GERMAN POWS ON THE AMERICAN HOMEFRONT

NEARLY 400,000 GERMAN WAR PRISONERS LANDED ON AMERICAN SHORES BETWEEN 1942 AND 1945, AFTER THEIR CAPTURE IN EUROPE AND NORTH AFRICA. THEY BUNKED IN U.S. ARMY BARRACKS AND HASTILY CONSTRUCTED CAMPS ACROSS THE COUNTRY, MOSTLY IN THE SOUTH AND SOUTHWEST.

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THOUSANDS OF WORLD WAR 2 PRISONERS ENDED UP IN MILLS, FARM FIELDS AND EVEN DINING ROOMS ACROSS THE UNITED STATES

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In the mid-1940s when Mel Luetchens was a boy on his family's Murdock, Nebraska, farm where he still lives, he sometimes hung out with his father's hired hands, "I looked forward to it," he said.

"They played games with us and brought us candy and gum." The hearty young men who helped his father pick corn or put up hay or build livestock fences were *German prisoners of war from a nearby camp*. "They were the enemy, of course," says Luetchens, now 70 and a retired Methodist minister. "But at that age, you don't know enough to be afraid."

Since President Obama's vow to close the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp erupted into an entrenched debate about where to relocate the prisoners captured in the Afghanistan War, Luetchens has reflected on the "irony and parallel" of World War II POWs and Guantanamo inmates*. Recently, the Senate overwhelmingly rejected providing funds to close the U.S. military prison in Cuba, saying that no community in America would want terrorism suspects in its backyard.*

But in America's backyards and farm fields and even dining rooms is where many enemy prisoners landed nearly 70 years ago. As World War II raged, Allies, such as Great Britain, were running short of prison space to house POWs. *From 1942 through 1945, more than 400,000 Axis prisoners were shipped to the United States and detained in camps in rural areas across the country.* Some 500 POW facilities were built, mainly in the South and Southwest but also in the Great Plains and Midwest.

At the same time that the prison camps were filling up, farms and factories across America were struggling with acute labor shortages.

The United States faced a dilemma. According to Geneva Convention protocols, POWs could be forced to work only if they were paid, but authorities were afraid of mass escapes that would endanger the American people.

Eventually, they relented and put tens of thousands of enemy prisoners to work, assigning them to canneries and mills, to farms to harvest wheat or pick asparagus, and just about any other place they were needed and could work with minimum security.

About 12,000 POWs were held in camps in Nebraska. “They worked across the road from us, about 10 or 11 in 1943,” recalled Kelly Holthus, 76, of York, Nebraska. “They stacked hay. Worked in the sugar beet fields. Did any chores. There was such a shortage of labor.”

“A lot of them were stone masons,” said Keith Buss, 78, who lives in Kansas and remembers four POWs arriving at his family’s farm in 1943. “They built us a concrete garage. No level, just nail and string to line the building up. It’s still up today.”

Don Kerr, 86, delivered milk to a Kansas camp. “I talked to several of them,” he said. “I thought they were very nice.

“At first there was a certain amount of apprehension,” said Tom Buecker, the curator of the Fort Robinson Museum, a branch of the Nebraska Historical Society. “People thought of the POWs as Nazis. But half of the prisoners had no inclination to sympathize with the Nazi Party.” Fewer than 10 percent were hard-core ideologues, he added.

Any such anxiety was short-lived at his house, if it existed at all, said Luetchens. His family was of German ancestry and his father spoke fluent German. “Having a chance to be shoulder-to-shoulder with [the prisoners], you got to know them,” Luetchens said. “*They were people like us*.

“I had the impression the prisoners were happy to be out of the war,” Holthus said, and Kerr recalled that one prisoner “told me he liked it here because no one was shooting at him.”

Life in the camps was a vast improvement for many of the POWs who had grown up in “cold water flats” in Germany, according to former Fort Robinson, Nebraska, POW Hans Waecker, 88, who returned to the United States after the war and is now a retired physician in Georgetown, Maine.

“Our treatment was excellent. Many POWs complained about being POWs—no girlfriends, no contact with family. But the food was excellent and clothing adequate.” Such diversions as sports, theater, chess games and books made life behind barbed wire a sort of “golden cage,” one prisoner remarked.

