

The Lost Camp Hialeah

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Our Land, Their Park

Before Camp Hialeah was returned to the possession of Busan Metropolitan Government, I thought of it as a piece of our land that has been conquered by American soldiers. The tall walls and barbed wire surrounding it seemed to act like a soundproof wall to block out the sounds of anti-American protests. It was where cries of "Yankee go home!" could be heard whenever some political event involving the U.S., such as unfair trade disputes between Korea and the U.S. or incidents involving American soldiers with Korean victims took place. Korean policemen would block the road leading up to camp Hialeah, making people fearful to even approach the area. Camp Hialeah was both the acting ground and

microcosm of the U.S. controlled global order formed at the end of the second World War.

On the other hand, within Camp Hialeah were droves of Koreans there to experience American culture. They listened to the music of Patty Kim and carved into cheap steaks in its clubs. They tried their hand at pachinko and watched 'uncut' original versions of movies in its theatre. It was a thing of great pride to have been inside the camp. Top Korean singers made their debut at the stages of American military camps. Korean youth became enthralled by American songs sung by these Korean singers. Such was the difference in atmosphere within and beyond the wall. On one side, people shouted anti-american slogans while on the other, they cheered for American culture.

I visited the old Camp Hialeah in early winter, which arrived before I had a taste of autumn. To be more accurate, I wanted to see Bondong village in Beomjeon 2-dong, which had been an obstacle to the creation of the park. Other than a few shop buildings on the roadside, the Bondong village had disappeared without a trace. The villagers who used to farm their crops with water from Baekyangsan mountain had to give away the majority of their land to the Japanese operated race tracks in the colonial era and then to Camp Hialeah after the Korean War. Finally, they had to give up their houses to make way for the citizen's park under construction, leading to the complete obliteration of the village. Feeling a sense of loss at how easily the memory of a village and of Busan city could be erased, I took pictures of the garbage pile

that was all that remained of the demolished village. This then got me into an argument with an employee from the demolishing company, which did not want even these traces to be made public.

The Camp and the Villagers

Bondong village was located at the Seomyeon side exit of Camp Hialeah. The roads leading to the camp gates were lined with shops. Although the crowds had gone when the American soldiers left, traces of its glory days could still be seen. Old signs saying 'VICTORY''HONG KONG CUSTOM TAILOR' and 'ORIENT GIFT SHOP' in English gave the street an American vibe. The owners of the shops still in operation had been catering to American soldiers for decades. They tailored suits for the soldiers and sold them souvenirs. When aircraft carriers would come in for military exercises in the 70s and 80s, these streets would turn into a temporary marketplace lined with merchants catering to American soldiers from all across the country.

Behind the main street are narrow mazes. A wrong turn could make you lose your sense of direction completely. The faded roof tiles and old persimmon trees testify to how old the village is. The stories of an old man who used to watch horse races at the tracks during the Japanese colonial era and an old woman who

used to sell tickets at the tracks bring up even older memories of the village. Every house used to have a smaller outer wing in its yard. They needed the extra room to rent out to American soldiers who lived with Korean women who were called yangsaeksi or western wives. The American military camp was a huge boon to the economy of the village. During the Korean War, the villagers made a living on laundry, by washing the clothes of American soldiers. The soldiers were great benefactors to the village children who gave them new food they had never seen before such as chocolate, chewing gum and c-rations. Before the wall was built, people were free to enter and leave the camp. They watched American soldiers playing baseball, learned the rules of the game and how to handle baseball equipment, developing an interest in the game. Camp Hialeah was inseparable from the lives of the villagers.

Camp Hialeah was in charge of storing and distributing supplies to American military camps around the country when they arrived from the U.S. These supplies would leak into the market through unofficial channels, forming a pillar of the economy of Busan. It is well known that the origins of the Seomyeon tool shopping district and the resulting machine industry of Busan as well as the international market and tinned goods market lie in leaked rations from the American military camps. The village is full of stories of how these supplies were siphoned from Camp Hialeah. While civilian employees of the camp or soldiers in the KATUSA (Korean Augmentation Troops to the United States

Army) brought out small amounts of tissues and oranges that were distributed in the market, the true creators of the international market and tinned goods market were the prostitutes and broker women. They had rules of the trade to abide by and specialized stores for different items. Foodstuffs and pharmaceuticals were the most commonly traded goods. They were never free from the surveillance of crackdown squads. Sometimes they stood waiting for the crackdown officials to get down from their taxis as if someone had tipped them off. They thrust lunch money into their hands and coaxed, fought with them and finally pleaded with them for their livelihoods. Village youths often had their bodies searched by officials who would pounce on them without warning. This was done to crackdown on foreign cigarette smuggling.

A middle aged man who grew up in the village during the 1970s says that he had never once brought his high school friends home. When they asked where he lived, he just replied 'Seomyeon.' A grandmother who had lived here all her life had made up her mind to leave many times because her daughters would complain about the shameful behavior of the prostitutes catering to American soldiers. Even so, they went to Camp Hialeah every birthday to enjoy American culture, feasting on steaks and hamburgers. The people of Camp Hialeah and Bondong lived through unique experiences, simultaneously becoming the recipients of economic and cultural benefits as

well as targets of surveillance and exclusion because of these very benefits.

Dispersed Villagers, Lost Memories

With the launch of the Busan citizen's park project, there was no lack of discourse surrounding the meaning of the park. The initial plan was modified through a long roundtable discussion due to criticism that it lacked the 'memories' of the city and its 'history and lives.' The conclusion was to create a History and Culture Museum in the park to preserve the history of the location and preserve some of the buildings used by the U.S. troops to revive the image of the past in its appearance. Looking at the complete obliteration of Bondong village, I wondered if the Busan metropolitan government truly understood the meaning of a citizen's park. Last autumn, I went on a trip to the Geumgang Pine Forest Path in Uljin-gun, North Gyeongsang province. It was an exploration course converted from the path over which peddlers used to carry the seafood from Uljin into the Taebaek and Bonghwa regions across the Taebaek mountain range. The exploration courses are jointly managed by the residents of the mountain valley and the Korea Forest Service. Only residents of the villages are allowed to work as guides and provide various services on the trail. Visitors eat meals prepared using local produce farmed by the villagers themselves and listen to stories

from their lives, enjoying the complete forest lifestyle experience. The villagers, forest path, and the Korea Forest Service coexist side by side. The history of Camp Hialeah has always coexisted with the residents of Bondong. They made use of various cultural facilities in the camp and interacted with American soldiers over a long period of time. Their livelihoods were built upon the camp. No other group of people would have as many memories related to Camp Hialeah. As a citizen of Busan, I want to hear the stories that these old folks have to tell. Unfortunately, the citizen's park has bulldozed these old memories away and the countdown to opening day has begun. But what could we possibly take away from the citizen's park, which has been stripped of these memories?

