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The “Other Braceros”

Temporary Labor and German Prisoners of War in the United States, 1943–1946

This article explores the contradictions between the bracero program and the temporary labor program using German prisoners of war in the United States during World War II. Despite the bilateral agreement between Mexico and the United States aimed at protecting the braceros, “who came as allies,” they remained alien workers and outsiders. In contrast, German prisoners of war, who came as enemies, were often transformed into personal friends “like our own boys.” This article uses archival records, in-depth interviews with former prisoners of war, and secondary sources to analyze several structural factors that help explain these divergent outcomes.

Confronting significant labor shortages during World War II, the government of the United States embarked on an “unprecedented experiment in inter-American labor migration,” commonly known as the bracero program (Craig 1971: 51). A series of bilateral agreements between Mexico and the United States first signed in 1942, the bracero program began as a labor emergency program, primarily in agriculture and later, in 1943, in railroad maintenance of way and mining. Its main purpose was to ensure the continued supply of cheap labor during World War II, when many Americans were drafted into the armed forces or left the low-wage sector to seek employment in the rapidly growing defense industry. Although it was conceived as strictly temporary, to be terminated at the end of the war, the bracero program was renegotiated and extended several times. It was finally discontinued in 1964.¹

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The long-term and, above all, unintended consequences of the bracero program extended beyond the time when it was in effect and continue to be felt today. In addition to institutionalizing previously random and uncontrolled migration from Mexico to the United States, the bracero program gave rise to the major contours of modern Mexican migration to the United States, both documented and undocumented, ultimately leaving a profound legacy for migration patterns as well as for the economies and politics of both countries (Garcia y Griego 1981; Gamboa 1990). Today the bracero program serves as the classic example of the tendency inherent in temporary foreign worker programs, often politely termed guest worker programs, to lead to longer-term migration and settlement. Given its legacy, it is not surprising that the bracero program is well known among students of international migration. Yet the labor shortages created by World War II gave rise to a less well known temporary labor program, the systematic employment of prisoners of war, mostly Germans.

The 380,000 German prisoners of war interned in the United States were not originally considered a potential source of temporary labor. Within a year of the arrival of the first 2,000 prisoners in November 1942, however, their labor had become an integral part of the American wartime economy. Prisoners of war contracted to private employers worked in a variety of industries, including railroad maintenance of way, forges and foundries, and open pit mines. They were frequently delegated to emergency work, such as snow removal, flood control projects, and road construction. Most worked in agriculture and related fields, such as canning and logging (Lewis and Mewha 1955: 140; Krammer 1991: 84–89). Between late 1943 and early 1946, German prisoners of war worked in every aspect of American agriculture and food production and in almost every state. In addition to helping offset critical manpower shortages, preventing the loss of crops, and increasing production, the extensive use of prisoner-of-war labor turned out to be profitable all the way around (Lewis and Mewha 1955: 263, 126; Geiger 1996: 73).

Precise figures on the number of German prisoners of war at work at any given time are not available, since the Provost Marshal General's Office and the Industrial Personnel Division seem not to have kept records (Fairchild and Grossman 1959: 195). Several sources indicate, however, that at the end of the war German prisoners of war outnumbered temporary foreign workers

employed in American agriculture. In May 1945 a total of 140,000 prisoners of war were working in contract labor. Of these 85,000 were employed in agriculture (ibid.). Roughly at the same time, in July 1945, 58,000 Mexican braceros were working in agriculture and 62,000 on railways (Galarza 1964: 53). According to data from the Office of Labor reported by Walter Wilcox (1947: 95), 44,897 Mexicans, 11,499 Jamaicans, 4,248 Bahamians, 932 Newfoundlanders, and 111,369 prisoners of war were employed in agriculture in November 1945.

The rapidly evolving prisoner-of-war labor program functioned much like a temporary labor program, despite their differences in origin and legal framework, and employers soon became dependent on the unexpected source of labor. Unlike the bracero program, however, the prisoner-of-war labor program remained temporary, and all prisoners were returned to Europe by July 1946. Despite lasting barely three years, “this peculiar little known historical footnote to the war” generated some unanticipated consequences (Dell’Angela 1996). While less dramatic and less consequential than those of the bracero program in the long run, they were remarkable.

