Down on the Farm

Lorton History: Down on the Farm

(One of the upsides to the prison was the agriculture it produced.)
By Irma Clifton

The abundant open space, cheap meadows and woodlands that make Lorton such an attractive place to live can trace this legacy, in part, to the agricultural mission that established the D.C prison in our community. Sustainable, self-sufficiency was the prison’s goal almost one hundred years before those words became fashionable.

Southeastern Fairfax County, after the turn of the 19th century, was the home to mostly subsistence farming and fishing. The soil had been depleted by colonial farming methods and many families found it difficult to maintain an acceptable standard of living. In other words, Lorton had a depressed economy. Enter, the prison, bringing jobs and a regular paycheck to numerous local families. But the prison brought much more—it brought modern (for that period) farming methods to what was worn out soil, and a workforce large enough to make farming a viable industry in the area.

When the first D.C. prisoners arrived in Lorton in 1910 they immediately began to cut timber and clear the land. With that harvested timber they constructed dormitories and other buildings that would serve their needs for the next ten to twelve years until they were replaced by brick. Over time, the more than eleven hundred acres acquired for the first section of the prison known as the Workhouse, was cleared and crops planted. The farming operation soon expanded to include dairy and beef herds. Fences were erected and cattle grazed bucolically along local roads. Fields of corn and grain waved over the countryside.
A greenhouse was built and along with it a series of cold frames that were used to cultivate seedlings to get a jump start on the growing season. As acreage was added to the prison, fields of vegetables were cultivated which produced an abundant harvest; so much so that a cannery was established to preserve fruits and vegetables for use in the prison kitchens during the off season. A large orchard located along both sides of Lorton Road served for many years to provide apples and other fruits. This led to the locals calling that section of road “Apple Orchard Hill” and many still do today. A large apple storage barn occupied a spot along Furnace Road until it was lost to arson in the 1970s.

A swine ranch (aka hog farm) housed thousands of hogs raised for consumption by the inmates. However, in the early 1950s disaster struck in the form of hog cholera, which led to the destruction of over three thousand hogs to prevent spread of the disease. The location of the swine ranch is on property that is now part of the Occoquan Regional Park.

In 1946 the prison went into the fishing business and according to an article in the Washington Post dated December 22, 1946, “The convicts will fish the waters of Occoquan Bay, off District-owned property at Cherry Hill and in other legitimate fishing grounds in the Potomac River.” Donald Clemmer, Director of Corrections said, “These waters will yield a variety of fish, including herring, shad, yellow perch, blue perch, hard rock, catfish and carp.” Photo records from the early 1950s show the enterprise still in operation. Other farming operations carried out by the D.C. prisoners included raising chickens and turkeys. The chicken houses were located along Furnace Road and the turkey ranch was located near the barrel arch bridge also on Furnace Road.

The dairy operation was by far the longest running agricultural operation at the prison. At first it was located just behind the Workhouse but was moved to a new up-to-date facility on Furnace Road in the 1960s where milking machines were used and milk was processed and packaged. The dairy and supporting corn and hay crops were the last farming operation to go and when the dairy closed in 1998 it was the last commercial dairy operation in Fairfax County, as well. At its height, the D.C. prison at Lorton covered almost 3,500 acres. The prison ran its own cannery, slaughterhouse, meat locker, deep freeze storage facility and fish processing plant.
Although through the years many other industries were associated with the prison, such as brick making, license plates, a foundry, print shop and sewing factory, none had such an impact on the land as farming. Driving the winding roads and seeing cattle grazing, watching hay balers traverse open fields or seeing corn shocks standing ghost-like among the stubble, belied the turmoil growing inside the prison walls that would lead to a whole new way of life for residents of Lorton.