

WINTHROP HISTORY WEBSITE: WIHAONLINE.ORG

WINTHROP Then and Now*Winthrop Improvement and Historical Association*

By G. David Hubbard, Town Historian • Photos courtesy of Stephen F. Moran

ARTICLE 976 — FORT DAWES IN THE 1950'S

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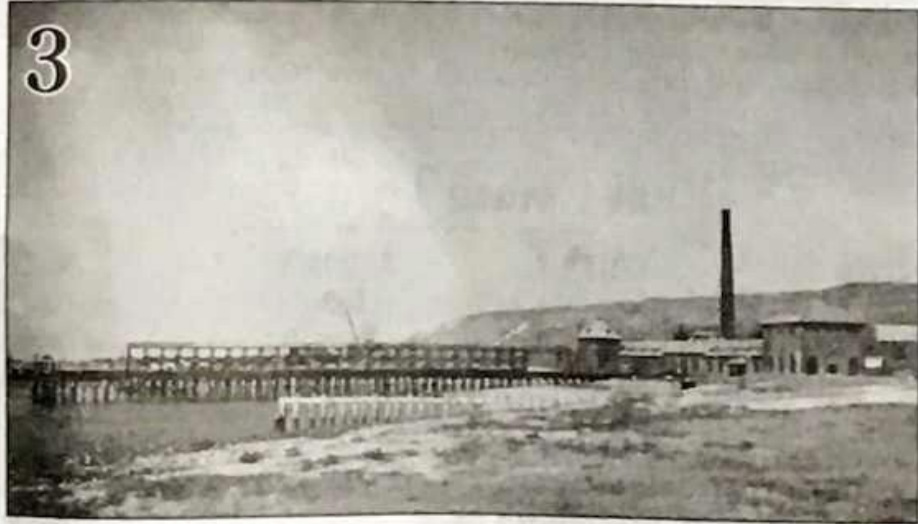
In 1955, Robert Higgins, then a 19 year old man, was drafted in California to serve in a U.S. Missile Battalion. He was subsequently stationed to perform this service at Fort Dawes on Deer Island. Bob served there from October 1955 until May of 1957, which incidentally was just 4 months before this writer arrived there for a four year tour of duty as an AVCO Field Engineer in support of an Air Force experimental Air Traffic Control station. Recently Mr. Higgins sent me a summary of his service at Fort Dawes along with photographs of Deer Island and Point Shirley in the mid 1950's. This article contains his description of the time he spent at Fort Dawes. A future article will contain photos he took of Point Shirley during this same period of time. The following was taken from Bob Higgins notes:

"I was stationed on Deer Island (Fort Dawes) with the 605 AAA (Missile) Battalion. Our particular unit was head-quarters for at least four missile batteries surrounding Boston. We had missile sites in Reading, Danvers, Lynn and at least one other town. In addition we had a small radar site in Nahant. We were part of several similar battalions around Boston. Each missile site (NIKE) had at least 20 guided missiles capable of shooting down an enemy plane. The sites were divid-

ed up into two locations, an actual missile launching area and a tracking station. When I first arrived, the units had 90mm anti-aircraft guns and started converting to the NIKE missile system in 1956. Our particular unit was the air traffic control group. We were responsible to record air traffic in our locations and plotting the aircraft during their flights. This was a 24 hr/7 day/week business. At least once a month there would be a several day alert/training session. Deer Island was also home of two Army service batteries, a U.S. Navy unit and a small unit of the Air Force. The Navy used the large bunker on the seaward side of the Southern end of the island built in 1940 after Shirley Gut was filled in. See picture 1 for a view of this bunker behind the man in the fore-ground. One of the incidents that occurred during my stay here, was when the Navy went out to blow up a WWII mine that had suddenly surfaced near the entrance to the Boston Harbor. Picture 2 looks North from this point where one can see the mess hall which the Army and Navy shared about 50 yards from the bay. My barracks can be seen next door, the Navy barracks next and our head-quarters building up near the gate. The barracks were standard units built during WWII. The road into Ft. Dawes came through Point

Shirley, across the filled in Shirley Gut, thru the Deer Island Prison and then past the only remaining building of the early days. See picture 3 which shows this initial pumping station, still on its original site just before the then entrance to Fort Dawes. We drove past this building to get to our walled compound at the Southern end of Deer Island. We were often required to help guard the entrance to Deer Island along with the prison guards; I actually spent many hours pulling guard duty at the pris-on gate. We also had Army Guards at our compound. The base had no medical care. We had to travel to the Boston Army Base to see a Doctor. We drew our main supplies from Fort Devens. The base, in addition to the Barracks, also had a gymnasium, baseball field, beer hall and recreation center. Life on the island was hard. The winters were cold and the sea brutal. The huge storm of 1956 was the worse experienced in 50 years. See picture 4 which depicts some of flooding that occurred. The Town of Winthrop called us for help in plowing their streets. Fortunately we had several large all wheel drive trucks equipped with snow plows. During this storm of 1956 our motor pool, where we stored all our vehicles, was flooded with sea water at least 4 feet deep".

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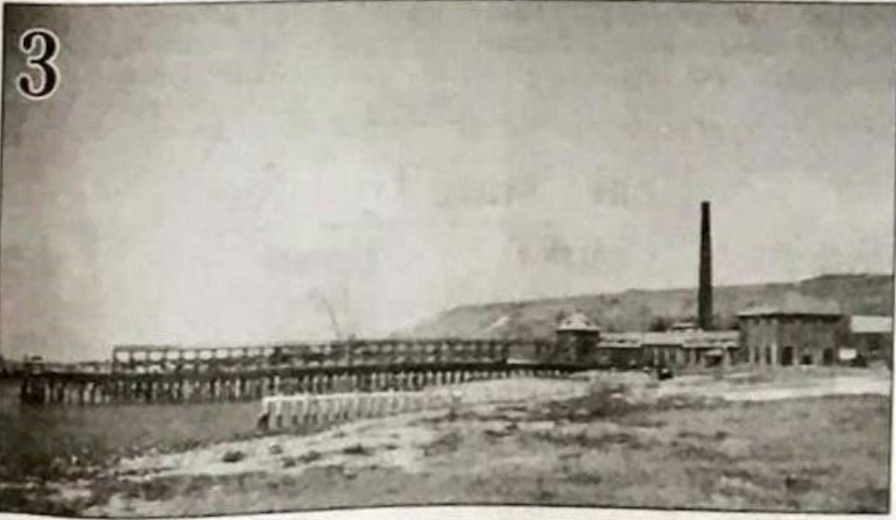
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