

A Short History of Camp Claybanks

Almost 60 years ago this month, a chapter in our area's history was concluded. Camp Claybanks, a U.S. Army installation on Lake Michigan was shut down after only about five years of operation. The base was on 434 acres just south of the Claybanks Township Park, leased from private owners. It opened in 1953 and closed in February 1958. What was this rather large military establishment doing in rural Oceana County and why was its operation so short-lived?

There were training needs for the military as a draft of sorts was still in force. The war-time draft had expired in 1947, leaving voluntary enlistment to supply the numbers needed for military service. It was not long at all, however, before fears of the Cold War prompted reinstatement of the draft if required numbers fell low. In 1950, there was a draft for the Korean War (exempting World War II veterans), and another general draft in 1951. In 1952, Congress required everyone who was drafted or enlisted to commit to an eight-year term. After active duty was completed, servicemen would be assigned to reserve status and could be called back to active duty for a war or national emergency. It was several years after, that Camp Claybanks was built to train the nearly 3,000 Army personnel and guardsmen and reservists from Michigan, Illinois, Iowa, and Indiana. The base accommodated 500 to 600 trainees at a time, while approximately 100 Army officials were permanent residents at the camp.

The facility was controversial from the start. A letter published in the Chicago Tribune on July 4, 1953 described concerns of a neighboring cottage owner who had been a seasonal resident for decades. "The site selected and now being used," the cottage owner wrote, "is in the heart of a popular vacation area, with summer camps, resorts, and summer homes which have been established for many years adjacent to the camp. Many people of modest means who have invested their funds in summer places in this area are seeing their investments and recreation facilities ruined by this activity. People who have already gone to their summer places nearby report that if the noise from the artillery were not enough annoyance, the noise and danger from low flying airplanes towing the targets are worse."

It does seem like the last place one would think of putting a military installation, but there were several similar bases in the Midwest and Camp Claybanks was reportedly modeled after one in Kenosha, Wisconsin. The Army was allotted \$782,000 to establish the camp, a sizeable request approved by Congress. (\$782,000 in 1953 had the same buying power as \$7,071,154 does in 2017, according to Dollartimes.com.) The base was a training facility, for servicemen to learn how to shoot anti-aircraft missiles. It encompassed a "rec hall," chapel, officers club, clinic, water tower, mess halls, Quonset steel hut barracks. The base also boasted a launch pad from which remote control airplanes were flown out over Lake Michigan. A variety of different range missiles were fired at them for practice, or at targets behind them, as the goal was not to destroy the expensive planes. The firing range overlooking Lake Michigan had positions for 16 guns up to 90-millimeter in size. The firing zone extended from the White Lake Channel to Little Point Sable and 10 miles out into Lake Michigan. Shooting occurred between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. No boats were allowed in the area during this time (unofficially), angering many residents.

The facility's officials made matters worse in 1955 with a bid to make the restricted zone official and expand the firing area. This increased local opposition and even officials at the state level became concerned also -- Michigan's Conservation Department stated it would oppose making the base's policy official. In 1957, the state legislature passed a law requiring permits for the military to use the space over Lake Michigan for a firing range, putting forth a potential roadblock for the base's plans. In

February 1958, the Army closed the training center despite lobbying by Rothbury community leaders for it to stay open, to maintain the economic benefits the base brought to the area.

After Camp Claybanks was closed, the site was bulldozed and turned back to the property owners. There are still some cement foundations that remain and there are still stories of missiles and remnants of aircraft washing ashore from the Big Lake.

Information source: "Camp Claybanks had short, but lively history," Sandra Tyrrell, White Lake Beacon, July 18, 1989.

Tanya Cabala is a lifelong resident of the White Lake area. A former educator and professional environmental advocate, she is currently the owner of Great Lakes Consulting, which provides project support and grant writing services to environmental and community organizations. More information is available at www.tanyacabala.com. Tanya loves her hometown, loves writing, and loves to hear from her readers. Contact her at tcabala@charter.net or (231) 981-0016.

