs. So you had the situation where a hut that was home to a large family on a Monday, was a cattle barn or a pigsty on Tuesday. ?With the 1950s drawing to a close, close on 200 families were still living in 161 huts and the huts were now in a deplorable state. That year the Derry Corporation built few houses, with none going to anyone from Springtown Camp. At the corporation housing meeting in the Guildhall in November 1959 Councillor Deeney stated that he had been a member of this corporation for 20 months now , and in all that time not ONE single house had been tendered for. He went on , "I would like to

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ask Alderman Glover this one 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 with silence. Alderman Glover offered no answer. Councillor Deeney went on to say , "These people have a damned good case for the human rights committee in Strasbourg.



Typical Hut in Springtown Camp

The Nationalist politicians try as much as they did and to be fair they did try hard came up against a brick wall in a Unionist controlled corporation. The women of the camp protested in the chambers of the Guildhall during a housing meeting in November 1959 . They were refused permission to speak. The meeting was abandoned after the R.U.C were called in to remove them. ?The Derry Journal headlines read that Friday.?"Round one to the women of Springtown Camp. Mrs Sadie Campbell, Mrs Kathleen Porter and Mrs J. Mc Brearty led a 20 strong group of mothers from Springtown Camp back again to the reconvened meeting the following week. Undeterred, they demanded to speak. They 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 . In their speech they 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." To their credit they succeeded in highlighting the situation that prevailed in Springtown Camp and indeed further residents were housed because of their protest and even more emigrated. But by 1964 they were still over 150 families living in what was now unbearable conditions. Promises were made and broken on numerous occasions. ?The huts were now crumbling before their very eyes. It became abundantly clear to the residents that their position was dire in the extreme. To make their position even more dire, at that time gerrymandering in Derry was rife and at its worst. With the prospects of approx 700 nationalist voters in Springtown Camp where to house them without jeopardising the Unionist balance of power, was an added headache for the Derry Corporation. This made them adopt their old attitude of denying responsibility for housing the people of Springtown Camp, stating the camp was outside the boundary, and thus making it the Rural Council's responsibility to house the residents.

The women of Springtown Camp taking over the Guildhall ?in protest of their living conditions in the camp.

Against this background and with the onset of another winter, some residents just couldn't take

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any more. They felt trapped, abandoned, displaced in this the city of their birth. There was only one way out of this terrible situation they found themselves in, and that was to uproot their young families and "take the boat" to England or Scotland. With the emigration rate from the camp now reaching alarming proportions, and in seeing young families torn away from their friends and relations and forced to flee their own city, in search of a proper home in another country, the residents knew they had to do something. The time was here when they had to take the initiative themselves, because no-one else was going to do it for them. So they organised themselves, elected a committee and took on the Unionist controlled Corporation, who were responsible for housing in Derry head on. Willie Campbell and Willie Edgar were elected joint chairmen. Jimmy Deery was secretary, John Mc Brearty was Treasurer, Rory Quigley, George 'Buzzard' Mc Laughlin, Willie Moran, Johnny Doherty, Hughie Harkin, and John Mc Laughlin made up the committee. Their first meeting was held in Rory Quigley's hut. Their mood was of anger and determination. Over the years they have watched this close knit community walked on and treated with complete and utter contempt by Derry Corporation. They knew everyone in Springtown Camp carried an undeserved social stigma because of the conditions they were forced to live in. No point in denying that employers shied away from employing their sons and daughters when they gave their address. No point in denying they were treated as third class citizens.



William Campbell hands out leaflets to women residents of the camp for distribution in the city

No more cap in hand to this bunch of men who ruled the corporation. They decided they would take their fight for proper houses on to the streets of Derry and in to the corridors of power at Stormont. This they had to do for their children. The newly elected committee demanded that it

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was now, not merely a Derry Corporation matter but that it was now indeed, a government matter and a matter of great urgency. A march was organised. The march in itself was quite unique. In so far as it was a silent protest march, no talking on route, just a dignified protest against the appalling conditions in which they were forced to live and bring up their children. The day before the march was to take place the R.U.C paid a visit to Springtown Camp and warned the residents, that if there was so much as a hint of trouble they would stop the march. Now how the old Derry Corporation would have loved that to happen. The Springtown Camp committee held an emergency meeting that night. Their then joint chairmen Willie Campbell and Willie Edgar, fearing that the R.U.C and the Derry Corporation would stop the march at the slightest excuse, came up with the idea of a silent march. This would give the authorities no excuse whatsoever to stop their march. This caught the R.U.C, and the Derry Corporation by complete surprise and with the television and media there it left them powerless to stop this march. Tuesday 28th January 1964 was a cold damp day. Over 200 determined men women and children of Springtown Camp assembled at the gate of the camp. Their mood had changed. You could see the determination in their faces. They were not going to listen to anymore excuses, no more promises, no more talk. They had had enough. Action was needed and needed now. They carried banners saying "Springtown, Derry's Little Rock. "Nobody wants us". Willie Campbell and Willie Edgar, then joint chairmen of the camp committee led the march. It proceeded along the Northland Road, down the Rock Road, up the Strand Road and on to the steps of Derry's Guildhall.



