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When the Afrika Korps Came to Texas

ARNOLD P. KRAMMER*

EARLY MORNING IN A SMALL TOWN, NOT UNLIKE ANY SMALL TOWN IN the country. People are eating breakfast, businesses are opening their doors for their first customers, and city traffic is coming to life. In the distance one suddenly hears the crisp, guttural commands of military German, and busy townspeople stop, shading their eyes against the bright morning sun, to stare at the columns of young men—deeply tanned, and healthy—as they march through town to harvest the crops in the surrounding fields.

A rural town in Nazi Germany? Oldtimers in Texas know better. This scene could have taken place in Tyler, Mexia, Hearne, Kaufman, Crystal City, Marfa, El Campo, Gainesville, Bastrop, Abilene—in over a hundred other cities and towns across the state.

The United States was in its second year of World War II—1943—and the people were adjusting to the scarcity of certain products and to the daily barrage of war news. The population was exhorted to produce at Stakhanovite levels; rural people were moving to the city to get higher-paying jobs in war industries; the scarcity of tires, gasoline, and batteries was patriotically endured; OPA ration books were the housewives' bibles; and "Mairzy Doats" was at the top of the record charts. Young boys avidly followed the course of the war by shifting pins on their bedroom wall maps; people were amused to find that "Kilroy" (whoever he was) had been there ahead of them; and every advertisement reminded readers to buy war bonds.

No one remained untouched by that second year of the war, but for many Texans, the first contact with the military reality of the conflict came with the appearance in their communities of large numbers of German and Italian prisoners of war.¹

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¹Although not all the German POW's in Texas were from the *Afrika Korps*, a substantial number were—hence the title of this study. Astonishing little has been written about the German (and Italian) POW experience in the United States, and the complete history is yet to be published. Aside from newspaper accounts and several immediate postwar recollections, the interested researcher is directed to the large amount of raw data in the National Archives in Washington. The War Manpower Commission

When the United States entered the war, the question of enemy prisoners of war was among the last considerations of a country recovering from a Japanese attack and preparing for a war in Europe. The nation had never held large numbers of foreign POWs in its entire history and was unprepared for the many problems which would grow to include their feeding, registration, clothing, housing, entertainment, and even reeducation. But prepared or not, the country suddenly found itself on the receiving end of massive waves of German and Italian prisoners by the second year of the war. More than 150,000 men arrived after the North African campaign got under way in the spring of 1943. An average of 20,000 POWs arrived each month between May and October of that year. The Normandy invasion the following June sent the numbers soaring to 30,000 prisoners a month through December, and by the last months of the European war, they poured in at the astonishing rate of 60,000 a month. By the end of the war, the United States found itself holding more than 400,000 enemy captives in 511 camps across the country.²

As might be expected, an operation of this size created a vast number

records, especially the Central Correspondence File (Record Group 211) and the War Production Board records (Record Group 179) are particularly rich in state and regional reports. Also available in the National Archives are the Annual Reports submitted by the State Agricultural Extension Directors (Record Group 33) and the Provost Marshal General's Office records (Record Group 389). The researcher is also directed to the records of the Provost Marshal General's Office, Prisoner of War Division, at the Office of the Chief of Military History, Washington, and to the reports by the International Red Cross Committee as published in *Revue Internationale de la Croix Rouge, 1942-1946*, located in the Library of Congress.

The following are the most authoritative studies to date: Edward John Pluth, "The Administration and Operation of German Prisoner of War Camps in the United States During World War II" (Ph.D. dissertation, Ball State University, 1970), hereafter cited as "Operation of German Camps"; Jake W. Spidle, Jr., "Axis Prisoners of War in the United States, 1942-1946: A Bibliographical Essay," *Military Affairs*, XXXIX (April, 1975), 61-66; Arnold P. Krammer, "German Prisoners of War in the United States," *Military Affairs*, XL (April, 1976), 68-73; Joseph T. Butler, Jr., "Prisoner of War Labor in the Sugar Cane Fields of Lafourche Parish, Louisiana: 1943-1944," *Louisiana History*, XIV (Summer, 1973), 283-296; Jake W. Spidle, [Jr.], "Axis Invasion of the American West: POWs in New Mexico, 1942-1946," *New Mexico Historical Review*, XLIX (April, 1974), 93-122; Terry Paul Wilson, "The Afrika Korps in Oklahoma: Fort Reno's Prisoner of War Compound," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, LII (Fall, 1974), 360-369; Robert Warren Tissing, Jr., "Utilization of Prisoners of War in the United States During World War II. Texas: A Case Study" (M.A. thesis, Baylor University, 1973); Robert Warren Tissing, [Jr.], "Stalag-Texas, 1943-1945; The Detention and Use of Prisoners of War in Texas during World War II," *Military History of Texas and the Southwest*, XIII (No. 1), 23-34; and finally, the excellent study by Hermann Jung, *Die deutschen Kriegsgefangenen in amerikanischer Hand—USA* (Munich, 1972).

²U.S., War Department, Army Service Forces, OMPG, Prisoner of War Division, "Prisoner of War Operations," August 31, 1945 (unpublished, four-volume manu-

of problems. Obdurate Nazis, for example (and there were many among the early prisoners from the elite *Afrika Korps*), were not segregated from the anti-Nazis, which made later control and reeducation of the POWs difficult. German-speaking interpreters among the American guards were extremely scarce, since qualified linguists were usually transferred to intelligence units overseas, and the POWs were often able to take playful advantage of the guards, or to interchange identities and ranks when the opportunities arose.³ There were other problems, not the least of which came from Washington itself.

Government agencies jealously competed for jurisdiction over the POW program. The Justice Department demanded responsibility for their security; the War Department control of the camps; the State Department control over their repatriation; the War Production Board supervision of issues involving their labor, and so on.⁴

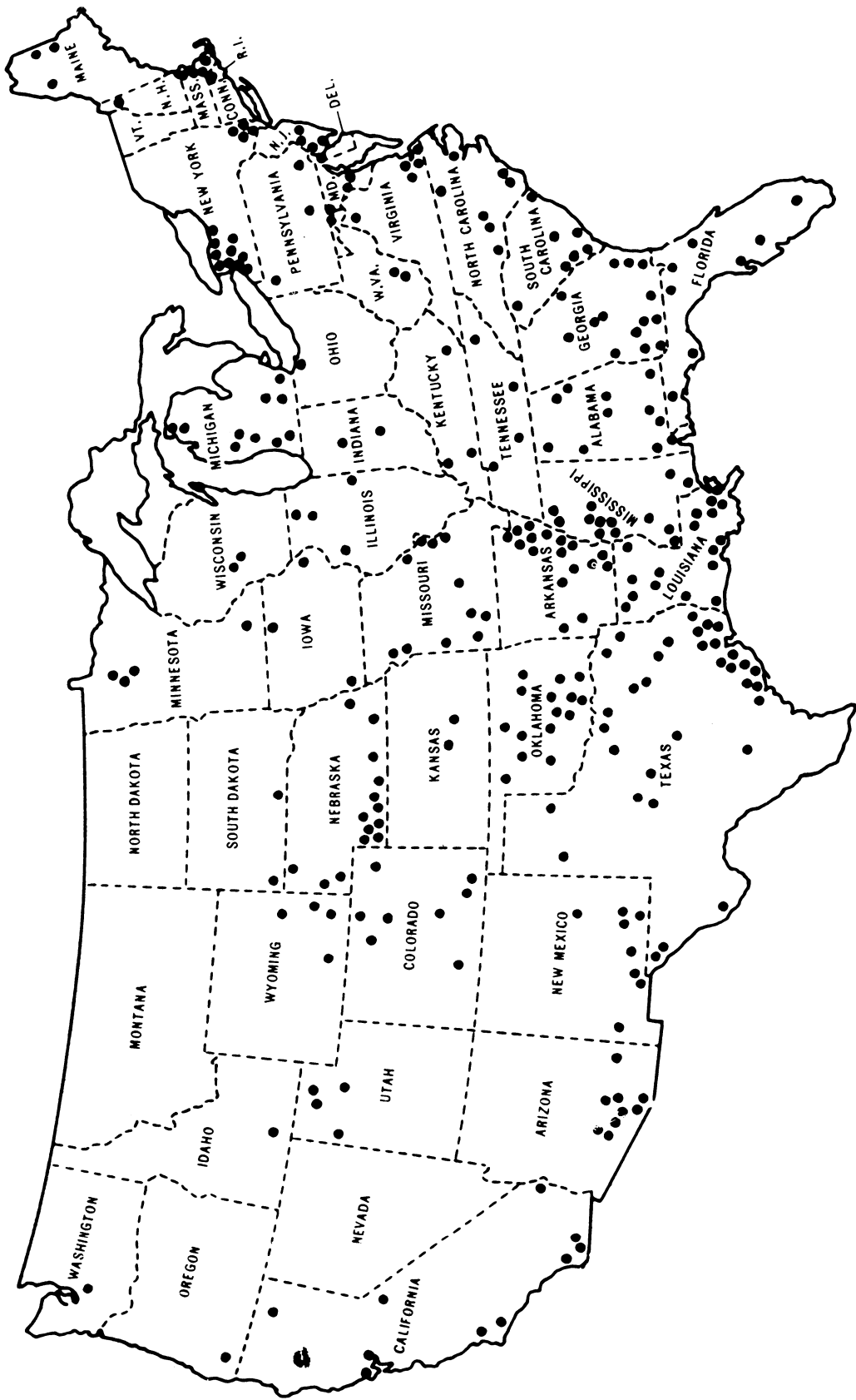
In the meantime, the prisoners were still pouring in, and the War Department, together with the Corps of Engineers, began scouring the country for camp sites. Many available county fairgrounds, municipal auditoriums, and abandoned Civilian Conservation Corps camps were held in readiness, and many military bases were ordered to prepare sections of their installations for arriving POWs. Preparation began, in the meantime, on the construction of hundreds of new POW camps, designed for between 2,000 and 4,000 men. The camps had to be located two to three miles from towns and railroad lines—close enough to transport

script collection of all regulations, directives, and procedures covered by Technical Manual 19-500) (Office of the Chief of Military History), I, 374. See also, George Lewis and John Mewha, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization by the United States Army: 1776-1945*, Department of the Army Pamphlet No. 20-213 (Washington, D.C., 1955), 90-91.

