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World War To

Penniman, Thriving Community in War, Today Scattered Ruins Off Scenic Road

By DICK VEILZ.

PENNIMAN, June 22.—Here, just off the scenic Colonial National Historical Parkway, lie the crumbling ruins of what was once a thriving city of more than 5,000 souls — Penniman, a World War ammunition plant, and now Virginia's "Ghost City."

Today a herd of peaceful cows graze over the fields once covered with fifty miles of railroad; wild flowers turn tender heads from broken vats where T N T once took form, and only herds of mosquitoes people the hundreds of acres near the wide York.

Just after you reach the present end of the three-strip Federal highway connecting Williamsburg with Yorktown, six miles outside of Williamsburg's city limits, there's a dirt road which turns off to the left and swings between two high mounds to that which was Penniman.

Was Complete City.

No longer can you mail a letter at Penniman postoffice—for that institution, once handling from 12,000 to 14,000 letters and from seventy-five to 100 sacks of parcels daily, is just one of the memories. Money orders here sometimes amounted to \$7,000, and it was a poor day when stamp sales dropped below \$200.

Its fire department, once housed in a spacious building, and boasting "one truck carrying 1,200 feet of 2½-inch hose, one 24-foot extension ladder, and other implements carried on modern apparatus," to say nothing of a Ford chemical truck, and a chief's car, answers no more alarms—and you'll have to dig deep to find one of the fire-alarm boxes.

Neither will your call for help receive aid from one of the nine police officers who once walked their beats on Penniman's boarded sidewalks, for their last inspection

has been held, and they're scattered—where, no one knows.

Practically everyone in Williamsburg and Yorktown either worked at Penniman, at the du Pont plant, for the government, or knew someone who did. Their memories are a bit hazy, for twenty years is a long time, but bit by bit as we talked to them the story of those days at Penniman came back.

Houses in Williamsburg.

On North Henry Street in Williamsburg stand three of the seventeen houses moved there from Penniman following the dismantling of the camp; fifty-one houses were moved to Norfolk; for some time the College of William and Mary used some of the structures for temporary dormitories, classrooms and dining-rooms. Another of the houses is to be found on South England Street, and yet another on Scotland.

E. T. Davis, Williamsburg contractor, took up twenty-five miles of the extensive Penniman Railroad system years ago and moved some of the houses. The railway system included a main line which joined with the Chesapeake & Ohio about a mile below Williamsburg, and a branch system which reached practically every building on the reservation.

At the height of the camp's career, six trains were operated each day to and from Williamsburg, where a number of workers made their homes. Among others in Williamsburg who moved some of the houses was John Warburton, now a City Councilman.

Sanitation Good.

When plans for the Penniman camp were drawn up, residents hereabouts told du Pont and government authorities that mosquitoes would prove too great an obstacle to overcome. But the sanitation staff took pride in their work, and the story goes that the mosquitoes

were as scarce at Penniman "as Huns in Washington."

The sanitation staff of seven, aided by the hospital group of twenty-four, used much the same system as tried in the building of the Panama Canal. This took into consideration the known fact that the malaria-bearing type of mosquito rarely travels more than half a mile from its breeding place. Extensive systems of ditches were dug, oil treatment systems installed and breeding checked in all of the surrounding swamps by applications of oil at frequent intervals.

Penniman even had a beauty parlor, although it was called a "shampoo room," conducted by a Miss Adamson and Miss Tighe, both of "the Francis Fox Institute of New York City," and "four assistants."

The drug store, so they tell us, was the favorite evening "hang-out," and where many a camp romance began. It was one of the last of the units to be dismantled.

Central Heating Plant.

A central heating plant, combined with a power system, served the community, and even today a few of the poles which once carried electricity, and some of the rusted pipes, may be seen half buried in the long grass.

High above today's ruins stands the water tower, rusted and frowning with age, its wooden-covered discharge pipe covered with a dead moss easily seen from the Yorktown Road. Gone are many of the pipe lines which served the camp but here and there, broken and useless, are some of the fire hydrants.

Building a house at Penniman was a two-day job, if we are to believe an article to that effect in the "Projectile." The residential area was located some distance from the main plant, bordering one of the creeks which flows into the York.

The Richmond News Leader, Wednesday, June 22, 1938

RUINS OF WORLD WAR TOWN—Little is left standing today at Penniman, community near Williamsburg, where 5,000 lived during the World War era and turned out ammunition for the guns in France. Through the doors of one of the crumbling buildings (just above) can be seen two other ruins, first in the beginning of a mile-long row of similar structures. Massive walls used in the buildings is noticeable. The photo at the left shows the type of houses which stood in the residential section of Penniman, as indicated in a print belonging to Drewry Jones, of Williamsburg. Many of these houses were moved to Norfolk, Newport News, Williamsburg, and other near-by towns. The photo at the right shows one of the white, ghost-like shell-loading plants, with a farmhouse and a water tower in the background—all that is left today on the site of the development. [Photos by Jack Garrett.]

Cheatham Annex is built on the spot no