Farmers who contracted for POW workers usually provided meals for them and paid the U.S. government 45 cents an hour per laborer, which helped offset the millions of dollars needed to care for the prisoners. Even though a POW netted only 80 cents a day for himself, it provided him with pocket money to spend in the canteen. Officers were not required to work under the Geneva Convention accords, which also prohibited POWs from working in dangerous conditions or in tasks directly related to the war effort.

“There were a few cases when prisoners told other prisoners not to work so hard,” said historian Lowell May, author of *Camp Concordia: German POWs in the Midwest*. *Punishment for such work slowdowns was usually several days of confinement with rations of only bread and water.*

“One prisoner at Camp Concordia said a good German would not help the Americans,” May said. “He was sent to a camp for Nazi supporters in Alva, Oklahoma.”

Of the tens of thousands of POWs in the United States during World War II, *only 2,222, less than 1 percent, tried to escape, and most were quickly rounded up*. *By 1946, all prisoners had been returned to their home countries.*

The deprivations of the postwar years in Europe were difficult for the repatriated men. The Luetchens, who established a "lively" letter exchange with their POW farmhands, sent them food and clothing. *Eventually Luetchen and his parents visited some of them in Germany.*

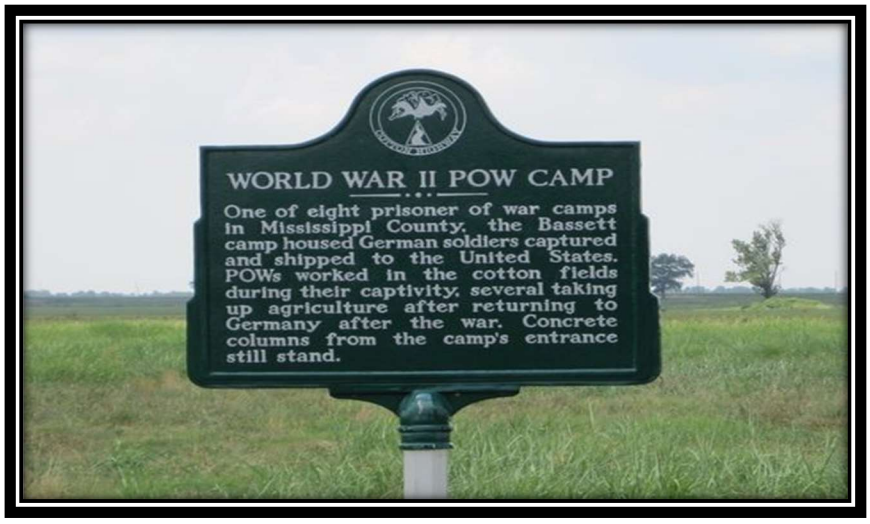
Recently Luetchens considered those experiences in the context of current controversies about Guantanamo detainees. "It was less scary then," he concluded, but he expressed hope for understanding others, even your designated enemies.

"When you know people as human beings up close and understand about their lives, it really alters your view of people and the view of your own world."

By VE Day, there were more than 370,000 POWs from the Third Reich being held on American soil. In addition to German facilities, there were camps in the U.S. to house more than 51,000 Italian POWs and 5,000 Japanese prisoners. More POWs were detained by American forces in Europe, the Far East and elsewhere.

Many of the captured German generals and admirals, there were 43 in all held in the U.S., were housed in private bungalows in a facility at Camp Clinton, Mississippi.

ON THE SITE OF ARKANSAS'S GREAT RIVER ROAD STAND THE REMAINS OF A FORGOTTEN WW 2 POW CAMP



The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture

THERE WERE 7 BASE CAMPS, 31 BRANCH CAMPS, 1 HOSPITAL, 3 INTERNMENT LOCATIONS AND 4 CEMETERIES IN ARKANSAS

THE POW BASE CAMPS IN ARKANSAS DURING WW2 INCLUDED:

Army & Navy General Hospital, Hot Springs, Garland County, AR, now Hot Springs National Park

Chaffee (Camp Adna R.), Ft. Smith, Sebastian County, AR (base camp), called **Fort Chaffee** since 1956, now Arkansas Army National Guard

Dermott (Camp), Dermott, Chicot County, AR (base camp)

Jerome, Drew County, AR (base camp), Japanese internment camp from October of 1942 to June of 1944. ***Became a German POW camp in October 1944.***

Monticello (Camp), Monticello, Drew County, AR (base camp)

Pine Bluff Arsenal, near Pine Bluff, Jefferson County, AR, now used by the US Army Corp of Engineers