³The problems resulting from the War Department's initial failure to segregate Nazi from anti-Nazi prisoners would continue to plague the prisoner of war program, and will be touched upon later in this essay. For a thorough investigation, see Pluth, "Operation of German Camps," 333-384. The British authorities, on the other hand, followed up their initial interrogation program by carefully separating the Germans into "leaders" and "followers." Their success is illustrated in a lengthy study by Henry V. Dicks, "Personality Traits and National Socialist Ideology," *Human Relations*, III (June, 1950), 111-154. Despite even these efforts, the British public was appalled to learn about the substantial control held by Nazi officers in their POW camps. See "Critic," *New Statesman and Nation*, New Series, XXVII (January 8, 1944), 108, and "Correspondence," *ibid.*, (February 12, 1944), 108.

Regarding the lack of German-speaking guards, see James H. Powers, "What to Do with German Prisoners: The American Muddle," *Atlantic Monthly*, CLXXIV (November, 1944). According to the New York *Herald Tribune*, April 13, 1944, "Only one officer at Camp Breckenridge speaks German . . . a situation duplicated at 194 other POW camps."

⁴Pluth, "Operation of German Camps," 62-67, 90-93.



Distribution of base and branch POW camps as of June 1, 1944. From Lewis and Mewha, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization*.

Christmas dinner for German prisoners of war at Camp Swift, 1943. U.S. Army Photograph.



prisoners and provide work projects, but hopefully far enough from population areas to minimize successful escapes and acts of sabotage.⁵

Built to standard specifications, each camp was made up of two to four compounds of about 1,000 men each, and each compound was surrounded by a heavy wire fence, as was the entire camp. The barracks were designed for utility and not comfort—a concrete slab floor, a 2 x 4 built structure covered by tar paper or corrugated sheet iron, rows of cots and footlockers, and a potbellied stove in the center aisle. Such quarters would have been instantly familiar to any of the American “90-day wonders” who were being trained for shipment overseas. Many Texans, in fact, felt that the camps were too good for the prisoners and most communities began to refer to their local camp as the “Fritz Ritz.” The only difference between the POW camp and a normal army training area, in fact, was the watch towers, located at each corner of the installation, which were manned by MPs or regular GIs who, for reasons of health, lack of training, or psychological makeup, were not needed overseas.⁶

As a site was being planned, one of the major considerations was that the area have plenty of available land, and that the camp should be as far as possible from any critical war industries. As a result, fully two-thirds of all the camps in the United States, about 340 out of 511, were located in the South and Southwest, of which 120 camps (containing 78,982 POWs) were located in Texas.⁷ Such nearly forgotten installations as Camp Barkeley, Fort Russell, Camp Hearne, Mexia Internment

⁵Arthur M. Kruse, “Custody of Prisoners of War in the United States,” *The Military Engineer*, XXXVIII (February, 1946), 72.

⁶*Ibid.*, 73–74; Maxwell S. McKnight, “The Employment of Prisoners of War in the United States,” *International Labour Review*, L (July, 1944), 50; U.S., Department of War, Army Service Forces Circular No. 155, Policy Book No. 1, Part II, Sec. VIII, 10–15, May 1, 1945, RG 389, NA.

Even officials overseeing the camps, conceded that these areas “tended to be the dumping ground” for “all the field grade officers whom the Army Ground Forces found unsatisfactory.” John D. Millett, *The United States Army in World War II. The Army Service Forces. The Organization and Role of the Army Service Forces* (Washington, D.C., 1954), 371. The War Department was not unaware of this problem. Brigadier General B. M. Bryan, Jr., assistant, the provost marshal general, assured members of the Committee on Military Affairs that, “At this time the War Department is in the process of replacing as many prisoner of war guards as possible by individual who have returned from overseas and most particularly by persons who have been in prisoner-of-war camps in Germany.” U.S., Congress, *Investigations of the National War Effort, House of Representatives 79th Congress, 1st Sess.*, (Serial 10933), III, Report No. 728, p. 10. See also the *Washington Post*, April 29, 1945; and *New York Times*, April 29, 1945. One must wonder, however, about the wisdom of replacing an “unsatisfactory” officer with an officer recently returned from an enemy prison camp.

⁷U.S., War Department, Army Service Forces, OPMG, “Weekly Report on Prisoners of War as of 23 October 1944,” RG 389, NA (hereafter cited as OPMG, “Weekly

Camp, Camp Bowie, Camp Fannin, Camp Swift, Camp Maxey, and the dozens of others which once held thousands of Hitler's soldiers, bristled with military security, and, for a short period of time, changed the lives of the Texas communities around them.

Local communities in Texas had seldom more than ten or twelve weeks to adjust to the prospect of hosting a POW camp in their midst. Most received word during the late autumn of 1942, and while speculation ran high regarding the nationality of the prospective prisoners—relocated Japanese Americans, or German or Italian military captives—both townspeople and farmers were optimistic about the economic and labor potential. When it became known that a POW camp was to be established in the Brazos bottomland, for example, the Hearne city officials, with the approval of the city council and the chamber of commerce, requested the federal authorities to put it near their city. A section of privately owned land was offered for sale to the government, and local contractors rejoiced in the unexpected windfall of the construction project.⁸ The camp was quickly completed, and the community settled back to await their new “neighbors,” thousands of combat-hardened veterans of Rommel's *Afrika Korps*. Veterans of the legions that had fought across the deserts of North Africa, in the battles of Gazala, El Alamein, Tobruk, and the Kasserine Pass, had arrived in Texas.

When the first contingents arrived, entire towns turned out to watch. “When the day arrived for the first trainload of prisoners to reach Hearne,” recalls a local Texas chronicler, “the roadways leading from the outskirts of town to the main entrance of the camp were lined with curious citizens waiting to get a good look at the German prisoners of war.” They were “. . . still wearing the clothes they had on when captured several weeks previous. Bloodstains were still visible on the clothes of those prisoners who had been wounded during the fighting in North Africa.”⁹

This scene was enacted in every community hosting a POW camp. At Mexia, the townspeople lined up along Railroad Street to stare, awestruck, at the stream of German prisoners—3,250 men in desert-khaki uniforms—who disembarked from the standing train. “Holy cow!” exclaims septuagenarian resident, Val Horn, recalling that November afternoon. “The line of prisoners stretched the whole distance from town, along the Tehuacana Highway, all the way out to the camp. Remember,

Report on Prisoners of War”); also *Texas Almanac, 1945–1946* (Dallas, 1945), 78.

⁸Norman L. McCarver, Jr., to A. P. K., October 15, 1975, interview.

⁹*Ibid.*; Norman L. McCarver and Norman L. McCarver, Jr., *Hearne on the Brazos* (San Antonio, 1958), 79 (quotation).

we were a town of only 6,000 people!"¹⁰ The community of Bastrop hosted 3,865 Germans at the nearby army training installation at Camp Swift; at Camp Bowie, outside of Brownwood, more than 1,300 German prisoners were isolated on a section of the army installation, out of the way of the more than 60,000 GIs who passed through that training camp; McLean, in the Panhandle, nearly tripled its population with the arrival of 2,760 *Afrika Korps* veterans; even smaller towns like Fort Clark, Anahuac, China, Liberty, Patroon, Bannister, Chireno, and Ysleta, found themselves caught up in the POW program when small work camps of 100 to 300 prisoners sprang up in their areas.¹¹

Germans were not the only nationality of prisoners in Texas. Hereford, in Deaf Smith County, found itself hosting 2,580 Italian prisoners of war, and smaller numbers were scattered near Amarillo, Big Spring, Dalhart, Dumas, and Lubbock. A few Japanese POWs appeared in Texas; 323 in Hearne, 182 in Huntsville, and 560 in Kenedy (out of a total of 4,242 who were held in the United States during the war).¹²

Most of the communities were cautiously optimistic about having prisoner of war camps in their neighborhoods. Every community, of course, had a small minority who were understandably disturbed at the thought of having Nazis in their midst, while their sons and husbands were overseas fighting Nazism. As the war progressed toward victory, however, and the humanness of the nearby prisoners became evident, even this minority came to realize the logic of the POW program and the potential advantage of the prisoners to labor-starved farmers.

If Texas townspeople were pleased, the prisoners were relieved and a bit astonished at the conditions and treatment which greeted them. Unlike the more security conscious Department of Prisoners of War of the British War Office, for example, the American War Department allowed the incoming prisoners to retain most of their personal belongings, with the exception of currency (such funds might have made possible the bribing of guards and eventual escape and were confiscated and held for return

¹⁰Val Horn to A. P. K., October 5, 1975, interview.

