

Telling our stories - voices from the Basque child refugee oral histories: (4) North Stoneham camp



The children driven by bus to the North Stoneham camp once the medical checks were completed. Local volunteers, including students from the University College, Southampton, had worked over the previous two weeks creating the camp, which provided 500 tents for the children, each accommodating eight children.

To the children the tents were like those seen in Western films, as **Josefina Stubbs** recalls:

“And when we saw the camp we said ‘Indians!’ We’d always looked upon a tent as being for Indians.”

José Armolea:

“There were so many hundred tents in this field, they dug different trenches for latrines, washing facilities... It looked like a bit of an adventure, it was like being in the Boy Scouts.”

Although for **Valeriana Llorente:**

“One of the things I disliked tremendously: they had dug up trenches for us to use instead of toilets and it was terrible.”

Equipped with electricity and a telephone and had a church and a cinema and described as much like a small city, the camp was a temporary accommodation whilst homes and accommodation was arranged elsewhere. So what was life like at the camp?

Francisco (Paco) Robles:

“Every morning... over the loudspeaker in Southampton they used to play ‘Land of Hope and Glory’ and I love that tune.”

Manuel Rodríguez:

“[They] used to play records in the morning... marching records. All to do with marches so that you start washing yourself... to keep you going quick.”

Herminio Martínez:

“There were so many of us you just followed that routine of in the morning you queue up for breakfast and then later for the next meal and so forth.”

Rafael Leandro Flores:

“In the middle of the camp they put water taps and means of washing board and that and the girls were washing and hanging the clothes up and we were making a living of what camp life was like. We learnt to keep the tents up and dry and clean and every day we would fold our beds up and the doctor would come round and see that we were doing it.”

Herminio Martínez:

“You queue up for everything, you the latrines were pretty horrible, it rained and rained so there was mud all over the place and there were there was the big tent where the films were shown.”

For many the abiding memory concerns food:

María Carmen Wood:

“All I can remember was – we couldn’t find anywhere to eat! Or drink. And we wandered round and we were told not to go outside the camps, because it wasn’t safe. And I can’t remember much more about that.”

Josefina Stubbs:

“If you didn’t eat your food you didn’t get your pudding which was either a banana, an apple or an orange... We’d have a bowl and queue up... They’d put so much on your plate and then you’d sit down at a wooden table... my sister would go first and then start eating as quickly as she could. I would follow, then sit next to her and when she’d eaten her portion she would swap plates with me and she’d have mine. Then she could get her pudding and I could get mine and that’s what I used to live on... There were mainly dishes like mince-meat and brown gravy. To me it was horrible. I didn’t mind the mashed potatoes so much but the food was not very Spanish.”

Rafael Leandro Flores:

“We ate very basic things of course like barley and onion soups and things like that. Corned beef. They put up a stall and I think Horlicks was a new thing in England and we would queue up to take a glass... and go back to the end of the queue again and take another.”

Félix Amat:

“Where the food was concerned there was no organisation, we just grabbed what we could. The Boy Scouts came with a tray full of food, sandwiches and such and chocolates and before they got two yards of the kitchen where they prepared it all, it all went, because we pounced on them.”

And the children hoarded items with the idea that they would be returning home.

Juanita Vaquer:

“One of the girls... her pillow case was full of bread to take home to her family. That’s what it was like, you see.”

Rafael Leandro Flores:

“All the time we were in England... we were thinking of Bilbao all the time. The people were keeping bread, white bread because we thought we were going back.”

Venancio Zornoza:

“There were thousands of children there. And frankly I don’t think I had any time to think about my mother and father... And because we had come for a few days, people went and got their rations and they used to keep them to take back to Bilbao... And you had to think, breakfast, if I don’t go there, I won’t get any bread. So it was sort of survival of the fittest.”

Others recalled activities or adventures outside the camp:

Herminio Martínez:

“I remember seeing the first films. I had never been to a cinema or seen a film of course.”

Manuel Rodríguez:

“We weren’t allowed to get out of the camp, but we escaped quite a lot of the time.”

Herminio Martínez:

“I wandered about all over the place and I had always been a wanderer so and on one occasion I remember we got out of the camp and wandered what must have been through the New Forest and so forth.”

Rafael Leandro Flores:

“I know a boy who got out of the camp and he found himself in a British homes and they looked after him and he came back with a watch on his wrist.”

Manuel Rodríguez:

“This lady came and she took me to Winchester. A lovely day out, bought me footballs. Never seen her before.”