Within a year of their arrival, German prisoners of war picked cotton in New Mexico, Alabama, and Mississippi and labored in the Florida citrus and sugar industries. They harvested potatoes in Maine and Idaho, peanuts in Georgia, fruits and vegetables in Maryland, and corn and tobacco in Maine, North Carolina, and Texas. They shucked oats and wheat in Missouri and cut lumber and pulpwood in Maine, North Carolina, and Georgia. In the process, the once-feared “Nazi Prisoners of War” (Krammer 1991) were transformed into personal friends “like our own boys” (*New York Times* 2002).

While it is not unusual for captors and captives to develop social relationships, the rapid transformation from “yesterday’s foe to today’s ally” was unusual (Margulies 1945: 479). Most important, it contrasted sharply with the experiences of Mexican workers, who came as allies and friends and nonetheless encountered personal rejection, exclusion, and discrimination (Copp 1963; Galarza 1964; Craig 1971; Gamboa 1990; Basok 2000).

The purpose of this article is to explore the contradictions produced by these two wartime encounters, where enemies became friends and friends remained outsiders. While not discounting the obvious racial dimensions, in particular the rampant racism encountered by Mexican workers, this study focuses on the legal and structural conditions and circumstances that may

help explain these differences. Specifically, it identifies three critical variables: the legal framework that structured the conditions of recruitment and employment, the placement of workers in the agricultural sector, and the nature of the contact between workers and Americans, in particular but not exclusively their employers.

Although the recruitment and employment of braceros were regulated by bilateral agreements between Mexico and the United States that stipulated humane treatment, minimum wages, and adequate living conditions, the mechanisms for enforcement were weak or nonexistent. Most braceros, for their part, were afraid to raise objections or launch complaints concerning inhumane and illegal treatment. In contrast, the treatment and employment of prisoners of war were subject to the 1929 Geneva Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners of War. This international treaty, signed by the United States and Germany, among others, mandated the humane treatment of prisoners of war and specified the conditions under which they could be employed by captor nations. Fearing retribution by Germans who were holding American prisoners of war, the United States carefully followed the mandates of the Convention. Enforcement of the rules was in the hands of the International Red Cross and the Swiss legation representing the interests of Germany. These organizations frequently visited the camps to check on possible violations. For their part, German prisoners of war were well versed in the rights provided them by the Convention and were not afraid to voice perceived or real violations.

Although both braceros and German prisoners of war worked in agriculture, the majority of braceros worked in large-scale agribusiness, predominantly in California, while many German prisoners of war worked for midsize and smaller family farmers in almost every state. Bracero camps were large and isolated in rural areas with little access to transportation. For employers and foremen, braceros were anonymous field hands, not individuals. Camps for prisoners of war working in agriculture were often small (so-called side camps) and located near small towns. This location and the fact that prisoners of war were working for midsize and smaller farms provided them with considerable opportunities to engage in face-to-face interaction with their employers and, frequently, employers' families and townspeople. While their work was technically supervised by a guard, relationships between guards and prisoners working in the fields were often casual and personal.

As German soldiers had considerable opportunities to interact with Americans, both military and civilian, as human beings, not as enemies, these interactions contributed to changing the existing stereotypes among captors and captives. In contrast, despite efforts made by the Mexican government to ensure equal treatment of its citizens and the American government's official recognition of Mexican migrant workers' important contributions to the war effort, the relative isolation of braceros and the virtual absence of face-to-face interaction with Americans only reinforced existing stereotypes.

The remainder of this article is divided into five sections. A discussion of the data and methods used in this study is followed by a short description of the main features of the bracero program. The next two sections provide detailed description and analysis of the relevant features of the prisoner-of-war labor program. The article concludes with a brief comparison of the unintended, contrasting consequences of these two temporary labor programs.

Sources and Methods

This study is based on multiple sources of data and employs several research methods. Data concerning the bracero program come from secondary sources, primarily published articles and books. Information on German prisoners of war comes from a variety of sources, including books, articles, and biographical accounts of former prisoners, as well as archival materials and in-depth interviews with 30 former prisoners of war who emigrated to the United States in the 1950s. Archival materials consulted at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, include relevant records of the Provost Marshal General's Office, the War Department, and the War Manpower Commission.