¹¹Because of the need to maintain small groups of prisoners near special work sites, more than thirty branch camps were established across the state. Generally containing only enough prisoners to alleviate the local manpower shortages, these branch camps usually utilized existing facilities: abandoned Civilian Conservation Corps structures at Ysleta and Kaufman; the county fair grounds in Fort Bend County; a section of the Flower Bluff Naval Air Station at Corpus Christi; and even circus tents at Navasota. See Tissing, "Stalag-Texas," 25; Kaufman *Herald*, May 6, 1976; Corpus Christi *Times*, March 16, 1966; and OPMG, "Weekly Report on Prisoners of War."

¹²The Italian POWs, incidentally, would quickly become an embarrassment to the War Department, for after Mussolini's fall in 1943 and the Italian government's fa-

at the end of the war).¹³ At their first meal, the incoming prisoners sat down to see foods which most of them had not tasted in years: beef, tomatoes, green vegetables, milk—even ice cream! Not only that, but they found that cigarettes and, in some camps, beer and wine were available at the camp PX, purchasable with the canteen coupons with which the government paid them for daily work. “We thought we were in heaven!” recalls a former POW. “Food which was not even to be found in our Mothers’ kitchens at home! White bread, and *real coffee*! We were dumb-struck!”¹⁴

While the majority of prisoners were certainly pleased at this initial treatment, a minority of obdurate Nazis interpreted the War Department’s humanitarianism as weakness. One prisoner from the *Afrika Korps* declared to an interpreter that the Americans could congratulate themselves for giving the best food and best constructed barracks to the Germans. “When Germany wins the war,” he announced, “that will be at least one good mark on your record.” Another newly arrived prisoner recalls of his comrades at Camp Livingston, Louisiana, that they thought: “if you give us this good bread, it is only to coax us, to corrupt us. If you are treating us so well, it is only because you are afraid of losing the war.”¹⁵

avorable change of attitude toward the Allies, they were no longer POWs—but neither could they be released. Instead, they were organized into “Italian Service Units” and allowed to work in nonessential war industries. A. J. Schroeter to A. P. K., July 2, 1975, interview; OPMG, “Weekly Report on Prisoners of War,” 10.

¹³War Office, Department of Prisoners of War, *Orders for Prisoners of War Camps in the United Kingdom, Handbook* (Revised February, 1941, WO/10701, Public Records Office, London), 10.

¹⁴Alfred Klein to A. P. K., August 25, 1975, interview (quotations); Fort Worth *Star-Telegram*, June 20, 1945.

Not only were the German prisoners provided with a diet as good as that enjoyed by American troops in the United States, and far better than that of American troops at the front (who lived on C-rations), but, amazing as it seems, the War Department eventually tailored the diet to the prisoners’ tastes. If the POWs were to receive food more to their liking, Washington reasoned, they would eat more and throw away less. Captivated by the argument of food conservation, the War Department notified all camp authorities on July 1, 1944, that POW menus could be altered to suit the tastes of the inmates. Within weeks the German prisoners were receiving substantial portions of pork and wurst. Within a very short time, the dietary conditions in American camps had reached such levels that John Brown Mason, the director of the Internees Section of the Department of State, could boast that “in many camps the prisoners have asked the German Red Cross through the Swiss representatives to keep food and tobacco in Germany because they are not needed by prisoners held in this country.” John Brown Mason, “German Prisoners of War in the United States,” *The American Journal of International Law*, XXXIX (April, 1945), 204. See also, Martin Tollefson, “Enemy Prisoners of War,” *Iowa Law Review*, XXXII (November, 1946), 57; U.S., House of Representatives, Committee on Military Affairs, *Investigations of the National War Effort*, 8.

¹⁵Powers, “What to Do with German Prisoners,” 47 (first quotation); Daniel Costelle, *Les Prisonniers* (Paris, 1975), 28 (second quotation).

Other prisoners were displeased with their surroundings, and the security officer at each camp, in an effort to head off potential security problems, noted such complaints during the routine censoring of all POW mail. The following were among those noted at Camp Trinidad, Colorado:

. . . And now the camp! We are here 14 days and still have no tables nor chairs. We are given only empty promises. The Americans cannot organize the least thing. . . . They fear us "Bad Nazis" so much, but this fear only fills us with pride. Now you have an idea how things are run in "God's" country.

and

We are trying with the most primitive tools to change the wooden barracks into human living quarters. One can say it is a camp for gangsters or Indians, but not for white men and captured officers. After a victorious end of this war, retaliation for this will be taken. We have to suffer badly here, but nothing can break our morale.¹⁶

Such sentiments were expressed by only a small percentage of the prisoners in every camp. One can assume that by these men, every act of kindness would have been misinterpreted in a similar way.

Such good treatment caused a bit of grumbling among American folk who resented the quality and quantity of food being fed to the POWs, but in fact, the government had a very logical reason. The better we treated the enemy prisoners in our custody, it was reasoned, the better our own soldiers in enemy hands might be treated. The argument proved valid! While Russian prisoners in Germany drank melted snow and ate rodents, and French prisoners were humiliated and kept on short rations, American POWs—while uncomfortable to say the least—received adequate, if not decent, treatment. Each side, in effect, was conscious of the fact that the treatment it accorded its prisoners would quickly be felt by its own soldiers held captive overseas. It was a shame, however, that the War Department never disclosed these motives to an anxious public which was living with red meat stamps and counting up ration points.¹⁷

¹⁶[Zahlmeister Hans Gelhard, Camp D, June 16, 1943] (first quotation), and [Oberleutenant Willy Wulk, Camp A, June 24, 1943] (second quotation), "Camp Complaints by German P.O.W.s Camp Trinidad, Colorado." Stephen H. Farrand Collection (Hoover Institution of War, Revolution, and Peace).

¹⁷For the logic behind the POW treatment, see U.S., House of Representatives, Committee on Military Affairs, *Investigations of the National War Effort*, 1-3, 6-13, 19. Prior to 1943, the War Department's official policy concerning publicity about POW operations consisted of a strong request to editors and broadcasters that they publish nothing about the "arrival, movement, or confinement" of prisoners of war—except on the authority of the Provost Marshal General. U.S., War Department, OPMG, Memo, Note to Editors and Broadcasters, October 20, 1942, Box No. 1311, RG 389, NA. For the army's later explanation, see "The Captive Enemy," *Newsweek* (March 29, 1943), 32-34. See also, Fletcher Pratt, "How the Censors Rigged the News,"



Above, POWs preparing dinner at Camp Swift. The man in the foreground is making German bread. Below, the German mess sergeant checks supplies in the POW mess hall. U.S. Army Photograph.





Uniforms of the World War II German military: (back row, left to right) private, lance corporal in the paratroops, engineer; (front row) submarine commander, captain in an engineers regiment, and a noncommissioned officer below the first three grades, Camp Bullis, Texas. U.S. Army Photograph.

The *Afrika Korps* in Texas, meanwhile, settled into its daily routine. In accordance with the Geneva Convention of 1929, the War Department ordered that the POW camps be separated into different compounds for officers and enlisted men. Higher ranking German officers were provided with individual rooms and allowed the services of their enlisted valets. Like American officers in German camps, they were not required to work and they seldom volunteered. Even so, they received a monthly salary: lieutenants received \$20 a month; captains, \$30; and majors and higher officers received \$40. Enlisted men, as in every army, lived less luxuriously in barracks, and were paid 10¢ per day in canteen coupons, plus an additional 80¢ per day in coupons for mandatory labor.¹⁸

Harper's Magazine, CXCII (February, 1946), 97-105; and finally Sydney Weinberg, "What to Tell America: The Writers' Quarrel in the Office of War Information," *Journal of American History*, LV (June, 1968), 73-89.

¹⁸These salaries were in no way excessive. In fact, American POW officers in Ger-

Camp discipline was maintained by the prisoners themselves, and it was an interesting comment on the training of these men, that combat-hardened veterans, captured and disoriented, transported thousands of miles to camps in an unfamiliar Texas, continued their iron discipline throughout the war. Long lines of Germans moved to and from their daily work tasks, led only by several German NCOs, without a ripple of resistance or disorganization. German enlisted men came to attention whenever one of their officers strolled by, and there is no case on record of a German enlisted POW refusing to obey an order from his officer. American guards and military police marvelled at the efficiency of the internal camp operation and were impressed by the swift severity with which infractions of discipline were punished.¹⁹ Local Texas towns quickly relaxed their vigilance, and their early fears of mass escapes faded.

In their spare time (and spare time is generally what prisoners have the most of) the POWs had a variety of available programs. Sports were the most popular pastime, and both officers and enlisted men organized soccer games on the camps' parade grounds at every opportunity. Families out on Sunday afternoon drives, riding along state Highway 190 outside of Hearne, grew used to seeing young men in desert-khaki *Afrika Korps* shorts, aggressively kicking a soccer ball across a makeshift field. Some prisoners took up weightlifting, others took up handball, and still others, curious about the customs of their hosts, learned to play baseball.²⁰

Those prisoners who, before the war, preferred intellectual activities or

man hands received a slightly higher amount:

Second Lieutenant	72 Reichmarks or \$28.80
First Lieutenant	81 Reichmarks or \$32.40
Captain	96 Reichmarks or \$38.40
Major	108 Reichmarks or \$43.20
Lieutenant Colonel	120 Reichmarks or \$48.00
Colonel	150 Reichmarks or \$60.00

U.S., War Department, OPMG, "Report of Protecting Power in Washington Regarding Prisoner Payments and Rates of Exchange," September 22, 1944, Farrand Collection. Since deductions were made for all food and clothing used by the American officer-prisoners in Germany, in reality they fared no better financially than their German counterparts in the United States. For an excellent investigation into this seldom-explored subject, see Walter Rundell, Jr., "Paying the POW in World War II," *Military Affairs*, XXII (Fall, 1958), 121-134. The United States War Department even established a savings program for the thrifty, by which they could receive hard currency upon repatriation.

