

*STARKE BECAME...
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IN BLANDING ERA*

by RICK CHESHIRE
UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA STUDENT JOURNALIST

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Those convicts who cleared a few hundred feet of scrub land near Kingsley Lake back in December, 1939 didn't realize they were starting what would become the fourth largest city in Florida during World War II.

First word of Camp Blanding came to Starke in November, 1939 when National Guard officers said a new Guard camp would soon be built on Kingsley Lake, seven miles east of Starke. The camp would cover 25,000 acres and building it would cost about \$500,000. As many as 10,000 men would be there at one time.



Sign advertising one of the many honky-tonks catering to service men in the bottom town that sprang up outside Camp Blanding.

“I do not think the people of your community fully realize just what this development is going to mean to Starke,” General Sumpter L. Lowery told a group of Bradford County residents. Even the General probably didn’t realize just how big an operation it would be.

In less than two years, the camp covered 119,000 acres and contained 90,000 troops. More than

\$30 million had gone into establishing the camp, which became a training station for Army troops about to enter World War II.

Soon the residents of this rural area would find their town becoming “neoned and streamlined,” as columnist Ward Morehouse described Starke in the *New York Sun*.

On September 6, 1940, the government announced it would spend \$10 million building Camp Blanding. A week later it was announced that 5,000 workers would start on the project, and workers rushed to Starke. Highways were lined with hitchhikers carrying tools and suitcases.

By November 8, more than 14,500 men were working at Camp Blanding. A week later, there were 21,000 workers, 14 times the population of Starke!

Every available truck, drag line, and steam roller in Florida was rented. Thirty buildings were started and finished each day. The job was so big it took three days to pay off the workmen.

Residents on the west shore of the lake quickly became aware of three shifts, 24 hours a day. At night the work gave off a roar of sound across the lake. The fantastic glow of hissing carbide lights emanated from a never-ending row of tents, blazing over the area that had earlier been a palmetto wilderness.

As workers rushed to Camp Blanding, they rushed to Starke. Every spare room in just about every house was rented to the



Call Street Took on Atmosphere of Coney Island.

newcomers. Many slept on the street or in cars; some pitched tents in the woods around Blanding.

“Rent jumped from \$20-\$25 to \$50-\$60. Land around the camp which had been selling for \$15 an acre sold for \$15 a front foot,” Time magazine claimed.

In McCall’s magazine, the author of “Boom Town U. S. A.” wrote of two workers, “. . . They were making money all right but both of them had been living in a garage, sleeping there in cots. Each of them paid \$10 a week for board and bed.”

Morehouse described Starke as a place, “once just a strawberry center, that got itself neon and streamlined. . . Starke, an overnight goldrush town as a result of the national emergency, is as fantastic a spot as America now presents. . . With its over-lighted facades, its blazing interiors, its fluorescent tubing, its while U-wait photo studies, its hell-red neons, its cheap jewelry displays and its gaudy movie palaces – the Ritz is right there on the corner and looking at you – Starke has gone from a population of 1,500 (Home of the Sweetest Strawberries This Side of Heaven) to a population of nobody knows that!”

That’s quite a contrast to the town Col. Harry Hatcher remembers in earlier years. “When I came through Starke before, it was a just a sleepy town. . . You’d get through it quick as you could cause there wasn’t anything here anyhow,” Hatcher says.



Three for a Dime Photos Were Popular Item.

Soldiers began moving into Blanding in large numbers in late November, 1940. Every popcorn vendor, peanut peddler and novelty stand within a thousand-mile radius followed the soldiers to Starke. Palm photographers set up tents and booths everywhere.

But the government made sure that soldiers had the best facilities for their leisure time at Camp Blanding. There were more than 20 chapels for men to worship in. An outdoor theater with seating for 5,000 was built. Eight other movie theaters at the camp accommodated 15,700 soldiers. Admission to the indoor theaters was 12 cents each.

For sporting events there was a field house with 18,000 square feet of floor space and a 33-foot ceiling, containing three basketball practice courts and one main court. There was space for locker rooms, showers and dressing rooms. The building was large enough for indoor baseball, and there were six outdoor tennis courts and eight handball courts. Papers around the nation implied that Blanding was a virtual resort.

The camp had its own railroad system with 21 miles of track going in and out of the camp, own roundhouse, and repair shops. Fifteen men worked under the post engineer maintaining tracks.



Madam Fortune Teller sets up shop on a vacant lot and awaits customers who dare to "Step Inside."

Blanding had its own fire department, police force, telephone services sewage disposal plants and water supply systems for 100,000 men. It employed 4,000 civilians, more than twice the population of Starke. Thirty-five civilians handled the mail.

When liberty time came soldiers poured into Starke. Streets were jammed with service men looking for a good time.

"You'd see the highways lined with soldiers trying to catch a ride," said Col. Hatcher, a Jacksonville native who was inducted into the service at Camp Blanding and came back to become post commander from 1969 to 1973.

"We'd stand around on the corner hoping to see some girls. If not, we'd go to a movie and hitch-hike back to camp," Hatcher says of his induction days at Blanding.

"When the soldiers came you couldn't walk on the street there were so many of them," says J. W. Ritch.

This was the scene for several years as infantry men trained for World War II. With the end of the war in 1945, Blanding began the transition from an emergency Army training camp back to a National Guard camp.



Blanding Bands added color to Starke parades.

Blanding recently underwent a \$6.2 million renovation in which buildings to house 5,000 troops were constructed. Now men are housed in barracks, rather than some men being housed in tents, as was the situation in earlier days.

Blanding is now designated a national Guard training site for the Southeast, a summer training ground for Guardsmen as well as for troops from Puerto Rico and other nations. This year, a group of soldiers from Scotland trained at Camp Blanding.

The camp is also used for training men from the FBI and sheriff's departments.

Although activity at the camp has slowed since World War II, Camp Blanding is destined to remain an important part of Northeast Florida.

THE EVENT

PETRIFIED LIGHTNING FROM CENTRAL FLORIDA

A PROJECT BY ALLAN MCCOLLUM

CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA
MUSEUM OF SCIENCE AND INDUSTRY
TAMPA, FLORIDA