Robinson (Camp Joseph T.), North Little Rock, Pulaski County, AR (base camp)

During World War II, the United States established many prisoner of war (POW) camps on its soil for the first time since the Civil War. *By 1943, Arkansas had received the first of 23,000 German and Italian prisoners of war, who would live and work at military installations and branch camps throughout the state.*

The presence of POW camps in the United States was due in part to a British request to alleviate the POW housing problems in Great Britain. *Initially, the U.S. government resisted the idea of POW camps on its soil.* The huge numbers of German and Italian POWs expected to occupy the camps created many problems for the federal government and the military. The military did not have the experience or manpower to maintain camps with large POW populations. Most of the skilled military personnel fluent in German and Italian were fighting overseas.

Government officials feared that housing so many prisoners could create security problems and heighten fears among Americans at home.

Establishing and managing POW camps in the United States was challenging on many levels, but organizing prison camps overseas created problems of its own. Supervising large groups of prisoners in Europe while adhering to the POW treatment policies established by the Geneva Conventions diverted food, transportation, and medical resources from the American war effort overseas. Eventually, the United States reasoned that keeping prisoners of war in the United States would be an efficient use of military resources.

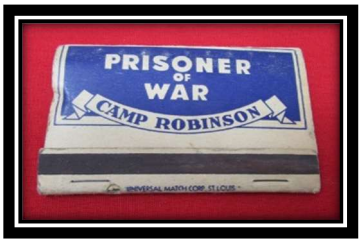
To alleviate some of the security concerns in metropolitan areas and calm citizens' fears, the United States housed prisoners in military installations and federal facilities throughout the South and Southwest.

About 425,000 captured Axis troops were sent to the United States for internment in more than 500 camps. 23,000 captured troops, mostly Germans and Italians from Erwin Rommel's Afrika Korps, were sent to POW camps in Arkansas.

Camp Robinson in North Little Rock (Pulaski County), ***Camp Chaffee in Fort Smith (Sebastian County)***, and ***Camp Dermott in Dermott (Chicot County)*** were the state's primary centers for Germans.

The remote locality of Camp Dermott in southeast Arkansas, previously the ***Jerome Relocation Center*** for Japanese Americans, made it the perfect site to house ***German officers,*** while ***Camp Monticello*** in ***Drew County housed Italians***, as did a branch camp in the Magnolia (Columbia County) area.

The Stuttgart Army Air Field in Stuttgart (Arkansas County) hosted German and Italian POWs.



Camp Robinson was regarded nationally as a model camp. Living conditions in the camps were pleasant under the circumstances and included barrack housing, recreational activities, and creative and educational opportunities.

Soccer was a popular sport among prisoners. POWs also performed theatrical plays and musical concerts. But it was not all fun and games. The POWs were required to work in and around the camp, earning eighty cents a day for their labor. Their duties included working in the camp cafeteria, in grounds maintenance, and on local construction projects. POWs could use their wages in the camp store to buy toiletries, candy, cigarettes, and even beer.

Many young men left Arkansas during World War II to serve in the military or find jobs in defense-related industries. Consequently, a labor shortage occurred in the farming and timber industries.

To alleviate these shortages, prisoners supplemented the farm and labor forces at branch camps throughout Arkansas, mostly in the Delta and southern regions. In many cases, facilities from the *Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)* served as barracks for the POWs at the branch camps.

Each day, trucks of prisoners were transported to farms and timber sites to chop cotton, cut wood, and perform other chores to help stabilize the economy. Prisoners at Camp Hot Springs, for example, worked in local hotels and built structures at Lake Catherine State Park, among other assignments.

There were few escape attempts because of the remote location of the state. Most POWs resigned themselves to a relatively comfortable existence in the camps. This lifestyle caused many citizens to accuse the military of coddling the enemy. Americans were subject to rationing of food and other items, while POWs were provided a steady diet of good food and access to many name-brand items, such as cigarettes, which were unavailable to the general population. *Additionally, many Americans whose relatives were killed or captured overseas were hostile to the prisoners.*

To ease the transition between the period of civilian labor shortage and the return of U.S. soldiers, several POW camps remained in operation for a year after the war.

Eventually, the camps were dismantled around the summer of 1946, and the prisoners were allowed to return to Europe. The fair and kind treatment experienced by German and Italian prisoners had a lasting impact on them.

After repatriation, many former prisoners returned to the United States to launch professional careers or to renew acquaintances with their former captors.