¹⁹An observer at the White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, POW camp noted that, "Their discipline is so deeply ingrained into their characters by this time that they learn by heart the rules and regulations that govern a prisoner's life, and never break the smallest of them. There has not been a single case of disciplinary action since the Germans moved in." F. G. Alletson Cook, "Nazi Prisoners are Nazis Still," *New York Times Magazine*, November 21, 1943, p. 38.

²⁰Klein to A. P. K., August 25, 1975, interview.

skilled crafts to physical exercise had more than enough to occupy their time as well. Each camp contained a number of men who had been carpenters, physicians, history professors, or mathematicians, and they jumped at the opportunity to conduct classes in their specialties. Regular classes were taught in everything from chemistry and physics, to American government, English language, and journalism. Some camps even offered piano lessons and courses in such subjects as "The History of American Comic Strips." With Germanic thoroughness, these mini-universities required examinations, held classroom discussion, issued final grades, and even gave graduation certificates. After May 19, 1944, the German Red Cross and the War Department even arranged for these POW-students to receive university credit through the Reich Ministry of Education.²¹ No small number of men in American camps later graduated from German universities after finishing part of their undergraduate work at "The University of Howzie" or "The University of Bolters." Two "honor students" from the Mexia Internment Camp, for example, went on to become successful professional men, thanks to their camp classrooms: Dr. Karl Janisch became an attorney and rose to become a justice of the Austrian Supreme Court, and Dr. Walter Littman went on to become a senior chemist in the West German Department of Defense. Both gratefully acknowledge their POW training, as do hundreds of others.²²

For those prisoners who showed an interest in subjects which were not available inside their camps, the War Department arranged for extension courses through local sponsoring universities. Prisoners at Camp Barkeley, for instance, took courses through Abilene Christian College; those at Camp Bowie, from Howard Payne College; at Camp Brady, from the University of Texas; at Camp Fannin, from Southern Methodist University; at Fort Bliss, from the University of Texas School of Mines; at Fort Crockett, from Rice Institute; at Fort D. A. Russell in Marfa, from Sul Ross State Teachers College; at Fort Sam Houston, from St. Mary's University; at Camp Bolters, from Texas Christian University; at Camp

²¹For the text of the Reich Ministry's directive, together with a list of German universities at which POW coursework would be honored, see U.S., Department of State, Special War Problems Division, "Copy of Letter of the German Red Cross, Dated May 19, 1944," Farrand Collection.

²²J. Fort Smith to A. P. G., August 7, 1975, interview; Klein to A. P. K., August 25, 1975, interview; Mexia *Daily News*, October 5, 1971; collection of twelve letters from former POW Heinz Koppius to Mr. and Mrs. John E. Lane, Kaufman, Texas, dated 1946 through 1950 (copies provided through the courtesy of Todd Bradley); and finally a fascinating volume which explores the many postwar German authors to come out of the American POW camp experience, and their writing: Volker Christian Wehdeking, *Der Nullpunkt: Über die Konstituierung der deutschen Nachkriegsliteratur (1945-1948) in den amerikanischen Kriegsgefangenenlagern* (Stuttgart, 1971).

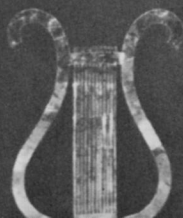


Murals painted by POWs to decorate Camp Swift's Theater No. 1. Above, the smoking room; below, a section of the theater. U.S. Army Photograph.





POWS provided their own entertainment at Camp Swift. U.S. Army Photograph.



McLean, from West Texas State Teachers College, and so forth. While there is no way of knowing how many POWs became dedicated fans of the Mustangs, Longhorns, Horned Frogs, or Owls, there is little question that many prisoners of war returned to Germany with an education substantially improved by their POW courses.²³

Prisoners with additional spare time pursued personal hobbies or handicrafts on their own. Officers, in particular, were fond of gardening, and what they did not grow, they purchased in town. J. Fort Smith of Mexia recalls that the German officers were permitted to order flowers from local florists, and kept their quarters filled with them, often spending a combined total of \$50 a day. Other POWs built walnut furniture; some painted murals on the walls of the theater, mess halls, and hospitals—a number of which still remain in Mexia. A collection of photographs of murals at Camp Swift is preserved at the Archives, Texas State Library in Austin. One enterprising prisoner at Mexia even made a clock that actually kept perfect time from some tin cans, using two Coca Cola bottles for weights. At Camp Hearne, a group of Germans painstakingly constructed complete replicas of old German castles—waist high—down to detailed turrets and moats. A curious visitor can still examine a little medieval schloss, rising just above the weed tops, in a corner of empty landscape where the camp used to be.²⁴

When public opinion caused an end to the sale of beer to POWs, prisoners in camps across Texas rose to the challenge. They started saving oranges, apples, potato peelings, and any kind of fruit, and each prisoner started hoarding his sugar ration. When they collected enough ingredients, the prisoners combined them, let them ferment, and were ready for a party. Despite the efforts of the American guards to locate the contraband liquor in monthly sweeps through the barracks, the stuff often went undiscovered until raucous laughter and slurred singing brought the guards on the run.²⁵

Too much leisure time is the worst enemy of any type of prisoner, and prison memoirs are replete with devices to keep oneself occupied. Some

²³A complete list of participating universities for the POWs in each Service Command can be found in U.S., War Department, OPMG, "Universities Sponsoring Prisoner of War Camps," Table 23, RG 389, NA.

²⁴J. F. Smith to A. P. K., August 7, 1975, interview; McCarver, Jr., to A. P. K., October 15, 1975, interview. The photographs of Camp Swift murals and a report, "Decorating Theatres at Camp Swift," are in the Edna Collins Collection (Archives, Texas State Library, Austin).

²⁵J. F. Smith to A. P. K., August 7, 1975, interview; "German Ex-POWs Return to Mexia—Recall Prison Camp Experiences," *Waco Tribune-Herald* (morning edition), October 18, 1974.

men juggle mathematical tables in their minds; others carve chess pieces out of soap; still others sketch or write; and some simply lose their sanity. Without sufficient work, military prisoners in particular develop a well-documented syndrome which sees the POW—feeling abandoned by his own country and despised by his captors—become increasingly frustrated, hostile, and, in response to his training as a soldier, aggressive against his captors.²⁶ The best solution is daily and tiring work. Fortunately, the United States was in desperate need of agricultural labor, and the needs of the prisoners exactly coincided with the needs of their captors. Following a long period of bureaucratic debate involving the War Department, the Department of Labor, the Provost Marshal General's Office, union representatives, and lobbyists from a number of industries and pressure groups, the government finally hammered out a series of directives in the fall of 1943 which outlined rules for the use of POW labor in strict accordance with the Geneva Convention.²⁷

The forced labor of enemy personnel has been a time-honored practice, and while the Geneva Convention did not prevent POW employment, it did restrict it to certain general areas. Under the direction of the War Manpower Commission and the War Food Administration within the War Department, the central guideline simply directed that a prisoner must be physically able, that the work in question must not be dangerous or unhealthy, and that no work project could be directly related to the war effort. Basically, labor could be performed in two areas: at military installations and related bases, and as labor contracted out to private businesses, farms, and small industries. Major Maxwell S. McKnight, Prisoner of War Division, assured the American public that such work involved no danger to the war effort, and that their labor would be used to displace American troops whenever possible.²⁸

²⁶See, for example, U.S., Department of Defense, *POW: The Fight Continues After the Battle*, Report of the Secretary of Defense's Advisory Committee on Prisoners of War (Washington, D.C., 1955); H. L. Ansbacher, "Attitudes of German Prisoners of War: A Study of the Dynamics of National-Socialistic Fellowship," *Psychological Monographs*, LXII (1948); Curt Bondy, "Problems of Internment Camps," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, XXXVIII (October, 1943), 453-475; and Walter A. Lunden, "Captivity Psychoses Among Prisoners of War," *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, XXXIX (March-April, 1949), 721-733.

²⁷For a complete analysis of the War Department's directives on POW labor, see Lewis and Mewha, *Prisoner of War Utilization*, 101-112; U.S., War Department, *Enemy Prisoners of War*, Technical Manual 19-500 (Washington, D.C., 1944), 5.1; and "Priorities in Allocation of Services of Prisoners of War," *Monthly Labor Review*, LVIII (June, 1944), 1189. For a short summary of Britain's utilization of POW labor, see "The Employment of Prisoners of War in Great Britain," *International Labour Review*, XLIX (February, 1944), 191-196.