Residents Of Springtown Camp marchin through the city on their way to derry Guildhall, William Campbell (left) and William Edgar, leading the marchers, were recieved by the Corporation and the protested against conditions at the Camp

Not a word was spoken by the marchers.. As the march reached the Strand Road a strange thing happened. The people of Derry who (how shall I put this?) were up to now, not au fait with the plight of the Springtown Camp residents, as they had enough troubles of their own to deal with came out from the shops where they were shopping and looked on at the marchers who were walking in silence carrying placards, After a few moments and on reading the

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placards they started clapping the marchers. The shoppers in William Street, on hearing the clapping rushed down to Waterloo Place to see what was going on. They too joined in the clapping and this they did right up to the steps of Derry's Guildhall. The joint chairmen entered the Guildhall to hand in a statement and address the housing meeting that was being held. The Springtown Camp people, led by their elected committee were on their way ! Nothing or no-one would stop them now. Nothing short of a proper house in their own city for all the residents would suffice. The fight was on to close Springtown Camp. The following Friday the Derry Journal carried a statement from prominent businessman, Mr. Frank Guckian and I quote. "Tuesday the 28th of January 1964 was surely Derry's day of shame. On that day a group of our residents, suffering injustice for many years asked for our help. We could only offer them vague promises. On that day a debate on the problems of Springtown Camp took place in Derry's Guildhall and many of our representatives remained silent. On that day television recorded our apathy and pointed the accusing finger. On that day I was ashamed to call myself a Derry man" Strong words indeed but the people of the camp thought they had to be said. Tuesday 28th January 1964 will live long in the memories of the residents. Was the march from Springtown Camp to the Guildhall, as suggested by Nationalist councillor Mr James Doherty, a prototype for the civil rights marches that were to follow through the North of Ireland in the late 60's and 70s. Ok, we can argue that point!!

But what can't be denied is that the people of the camp were living in appalling conditions, most probably the worst conditions in Ireland. After a bad accident at work, their Chairman, Willie Campbell was hospitalised. Jimmy Deery who was secretary was elected chairman, with Rory Quigley being made secretary. The rest of the committee remained the same. Now with the full support of the people of Derry behind them, they organised a petition. calling on the Government to house all the families in the camp. Their target was a massive 20,000 signatures. At the four corners of the Guildhall Square they sat at make shift tables. at factory gates they stood, at the dole office, and in every nook or cranny. From door to door they walked, men women and children seeking support in their fight. To their amazement a total of 21,428 signatures was collected, demanding the powers that be to house the people of Springtown Camp without delay. The Camp was buzzing. The people had a new spring in their step. No more were they on their own. Their city folk were backing them to the hilt. The television cameras were now a regular fixture in the camp, both UTV and later the BBC and RTE took great interest in the story that was Springtown Camp. Charles Witherspoon, the UTV interviewer was horrified at what he saw in the camp. He was visibly moved. Newspapers carried the story of their plight, and their fight against the authorities almost every week. The pressure was now on the authorities. No more buck passing. No more lies. No more stalling. The television interviewers were now asking searching questions to the authorities..questions they had no answer to. Politicians from out of town were now visiting Springtown Camp to see for themselves. They too were horrified at what they saw. With the help of Mr Eddie McAteer. a deputation from the Springtown committee, (Chairman Jimmy Deery was accompanied by Rory Quigley, John Mc Laughlin, John Mc Brearty), were received at Stormont, where they handed over a petition with 21,428 signatures supporting their case for proper housing for all the residents of the camp.

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There was no let up by the committee, who kept the pressure on the corporation. Now, politicians from outside Derry were taking an interest in the story that was Springtown Camp. Sheelagh Murnaghan M.P visited the camp on Saturday 13th June 1964 and said and I quote "I have never seen anything as bad as this except near Johannesburg." She went on to praise the women of the camp for the way in which they carried on their daily chores in the face of such adversity. The pressure was now relentless on the corporation. They were getting it from all sides. They were summoned to Stormont by the health minister Mr. Morgan and in the Guildhall at a housing meeting discussing the corporation's dismal performance that year, Councillor Canning asked the mayor. "When can the people of Springtown Camp expect to be housed?" The mayor replied "I don't need to answer that question." Councillor Canning, "Are you afraid to answer it?" The mayor. "I am not going to answer it." The campaign continued and eventually, with no alternative, the corporation started housing the tenants. Still to the bitter end the corporation were acting vindictively towards the few remaining residents. They tried to allocate them houses far outside the city. The residents refused to go. The Derry Corporation summoned them to court as they now wanted the site for Industrial units. Mr Paddy Maxwell represented the residents. The residents lost the case. The residents went back to their huts and refused to budge. Fearing more bad publicity, the corporation caved in and housed the residents in Derry. Thus arrived the day in October 1967.. when the last residents to leave the camp, Charlie and Sarah Lynch closed the front door of their hut for the last time, there ending the days of Springtown Camp.

Through the eyes of us the children who grew up in the camp we remember the long summer days, being surrounded by beautiful spacious green fields where the bluebells, buttercups and daisies grew. It was like a big adventure park for us the children. In our close knit community, we can fondly remember: Bella, Gander, Uncle, Rosie and Danny, Tipperary, Mary Ann Meehan's, McConnells and Tommy Moore's shop and John Moore's hut where we first saw Rawhide on television. But in truth, we the children were blissfully unaware of anything else. I wonder would our parents remember Springtown Camp with the same fondness?

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A fulfilled sex breath is indispensable for most partnerships. So it is really problematic when this no longer happens at all because of significance. Several drugs are far-famed. Other works for racy cases like Hodgkin's lymphoma, anxiety or bronchospasm. The most common sexual disorders in men are ED and inhibited sexual desire. If you are considering Cialis, you apparently want to read about [cheap levitra](#) . In our generation, there are varied options for men who suffer from erectile dysfunction. Very likely "" is a very much complicated matter. Of all the matters in the field of healthcare that pique our attention most, it's ED, special "". A long list of common remedies can lead to erectile dysfunction, including several blood stress medicines, pain medicaments, and most of antidepressants. Certain patients using this drug as a rule do not have any side effects to Cialis.

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