

# HAWTHORNE -- A Story of Survival Against All Odds

## How and Why Hawthorne Became A Military Town

Many stories have been written about Hawthorne's emergence as a "military town" -- most with reasonable accuracy, some centered more on fiction than fact. At almost the same time Hawthorne was nearly destroyed by fire in July 1926, a disastrous explosion virtually wiped out an ammunition depot at Lake Denmark, New Jersey. There was clamor in Washington to relocate such dangerous facilities in remote areas, far removed from population centers.

The thought of selecting the Hawthorne area actually originated in Tonopah where a number of citizens offered their views on street corners and in print.

C.C. "Good Roads" Boak first tossed out the idea of considering Sodaville where there was "ample land and water and protected by high

mountains to the east and west."

James M. Fenwick thought it might be advisable to set up plant facilities at Hawthorne and store the dangerous explosives under the waters of Walker Lake. (That same thought has been advanced recently in the arguments over deployment of the MX Missile.)

Some support for the idea surfaced in Reno, but there also were those in Reno who believed a more logical site might be in the Secret Valley area, across the California state line but closer to Reno.

U.S. Senator Tasker L. Oddie quickly warmed up to the Hawthorne "movement" and as a member of the Naval Affairs Committee, did not hesitate to engage in a bit of log rolling and arm twisting as the navy proceeded to consider "potential sites in the West" for a new

ammunition depot. (in those days they were referred to as "field inspections" and not "studies.")

Despite strong competition from California congressmen, Oddie prevailed, and on July 24, 1928, there was a formal "ground breaking" ceremony, with admirals and state officials participating, to mark the establishment of the U.S. Naval Ammunition Depot, Hawthorne, Nevada.

(Even though local residents and many visitors who had come from Tonopah and elsewhere grew quite impatient as the "official party" arrived from Reno more than two hours after the ceremony was scheduled to start, there was an amusing twist to all the pomp and ceremony. The ground breaking ceremony actually took place within the boundary of the one-square

mile town of Hawthorne instead of somewhere within the 230-plus-square mile newly created "military reservation.")

Within a few months the navy had established "headquarters" in the jury room of the courthouse in Hawthorne to prepare for the awarding of numerous contracts that would be involved in the construction of the depot (frequently called "ammunition dump" by those who then were unfamiliar with specific designations for arsenal, depot, plant, etc.)

First contracts were for railroad and road construction throughout the reservation, and a frame office headquarters and a corrugated iron garage building, both located near the site of what would become the "main gate."

It was not until June 1929 that the first major construction contract would be awarded for the construction of 17 buildings and "quarters" for officers and civilian employees, all in the industrial area; and 84 "igloo" type explosives magazine area -- more than 120 buildings in all, not the "17 buildings in the magazine area" -- a statement which erroneously has found its way into some of the "history" of the depot which the navy has recorded.

Contracts for other major facilities, including the mine filling plant in the magazine (ordnance) area, were awarded subsequently, and work was still in progress when the navy officially "moved in" and formally commissioned the depot on September 15, 1930. With the completion of all construction work in 1931, the government had expanded slightly more than \$3 million of the \$3,500,000 which had been appropriated by Congress for the construction of the ammunition depot.

Simultaneously with the commissioning of the depot, the first contingent of 48 Marines arrived to "guard" the depot -- many of them direct from Nicaragua where they had been chasing the rebel leader Sandino. (Today his descendents are in command of Nicaragua, with the blessing of the

United States.)

Shortly after the arrival of the Marines, the first shipments of "ammunition" were delivered to the depot -- from Mare Island, Calif., with much of it coming from the Benicia Arsenal. All of it was "stuff" that had been stowed in magazines since the end of World War I.

In the meantime the navy had established a staff and work crew of 60 "civilian" employees to maintain the new depot. This figure was cut to 48 when President Franklin Roosevelt took office and ordered an "across the board" cut of 20 per cent in the number of government employees.

Not until 1935 did the mine filling plant see any activity, and this was to "rework" mines, depth charges and some bombs that had been in storage for 15 years or more. That project completed, the depot again reverted to "mothball" status until the outbreak of war in Europe. Congress began to appropriate funds for the expansion of the depot and to place it on "active duty" status.

In the two years prior to December 7, 1941, the depot was now producing ammunition and shipping it to "classified" destinations. When the Japanese struck Pearl Harbor the importance of Hawthorne NAD became so great that the government recruited thousands of civilian workers, and the navy assigned more than 2000 sailors for "bomb line" work at the Hawthorne facility.

As has been written in other stories in this Centennial issue, the World

War II period brought more than 13,000 persons together in the little town of Hawthorne, and hardly had the war ended than more than half of that number departed as rapidly as they had arrived.

The story was repeated, but on a smaller and less hectic scale, during the Korean conflict and the ill-fated mission called Vietnam. However, the Hawthorne NAD continued to remain "at the ready" as it had for 47 years, until October 1, 1977, when the "depot" became a "plant" under control of the U.S. Army.

Representatives of all branches of the military, as well as civilians in attendance, were visibly moved as the U.S. Navy and U.S. Marine Corps "struck their colors." However, Hawthorne would remain a "military town" -- but not for long.

Hardly had the Army adjusted to the assignment of operating a one-time naval ammunition depot when the powers that be in Washington determined that a contract system would be more "cost effective." The change became effective on December 1, 1980. Today, Hawthorne's closest "tie" to the military is the U.S. Air Force which has maintained a combat evaluation group within the depot/plant boundaries since 1966.

Hawthorne's distinction as a "military town" and the exceptionally fine community relationship between the military and civilian sectors that lasted for 50 years is an example of Americanism that is sorely needed in the nation today.

### Va. vote inspires blacks

PHILADELPHIA — Buoyed by the victory last month of Virginia Democrat L. Douglas Wilder, black lawmakers Tuesday predicted a surge in the number of blacks seeking high state office.

Wilder's successful bid to become the first black lieutenant governor in the South since Reconstruction is being hailed as a signal of broad and renewed appeal of black candidates.

Three more black legislators — members of the National Black Caucus of

State Legislators, meeting here this week — are expected to officially declare their candidacy for lieutenant governor in their states.

"Doug Wilder had it tougher than I do," said Colorado state Sen. Regis Groff, one of the hopefuls. "All I have to do is prove I'm the best candidate."

Others considering running: Illinois legislator Carol Moseley Braun and Pennsylvania state Rep. Dwight Evans.

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