²⁸McKnight, "Employment of Prisoners of War," 48, 54, 57-58; and Mason, "Ger-

Within weeks of the completed directives, thousands of prisoners were assigned to tasks on military bases at Fort Sam Houston, Fort D. A. Russell, Fort Bliss, and Fort Hood, replacing American personnel as administrative clerks, bakers, blacksmiths, carpenters, draftsmen, electricians, garbage collectors, grounds maintenance workers, locksmiths, machinists, mechanics, mosquito control technicians, plumbers, post police, shoe repairmen, sign painters, truck drivers, upholsterers, tinsmiths, warehousemen, and in seventy-eight other categories. Security was very heavy during the first few months of such job activities, as camp officials feared the damage which the POWs might accomplish when allowed to work inside active military bases during wartime. Their anxieties, however, proved essentially groundless. There were some incidents, to be sure—the stealing of sugar, the random cutting of phone wires, the occasional tearing up of mail—but nothing more serious than what, during peacetime, would be classified as vandalism.²⁹

Despite the lack of incidents and the apparent ease with which the prisoners accepted their tasks, the army issued an official *Handbook for Work Supervisors of Prisoner of War Labor* which instructed American guards to “be aloof, for the German only respects firm leadership Allow them to rest only when necessary. DRIVE!” American General Wilhelm D. Styer put the situation much more succinctly. When his aide questioned some aspect of prisoner labor, General Styer grunted that, “We must overcome the psychology that you cannot do this or that. I want to see these prisoners work like piss ants!”³⁰

And work they did. In paid work on military installations alone, the POWs—more than 160,000 of them—performed 90,629,233 man-days of labor between mid-1943 and the end of December, 1945. In dollars and cents, if one figures their value at a low \$4 a day, the military labor produced by the prisoners resulted in government savings of more than \$131,000,000—and that estimate in no way measures the value of freeing American personnel for the war effort overseas.³¹ The military-con-

man Prisoners of War in the United States,” 205.

²⁹“List of Prisoner of War Labor,” Camp Shelby, Mississippi, September 14, 1944, Farrand Collection; “Report: Visit to Camp Fannin, Texas, by Mr. Emil Greuter, Swiss Legation, Accompanied by Mr. E. Tomlin Bailey, March 8 and 9, 1944,” Tyler *Courier-Times-Telegraph* Library Files; “FBI Traces Mysterious Propaganda Pamphlets to Mexia War Prisoners,” *Mexia Daily News*, June 18, 1944; “Hearne Prisoner of War Camp Selected Distributing Point for Prisoner Mail in the U.S.,” *Hearne Democrat*, March 24, 1944; Klein to A. P. K., August 25, 1975, interview.

³⁰U.S., War Department, Army Service Forces, *Handbook for Work Supervisors of Prisoner of War Labor*, Manual 811 (Washington, D.C., 1945), 15 (first quotation); Styer quoted in Lewis and Mewha, *Prisoner of War Utilization*, 254–255.

³¹Lewis and Mewha, *Prisoner of War Utilization*, 263.

nected POW labor made up only a portion of the total labor picture, however.

Within a year of the beginning of the war, the domestic labor market was already feeling a shortage. Labor, especially farm labor, was critically short since all able-bodied young men were being drafted into the armed forces. By mid-1942, in fact, the federal government had already tried recruiting farm workers from Mexico, Jamaica, and the Bahamas, but the prospects for filling harvest and production quotas still appeared dim. Even the government admitted that the situation was growing critical.³² The logical decision, therefore, was to offer POWs to the labor-starved market on a contract basis.

Texas farmers were overjoyed that Washington, which had ignored them for so long, was at last apparently acting in their behalf. This early optimism soured, however, as farmers and small businessmen encountered the federal bureaucracy. Employers who wanted POW workers were directed to submit their requests to the local county agent, detailing the particulars of the work project; the agent, in turn, determined if the normal sources of labor were exhausted before certifying the need for POW labor. If the certificate was approved, the request was passed on to local military officials who then consulted the Department of Agriculture's Extension Service to determine how many POWs to allocate for each farm. As if that were not enough, the now-certified request went to the offices of Colonel Daniel B. Byrd, chief of the Eighth Service Command's Alien and Prisoner of War Branch, or to Major General Richard Donovan, commanding general of the Eighth Service Command, in Dallas. But the average farmer in, say, Limestone County, was not yet finished. He still had to assure the War Manpower Commission, or, in his case, County Agent Edward Singleton in Groesbeck, that he was going to pay the prevailing wage rate for "free labor" in that area, a minimum of \$1.50 per day. (The prisoners, however, still received a standard 80¢ a day in canteen coupons—the difference to be paid into the federal treasury to support the POW program.) Moreover, he had to contract with Singleton in Groesbeck for groups of not less than fifteen POWs, and promise to supply the necessary food and transportation for the prisoners. For the government's part, a farmer was allowed to deduct from each prisoner's wage one cent per

³²U.S., House of Representatives, Committee on Military Affairs, *Investigations of the National War Effort*, 8. By March, 1943, the government belatedly ordered a draft exempt status for "essential" farm workers, but the situation, as Secretary of Agriculture Claude R. Wickard himself implied, was critical. For information concerning the importation of labor, see Walter W. Wilcox, *The Farmer in the Second World War* (Ames, Iowa, 1947), 95.



German POWs repairing worn field kits and leggings at the Clothing and Equipment Section, Camp Swift. U.S. Army Photograph.

mile for transportation and 5 percent of the prevailing wage as his expense for training the worker.³³ Sounds complex? Think how it sounded during the war to a Texas farmer who desperately needed agricultural labor.

In fairness to the federal government, it should be noted that this bureaucratic maze eventually simplified itself, and by mid-1944, the requirements became so informal that, in many cases, a telephone call or personal visit to the county agent's office would be sufficient to obtain a truckload of POWs. Soon, even the most skeptical Texas farmers were waiting in line for a share of these efficient and inexpensive workers.³⁴

Hardly any eligible Texas industry failed to utilize at least a few truckloads of prisoners sometime during the war, and the POWs saw "action" in jobs which ranged from logging and food processing to flood control and rock quarrying, and hundreds of other projects, including an ironic (but far from unenjoyable) assignment as kosher meatpackers in Dallas. Wartime residents of Huntsville who recall the weekly paper drive, for instance, will remember that after March, 1944, the twice-weekly curbside collection operation was taken over by local prisoners of war. They had replaced the Boy Scouts of America. In other areas, German POWs were assigned to work on the Denison Dam Reservoir, laboring a forty-

³³Mexia *Daily News*, July 6, 7, 1953; Kaufman *Herald*, January 20, 1944.

³⁴Kaufman *Herald*, June 15, 1944; February 1, 1945.

eight hour week, and causing the American guards on the project to concede that they were "beautifully trained soldiers." Captured Nazis were also used on the railroads and in other meatpacking plants (though union opposition quickly brought these assignments to a halt), as orderlies and maintenance workers at such institutions as the Harmon General Hospital in Gregg County (now LeTourneau College in Longview), and, like the WPA of the Depression years, on the building and repair of state and county roads.³⁵ Their greatest contribution, however, was to agriculture.

In Louisiana, for example, prisoners were used to plant and harvest rice, cotton, and sugarcane—cutting more than 246,000 acres of cane in 1944 alone. In Missouri, prisoners dug potatoes and shocked oats and wheat. They picked tomatoes in Indiana, dug potatoes and sugar beets in Nebraska, and reaped wheat and seed crops in Kansas and peanuts in Georgia. In Pennsylvania the prisoners were used primarily for nursery and orchard work; in Maryland they brought in corn, hay, grain, and tobacco; in Maine they dug over 4,890,000 bushels of potatoes in 1945 alone; in New York state they picked and helped process more than 2,000,000 tons of fruits and vegetables; in Illinois they cut asparagus.³⁶

In Texas they were no less industrious. They picked peaches and citrus fruits, harvested rice, cut wood, bailed hay, threshed grain, gathered pecans, and chopped record amounts of cotton.³⁷ The process for obtaining prisoners to work on one's farm was substantially the same as for any other business, although, as the war progressed and it became evident that security would not be a problem, the system became less formal. When farmers

³⁵Huntsville *Item*, June 3, 1943; March 9, 1944; *New York Times*, May 31, 1943 (quotation); *New York Times Magazine*, November 21, 1943. For a full investigation of the labor utilization of POWs in Texas, see Tissing, "Utilization of Prisoners of War."

Not all segments of the economy welcomed the use of POW labor. George Harrison, president of the powerful Brotherhood of Railway Clerks, carried on a violent campaign against employing POWs on the railroads. *New York Times*, October 15, 1943. The Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workman of the A.F. of L. were no more pleased at the appearance of German prisoners in the meatpacking industry. *New York Times*, February 12, 1944. The International Woodworkers of America accused the government of working in collusion with employers to break down the wage and working standards established by the union. Claude Ballard to Donald Nelson, Director, War Production Board, November 10, 1943, Log No. 1853, Class No. 430.44, RG 179, NA. The Roosevelt Administration, wary of further labor unrest, decided against detailing prisoners to heavily unionized segments of the working front, and POW contracts were thereafter more carefully restricted.

³⁶Lewis and Mewha, *Prisoner of War Utilization*, 125-143.

³⁷"Nazis Hoe Cotton," *Business Week* (June 19, 1943), 18; Kaufman *Herald*, February 1, 1945. The major tasks accomplished by the POWs in Texas during 1945, for example, included the following: 103,487 acres of cotton chopped; 16,500 bales of cotton picked or pulled; 12,347 acres of corn chopped or thinned; 21,000 acres of corn harvested; 58,083 tons of hay harvested; 102,088 acres of rice harvested; 2,360 cords

such as W. L. Maxwell or H. V. Porter, outside of Huntsville, decided to asked for POW labor, they contacted the office of the War Manpower Commission in Huntsville, initiating a process which finally ended at the desk of Colonel J. R. Carvolth, commander of the army POW camp at Huntsville. Once assured that Maxwell and Porter would be paying into the federal treasury the required \$1.50 per man per day and that they would provide the transportation and required farm tools, Colonel Carvolth approved the contracts and selected work groups of fifteen to twenty men from among the thousands of former *Wehrmacht* soldiers. They were young, the farmers recalled, about twenty years old on the average, very enthusiastic and eager to learn. Guarded by a minimum of armed GIs from the camp, the prisoners worked a steady ten-hour day, broken only by a lunch of bologna sandwiches supplied by the farmers, which was eaten out in the fields as the men sat in the shade of an available tree. "One of the biggest problems," recalls Carl Maisen, an American POW camp guard, "was that, when a farmer had a tractor and mules, all the prisoners wanted to operate the tractor—and we had to set up two shifts so that all could have a turn at the tractor."³⁸

The prisoners generally wore their *Afrika Korps* shorts and peaked caps, or in chilly weather, the regulation blue fatigues with the letters "PW" stenciled in large white letters across their backs. They were theoretically forbidden to fraternize with either the guards or civilian laborers, though fraternization with both occurred regularly. They obeyed commands instantly and sang as they marched to and from work. One day an American sergeant was marching a group down the road from Bastrop to Camp Swift (or so the local story goes) and found himself groping in his vocabulary for the German equivalent of "Halt!" (which happens to be "Halt!") He threw up his arm to stop them, and the entire platoon came to attention, shot their arms upward, and chorused "Heil Hitler!"³⁹

of wood cut; 9,346 acres of land cleared; 2,150 miles of fence built or repaired; 133,952 acres of grain sorghum shocked; 107,468 bushels of potatoes picked; 1,848 acres of potatoes harvested. Texas Extension Service, "Annual Reports, 1945," Texas A&M College (College Station, Texas, 1945) (Texas A&M University Library), 401-402, 405. See also Tissing, "Utilization of Prisoners of War," 61-68.

³⁸"Nazis Hoe Cotton," 18; *Mexia Daily News*, June 30, 1971 (quotation).

³⁹Wilma Wiley to A. P. K., September 5, 1976, interview.

On some occasions, only one guard was required for groups of fifty to ninety prisoners, and for tasks requiring three or four prisoner to do yard work or house painting, the farmer was often in complete charge of the men. Prisoners escaped so infrequently that guards were very casual in their watch. The relationship between the POWs and the farmers appears to have been one of mutual and genuine admiration. "One Tehuacana farmer, Lloyd D. Yelverton, stated, 'They were just the best bunch of boys you ever saw in your life. You enjoyed being around them.'" Tissing, "Stalag-Texas," 29.

The stories and anecdotes about the prisoners in Texas are as varied and numerous as the men and work tasks involved. On one point, however, all participants will heartily agree: the German POWs were excellent workers, and in spite of the bureaucratic red tape and the frustration of training one group of workers, only to receive a new and untrained group the following day, their labor was gratefully utilized. There is also little question that the POW contract program in Texas, as throughout the rest of the country, was important in relieving the acute domestic labor shortage, both in small businesses and on the farm.

While there is no way of knowing what the state or country's agricultural production would have been had the prisoners not been available, the federal government was pleased to announce the following figures before Congress at the end of the war. On contract labor alone, between mid-1943 and 1946, the POWs completed 20,882,852 man-days in agricultural work, 5,047,867 man-days on forest operations, 4,229,588 man-days in food processing, and 4,058,878 man-days on other work—a total of 34,219,185 man-days. In monetary terms, the federal treasury received more than \$39,000,000 from contract employers alone.⁴⁰

"I don't know whether people appreciate the value of the prisoners," commented Major General Russel B. Reynolds, commanding officer of the Sixth Service Command. "Their background of intense military training made them steady and uncomplaining workers; they are conserving a vast quantity of manpower, doing jobs in which soldiers or civilians would otherwise have been used."⁴¹

Another viewpoint, reported in a 1943 issue of *Business Week*, was voiced by a civilian worker in Texas. "The big Negro perched on the tractor . . . as he gazed across the cotton fields at the cluster of German

There is an interesting contradiction in this prisoner-farmer relationship. Considering that the estimates of active Nazis within the POW camps ranges from 10 percent to over 50 percent, one can only speculate on the reasons. Ansbacher, "Attitudes of German Prisoners of War," 13, 15, 18, 20; Dicks, "Personality Traits and National Socialist Ideology," 152; Powers, "What to Do with German Prisoners," 48. Many of the POWs were farm boys themselves, and the easy familiarity of rural life may have taken precedence over political ideologies. Also, their noncommissioned officers usually preferred less tedious tasks. Perhaps the length of their imprisonment caused an erosion of ideological commitment, or the steady influx of war news caused a deterioration of prisoner morale. Whatever the reason, the fact remains that the prisoners working in agriculture developed warm, if not friendly, relationships with their employers. One such prisoner, working at Cedar Lane Farms outside of Kaufman, turned to his employer on a hot afternoon, smiled, and said: "Well, Hitler said we would be in America in 1945; and here we are—chopping cotton." Mrs. John E. Lane to A. P. K., June 12, 1976, interview.

⁴⁰Lewis and Mewha, *Prisoner of War Utilization*, 262–265.

⁴¹Rockford [Illinois] *Morning Star*, March 15, 1945.



Texas POWs worked in a number of food-processing jobs. Above, sealing cans of sweet peppers, and below, stuffing sweet peppers into olives, both at the cannery located in Alvin, Texas. U.S. Army Photograph.



prisoners . . . [complacently] chopping cotton. . . . 'It's a pity,' he murmured, 'that nice young folks like them . . . has to get in sech devilment that they has to chop cotton so far from home.'⁴²

A final viewpoint was registered from the side of the POWs. "I was lance corporal with Rommell [*sic*]," said former POW Wilhelm Sauerbrei in an East Texas drawl as he recalled his days at Camp Hearne during a 1957 reunion in Houston. "Captured in Africa in 1943, I was brought to Houston, Texas, then to the Prisoner of War Camp at Hearne, Texas[,] and put to picking cotton. Darned if they didn't pay us for it—80¢ a day! Man, that was eight beers or eight packs of cigarettes!"⁴³

Even these pleasant circumstances did not reconcile all of the prisoners to their situation, particularly not the dedicated Nazis from Rommel's legions. Inevitably, they were involved in a number of escapes or escape attempts. In contrast to the highly publicized mass escapes and attempts from camps in other states, at places like Papago Park, Arizona; Trinidad, Colorado; or Fort Ord, California, not more than two dozen POWs ever escaped in Texas, and every escapee was caught within three weeks—most of them much sooner. Generally motivated by feelings no more sinister than boredom, the prisoners often simply wandered away from their work parties and were picked up within hours at nearby towns, confused and helpless.⁴⁴ Unlike American prisoners in Germany, who could escape to neutral Sweden or Switzerland and who often had the help of the French underground, German prisoners in the United States found little sympathy among local Texans, and even if they had, where could they have gone? Such logic, however, did not stop some of them from trying.

In mid-1944, for example, a prisoner who had escaped from the Mexia camp was found a day and a half later huddling in a railroad boxcar, hungry and thirsty, on an unused rail spur line in the middle of the downtown area. He was unaware that neither the car nor the spur line were in use. In another case, J. Fort Smith of Mexia recalled, one prisoner made a successful break from a work party, but cut across a fenced-in pasture and was run up a tree by an angry Brahman bull. When the guards, who were searching for him along Highway 14, were attracted by his cries for help and rescued him, he was enormously grateful to get safely back to camp. Another escape occurred when a few of the prisoners, also at Mexia, decided to drift away from camp for a few days, and made

⁴²"Nazis Hoe Cotton," 18.

⁴³McCarver and McCarver, *Hearne on the Brazos*, 82.

⁴⁴New York *Times*, August 10, November 9, 1943; June 29, July 29, October 9, December 26, 27, 1944; February 13, 1945; *Arkansas Gazette*, December 26, 27, 1944; "The Kriegsmarine Escape," *Newsweek* (January 8, 1945), 33-34.



Two prisoners of war sawing logs for a lumber company near Pollack, U.S. Army Photograph.

some dummies which their comrades stood up at the back of the line during morning inspection, “so that none of the guards would know that the men had gone. It worked fine,” said former POW Werner Richter, “until one of the dummies fell over.”⁴⁵ Such naive schemes as this could seldom lead to successful escapes.

At Camp Hearne, there were only two escapes. The first was rather uneventful: an escaped POW was found marching along the highway between Hearne and Franklin, wearing civilian clothes over his camp uniform, and heartily singing German army marching songs. He was gently returned to camp, and for some reason could not understand how the local farmer who caught him had seen through his clever disguise. The second escape was a bit more sophisticated. Six Germans spent part of every day constructing a makeshift boat in a hidden area along the Brazos River: a remarkable craft made of waterproof GI ponchos with umbrellas for sails. One night they escaped and sailed their improvisation down the Brazos, hoping to reach the coast. Once there, they hoped to find the mouth of the Guadalupe River and work their way upstream to the “safety” of the German communities of New Braunfels, Comfort,

⁴⁵*Mexia Daily News*, June 30, 1971; J. F. Smith to A. P. K., August 7, 1975, interview; *Dallas Morning News*, October 10, 1971 (quotation).

or even Fredericksburg. An ambitious project, but short lived. They were caught near Bryan, and that was that.⁴⁶

There were a number of more serious escapes, though none of the prisoners remained uncaught. On June 6, 1943, for example, a group of eight "hard cases" escaped from a work detail between North Camp Hood and South Camp Hood, near Temple, and were captured, one by one, as they fled across Bell County. One was caught at Flat, two others were picked up by Bell County Sheriff John Bigham and Deputy Ralph Jeffers, near Sparta, and so forth, until they were all safely returned to their compound at Camp Hood. Despite an article by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover to the effect that "Even one escaped prisoner at large, trained as he is in the techniques of destruction, is a danger to our internal security, our war production, and the lives and safety of our citizens," every escaped POW was quickly rounded up, and not a single incident of sabotage by an escapee is on record.⁴⁷ As a matter of fact, the army showed a better record than that of the federal penitentiary system.⁴⁸

Far more serious, but generally unpublicized, were the deaths and beatings which took place inside of the camps. The War Department's initial failure to segregate the anti-Nazis from the Nazis continued to plague the POW program throughout the war. Despite the efforts of the War Department to introduce a de-Nazification and education program in each camp, the undercover struggle went on. Books on democracy were distributed to all the prisoners, civics classes were organized, and the inmates were encouraged to publish camp newspapers.⁴⁹ While the lessons in demo-

⁴⁶Bryan Eagle, October 14, 1973; McCarver, Jr., to A. P. K., October 15, 1975, interview. Similar escapes occurred at a number of other Texas camps. At Camp Berkeley, for example, German POWs periodically escaped and were found, without exception, taking an afternoon nap in Abilene's old band stand. Abilene Reporter-News, October 3, 1971; Ed N. Wishcamper to A. P. K., September 10, 1975, interview.

⁴⁷Mexia Daily News, June 10, July 25, 1943; New York Times, August 10, 1943; J. Edgar Hoover, "Enemies at Large," American Magazine, LXXXVII (April, 1944), 97 (quotation); and William E. Kirwan, "German Prisoners of War," Bulletin of the Bureau of Criminal Investigation, New York State Police, IX (August, 1944), 1-6.

⁴⁸As of June 30, 1944, the comparative escape rate from POW camps and federal penitentiaries was as follows:

federal prisoners:	15,691	Escapes:	69	Rate:	.0044
prisoners of war:	288,292	Escapes:	1,036	Rate:	.0045

The army pointed out that "(A) In most Federal penitentiaries prisoners are confined behind permanent walls and their escape is retarded by the latest scientific devices, and (B) Prisoners of War are confined in barbed wire compounds and are sent out from the camp daily on work projects." See U.S., War Department, Bureau of Press Relations, Press Conference of Major General Archer L. Lerch, PMG, The Pentagon, Prisoner of War Fact Sheet, February 13, 1945, 3, Prisoner of War File, U.S., Item 33836, Office of the Chief of Military History; New York Times, January 18, 1945.

⁴⁹The War Department's reeducation of prisoners of war is a study in itself. The

cracy were only moderately successful, appealing mainly to those already interested, the newspaper idea caught on right away. It not only allowed the prisoners to put their arguments into print, thereby experiencing democracy firsthand, but it provided the authorities with a weekly weather-vane regarding the prisoners' moods and opinions. In Texas, the POWs were particularly prolific, producing nine separate weekly papers: Camp Bowie published *Brücke* and *Lagerspiegel*; Fort Crockett put out *Willie und Weg*; Camp Fannin published *Aufbruch*; Camp Hearne published *Spiegel*; Camp Hood put out *Neuland*; and Camp Maxey's literary-minded prisoners put out no less than three newspapers, *Echo*, *Der Texas Horchposten*, and *Deutsche Stimme*.⁵⁰

Nonetheless, each camp experienced a rash of kangaroo courts and beatings, as the "hard cases" tried to bring the others into line. The non-commissioned officers in the German army, as in most armies, were responsible for the maintenance of discipline among the enlisted men, and, because of this fact they had been promoted to their rank as much for their ideological views as for their combat experience. Noncommissioned officers, moreover, were required by the Geneva Convention to provide only supervisory work. Thus, as prisoners they held in their hands power identical to that which they had wielded before capture. In an effort to maintain the smooth operation of the prisoner of war camps, therefore, the American authorities in most camps simply handed over responsibility for the assignment of duties and for the general control of discipline to the German noncommissioned officers. Quoting an American corporal

interested reader is directed to Henry W. Ehrmann, "An Experiment in Political Education: The Prisoner of War Schools in the United States," *Social Research*, XIV (September, 1947), 304-320; F. G. Alletson Cook, "Democratic ABC's for Nazi PW's," *New York Times Magazine* (November 11, 1945), 8; Genevieve Forbes Herrick, "Behind Barbed Wire: German POWs Learn of Freedom," *The Rotarian*, LXVIII (March, 1946), 22-24; *Washington Post*, July 10, 1944, January 20, 28, 1945; U.S., War Department, OPMG, "Story of the PW Reeducation Program," March 5, 1946, and OPMG, Special Projects Division, "Re-education of Enemy Prisoners of War," November, 1945, both on file in the Office of Chief of Military History, File 4-4.1 BA; and finally, Cummins E. Speakman, Jr., "Reeducation of German Prisoners of War in the United States During World War II" (M.A. thesis, University of Virginia, 1948). The program faced considerable opposition. See, for example, *New York Times*, November 30, 1944; *Washington Post*, August 20, 1944. Among the few postwar studies of the results of the program, see Helen Peak, "Some Psychological Problems in the Re-education of Germany," *Journal of Social Issues*, II (August, 1946), 26-38; U.S., War Department, OPMG, "Poll of German Prisoner of War Opinion," Office of Chief of Military History; Anna J. Merritt and Richard L. Merritt (eds.), *Public Opinion in Occupied Germany: The OMGUS Surveys, 1945-1949* (Urbana, Illinois, 1970), 200-201.

⁵⁰For a complete list of all POW newspapers, see Karl John Arndt (ed.), *Microfilm Guide and Index to the Library of Congress Collection of German Prisoner of War Newspapers Published in the United States from 1943-1946* (Worcester, Mass. 1965).

who served eight months at a POW camp, John Powers noted that,

"It is the *Feldwebel* (sergeant), not the commissioned officer, who commands the men's respect. In this group we find quite obviously the greatest percentage of Nazis. I should say that 50 percent of the German noncoms definitely support Hitler and his government. They are, in reality, a police force in the camp, since all activity inside the barbed wire is directed by them. The effect of their rules in a little Germany, where persecution of anti-Nazis is thorough and violent."⁵¹

One POW at Camp Hearne, a man named Kraus who had grown up in the United States and returned to Germany before the war, only to find himself drafted into the German army, was beaten to death by other prisoners who believed him to be an informer. Another either threw himself or was thrown under the wheels of a passenger train while on labor detail in the Brazos Valley. At Camp Swift on April 19, 1944, ten prisoners nearly killed an "informer." And so on. Similar incidents occurred at Camp Fannin, Camp Berkeley, Fort D. A. Russell, Camp Wolters, Camp Wallace, Camp Hood, Fort Bliss, and, as far as the authorities could determine, at at least six additional base and branch camps.⁵²

In many cases, lacking evidence to prove who the culprits were, authorities could only place the suspects in the camp stockade for punishment. In cases where stronger but not conclusive evidence existed, suspects were sent to a special camp for obdurate Nazis at Alva, Oklahoma. In cases where the evidence was conclusive, or the crimes particularly brutal, the prisoners were court-martialed and sent to a federal penitentiary. For example, when eleven prisoners assaulted a fellow POW at Camp Hood on March 26, 1944, all eleven were shipped to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Similar punishment was dealt out to three Italian POWs who stole a car on Christmas day, 1944, at Hereford; when Italian POW Francesco D'Angelo stabbed fellow POW Pieruigi Berticelli to death at Hereford, he received ten years, hard labor, at the Federal Reformatory at El Reno,

⁵¹Powers, "What to Do with German Prisoners," 49. The chaplain of the POW camp at Huntsville, First Lieutenant Maurice H. Hall, told an interviewer that "60 percent of the prisoners are confirmed Nazis. You might as well preach Christianity to a wall as to these Hitlerites. The Nazis are treacherous, often trying after midnight in the barracks to lynch their comrades who are not Nazis. Unless we evangelize these men, they will return to Germany after the war with nothing but contempt for our ideals, more than eager to fight another war." *Duluth Herald*, November 11, 1943. See also "The Gestapo in America," *New York Times*, January 18, 1945.

⁵²*New York Times*, January 17, 1945; McCarver, Jr., to A. P. K., October 15, 1975, interview; U.S., War Department, OPMG, "Enemy Prisoners of War Under Sentences of Courts Martial (through 31 August 1945)," "Prisoner of War Operations," 4-4-3, AA, Vol 3, Office of Chief of Military History; *Mexia Daily News*, February 22, 1945; Klein to A. P. K., August 25, 1975, interview; Wiley to A. P. K., September 5, 1976, interview; and finally, a number of personal interviews with former prisoners of war in Costelle, *Les Prisonniers*, 32-43, 74-91.

Oklahoma; three prisoners convicted of stealing an auto at Tuscola on March 29, 1944, were sent to Leavenworth; four Germans went to the Texas Department of Corrections prison at Huntsville for nearly killing a fellow prisoner at Camp Wallace on January 3, 1945; and German POWs Josef Rondorf and Ignaz Luke received eight years at hard labor at Leavenworth, after initiating an escape attempt in a stolen skiff on May 23, 1945, near Haslan, Texas.⁵³ In every case the army acted swiftly, though the local communities knew little or nothing about these goings-on.

As the war drew to a close, American opinion divided on the question of repatriation. One segment held that to send the German prisoners home so soon after the end of the war would be impractical for the United States and dangerous to the Allied occupation forces. In any case, the German prisoners should learn that repatriation is a privilege, not a right. The other side argued that, with the war over, the Geneva Convention was no longer in force, and the United States no longer had any legal right to hold or work the POWs. (For that matter, with the war over, they were not even legally prisoners of war.) Editorials began to appear in at least one influential journal which accused the government of being in the slave trade, making us no better than the Nazis we had just defeated.⁵⁴ It should be pointed out, in fairness to a government under the direction of a new president and coping with thousands of postwar problems, complicated by difficulties with its former Allies, that Washington was moving as fast as possible on the question of POW repatriation.⁵⁵

Repatriation finally began in earnest in November, 1945, and POWs were returned to Europe at the rate of 50,000 a month, though many were used to help rebuild war-damaged Britain and France before their ultimate return to Germany. The final boatload of 1,386 German prisoners "waved an indifferent farewell," and sailed for Europe from Camp

⁵³U.S., War Department, OPMG, "Enemy Prisoners of War Under Sentences of Courts Martial," 1-7. Interestingly, the director of the Internees Section of the Department of State, John Brown Mason, noted in his otherwise authoritative study that "The general public appears to have a grossly exaggerated idea of the Nazi-criminal aspects of camp life; there have been a total of only 2 murders and not over 10 severe beatings due to political reasons." Mason, "German Prisoners of War in the United States," 213 n.

⁵⁴New York *Times*, May 19, 31, July 1, 30, 1945; *Washington Post*, April 24, May 6, 1945; "Uncle Sam in the Slave Trade," *Christian Century* (June 12, 1946), 741; "Set These Slaves Free!" *ibid.* (July 31, 1946), 933-934.

⁵⁵In the meantime, the issue of how to treat the POWs was resolved decisively by a terse statement from the Department of the Army. While being questioned during a news briefing, a harrassed army spokesman declared simply, "The Army does not make policy, but implements it. I cannot tell you when repatriation will be completed; but I can tell you this: regardless of the final date of their return to Germany—while they're in this country, we'll work the hell out of them!" "The Nation: Enough Nazis," *Newsweek*, XXV (May 21, 1945), 38.

Shanks, New York, on July 22, 1946, leaving the commander of Camp Shanks, Colonel Harry W. Maas, to echo the feeling of the country at large, sighing "thank God, that is over!"⁵⁶ And with the exception of only 188 Germans, 25 Italians, and one Japanese POW who were in hospitals or serving prison terms in the United States, it was, indeed, over.⁵⁷

In Texas, prisoners were funnelled from the smaller branch camps into the larger base camps, and from the base camps to the military installations at Fort Bliss, Fort Sam Houston, and Camp Hood. As the prisoners left Texas by the trainload, the camps began to dry up. In Hearne, for example, the federal government declared the entire camp "surplus property," and, together with its two hundred buildings, the camp was put up for sale to the general public. Several of the buildings were bought for homes and moved into Hearne. The hospital was also moved into town and is still used by the school system. The city of Hearne purchased 292 acres of camp land and part of that area is now the small Hearne municipal airport. The construction of an industrial park is currently being considered on an additional section of the land. The only building remaining at the site today, in fact, is the headquarters of the former commanding officer, which was purchased together with land around it by the local post of the American Legion for its headquarters. Otherwise all that remains of the Hearne Prisoner of War Camp are the crumbling foundations of the buildings that housed the POWs, a disused cemetery, and a concrete model of a medieval German castle.⁵⁸

⁵⁶U.S., War Department, Bureau of Public Relations, Press Branch, "Transfer of German Prisoners to France to be Resumed," November 21, 1945, Farrand Collection; "German Prisoners of War in France: Opportunity to Become Free Workers," *International Labour Review*, LVI (September, 1947), 334-335; *New York Times*, May 1, July 22, September 5, 1945, July 23, 1946 (quotation), February 26, March 3, 1947; "Last of the Supermen," *Newsweek* (August 5, 1946), 20.

⁵⁷Not all the prisoners of war were anxious to leave Texas for the uncertainties of postwar Europe, and according to the United States Department of Justice, Immigration and Naturalization Service, a large but undisclosed number of former German POWs began the process of legal immigration to the United States immediately upon arriving in Germany. James F. Green to A. P. K., August 13, 1975, interview. At least one German POW, a Joachim Obier, destined, perhaps, for temporary assignment in French agriculture or German mines, could not wait. On June 20, 1946, he broke out of a POW transit camp in Oxford, England, and went straight to the United States Embassy in London; he was apprehended after pleading to be returned to Texas. *New York Times*, June 21, 1946. Other former POWs were less dramatic. In a letter to the editor of the *Dallas Morning News*, a Hans-Jochen Sembach wrote from Germany that, "My finest period of war imprisonment was spent . . . at White Rock. . . . For me Texas is unforgettable. . . . I fled out of Camp Shanke [*sic*], N.Y., to travel back to Dallas, but the MP's had good eyes. . . . I want back in old Texas and I can work." *Dallas Morning News*, March 25, 1951.

⁵⁸McCarver, Jr., to A. P. K., October 15, 1975, interview.



POWs stationed near Alvin worked on the construction of an irrigation canal for nearby rice farmers. U.S. Army Photograph.

Fort D. A. Russell, a military reservation of some 2,700 acres overlooking Marfa, was deactivated during the early 1950s and sold at auction. The area today is covered by private homes, and on the site of the old POW section now stands a Federal Land Bank Office, the Border Patrol Sectional Headquarters, and a laundromat.⁵⁹

Fort Bliss and Camp Hood (now Fort Hood), of course, are still active military bases, and if anything have grown larger since those days. Fort Sam Houston is now a large portion of San Antonio itself, and serves as the 5th Army Headquarters. Mexia Internment Camp, which once held as many as 8,500 prisoners of war, was sold back to the local community by the federal government, and in April, 1946, after protracted negotiations, became the Mexia State School and Home (now Mexia State School).⁶⁰

Camp Bowie in Brownwood, once the bustling site of the activation of the 36th Division and later the training area for thousands of GIs (and residence of several thousand POWs), was deactivated after the war, and the land placed on the auction block. The town of Brownwood, then located two miles from the camp, has since expanded to the camp site

⁵⁹Marfa Chamber of Commerce to A. P. K., January 10, 1976, interview.

⁶⁰Killeen *Daily Herald*, November 9, 1972; Mexia *Daily News*, October 10, 18, 1945.



Prisoners of war line the street to pay respect as a funeral Swift. U.S. Army

itself, which now boasts a new industrial park area, hospital, and junior high school.⁶¹

Camp Swift, seven miles north of Bastrop, was one of the largest army training and transshipment camps in Texas, and, at its wartime peak, held nearly 90,000 men (including the 95th Division, the 97th Division, and 105th—Indian Head—Division). Like Camps Bowie, Russell, Fannin, and Mexia, Camp Swift was deactivated after the war and sold back to the original landowners. Today the former camp site contains scattered housing developments and ranches, a University of Texas cancer research center, and a unit of the Texas National Guard. After two years of public protest, the Bastrop community is resigned to a new government struc-

⁶¹Brownwood Chamber of Commerce to A. P. K., December 16, 1975, interview.



procession leaves the POW camp for the cemetery, Camp Photograph.

ture soon to be built at Camp Swift. Ironically, considering the earlier use of the area, the \$11 million structure will be a medium security prison—a Federal Youth Center for youthful first offenders. All that remains of the original POW camp are some concrete barracks foundations, several warehouses, and an abandoned camp cemetery in which lie an unknown number of German prisoners. Despite these meager remnants of the war years, the Bastrop Chamber of Commerce reports that affluent German visitors—alumni of the “Class of ’44”—still return, periodically, to poke among the ruins and look up friends in town.⁶²

So it goes across the state. Camps were sold back to the communities,

⁶²Austin *American-Statesman*, September 19, 1976; Bastrop *Advertiser*, September 16, 1976; Bastrop Chamber of Commerce to A. P. K., July 1, 1976, interview.

turned into farmland or real estate developments, and are all but forgotten. Only the persistently curious chronicler or the accidentally lucky tourist may stumble across an old camp site, or happen to chat with a local resident who might dimly recall the appearance of the prisoners of war in his community. In the main, however, those days have slipped by, unrecorded, except as they added a few more varicolored threads to the rich tapestry of Texas history.

If the local communities have forgotten about those days, the prisoners have not. Because the Germans saw their incarceration as an extension of their wartime military service, former prisoners meet for periodic reunions both in Germany and in Texas. More than three hundred former prisoners from the Mexia camp, for example, gathered for a reunion at Heidelberg in June, 1973, and crammed their signatures on several 6" x 8" photo postcards, which they mailed to favorite guards and special friends like Val Horne and J. Fort Smith. A few former prisoners, now affluent German and Austrian citizens, return to their old camp sites periodically to stroll through the "old neighborhood," noting changes and reminiscing. Some communities like Kaufman have taken a personal interest in the career of a former POW—in this case a now prosperous German banker, Heinz Koppius—and close correspondence is maintained by a number of townspeople. In what must be one of the more ironic epilogues of the POW experience in Texas, three former prisoners, Werner Richter, Walter Littman, and Karl Janisch, were honored by Mexia Mayor Billy Pollard, during one of their periodic pilgrimages in October, 1971, with certificates of honorary citizenship of Mexia and the Keys to the City!⁶³ Similar reunions have taken place at nearly every Texas community which hosted a camp during the war.

It was during one of these reunions, this one at Hearne with a former POW named Wilhelm Sauerbrei, that the best summary of the prisoner of war experience in Texas was made. While driving up from Houston in a car full of community dignitaries and reporters, the former *Afrika Korps* corporal regaled the occupants with stories and recollections about his days in Texas.

"You must have had it pretty easy," the Houston reporter commented.

"I'll tell you, pal," Sauerbrei said confidentially, "if there is ever another war, get on the side that America isn't, then get captured by the Amerians, —you'll have it made!"⁶⁴

⁶³Mexia *Daily News*, October 5, 1971.

⁶⁴McCarver and McCarver, *Hearne on the Brazos*, 82 (quotation).