Names of possible respondents were located through a variety of secondary sources. In particular, I searched for names mentioned in published materials, including books, local history journals, local newspaper articles, and autobiographies, as well as names in local museums and on Web sites of former prisoner-of-war camps and other Web sites devoted to World War II. Together these sources yielded the names of 60 former prisoners of war who had emigrated to the United States. I obtained some addresses from authors of previously published material but in most cases used the Internet to search for current addresses.

I was unable to find addresses for 6 individuals, and 4 others had died. Of

the 50 still living for whom I had names and addresses, 8 did not respond to my written request for an interview, and 3 letters were returned as undeliverable with no forwarding address.²

The in-depth interviews with former prisoners of war conducted between 2001 and 2004 usually took place in the homes of the respondents and lasted between three and five hours.³ In addition to obtaining basic biographical information and life histories, interviews were structured to focus on five segments of the respondent's life experience: experience in the German army, prisoner-of-war experience, postwar return experience, decision to emigrate to the United States, and post-emigration experience. The interview data used in this article concern primarily the respondents' prisoner-of-war experiences.⁴ Interviews were conducted in German or English, depending on the respondent's preference, and sometimes in a combination of the two.⁵

Given that interviews were conducted with a sample of former prisoners of war that was nonrepresentative, particularly in that they had emigrated to the United States, this study makes no claim that their experiences were representative of the experiences of German prisoners of war interned in the United States. In addition to the fact that the major criterion for their inclusion in the study was that they emigrated to the United States, the men I interviewed were relatively young, between 17 and 26, when they were captured. This meant that they were probably more flexible, curious, open-minded, and willing to take advantage of their experiences than their older comrades. Although the experiences of my respondents were not representative of German prisoners of war in the United States, they were not unusual, as indicated by many of the archival and secondary sources used in this study.

The Bracero Program: Recruitment and Employment

While some students of the bracero program have questioned the reality of labor shortages created by the war (Kirstein 1977; Calavita 1992; Gutierrez 1995), there is no question that large agricultural employers long eager to recruit cheap Mexican labor used the war as a convenient rationale for their labor needs. Indeed, President Franklin D. Roosevelt described the 1942 agreement between Mexico and the United States as an "eloquent witness"

to the important role Mexico was playing in the “war of food production upon which the inevitable success of our military program depends” (quoted in Kirstein 1977: 15). Similarly, an article in the *New York Herald Tribune* enthusiastically referred to “an army of 50,000 good neighbors [that] is helping us harvest victory” (McCrary 1943).

Unlike the program in place during World War I, which had been established unilaterally by the United States, the new bracero program was based on a bilateral contract negotiated between the governments of the United States and Mexico (Kiser and Kiser 1979: 67). Deeply aware of past mistreatment of its citizens, the Mexican government used its newly gained influence as an ally of the United States to insist on safeguards to protect its citizens from exploitation and abuse. These became part of the formal agreement signed in July 1942. First and foremost was that the United States government (initially the Farm Security Administration, later the War Food Administration), not individual employers, served as the formal employer. Additional protections included in the final contract were the provision of “adequate housing,” equal to that of domestic farmworkers in the area; payment of “prevailing area wages,” not less than 30 cents per hour; a guaranteed minimum number of working days; paid transportation from recruitment centers in Mexico to places of employment in the United States and return to recruitment centers after the contract was fulfilled; and protection from discrimination.⁶ Employers in the United States were responsible for transportation, repatriation, and living expenses. Braceros were also exempted from American military service. On the American side, to placate the concerns of labor unions, American employers who wanted to hire Mexican workers through the bracero program had to demonstrate an existing labor shortage.

During the war the bracero program’s administrative structure was binational. Recruitment began with certification by the U.S. Employment Service specifying the need for labor. The Mexican government (the Bureau of Migrant Labor in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) assigned quotas to Mexican states and screened workers at recruitment centers in Mexico City and later at other locations. Those chosen were then transported to farms in the United States and returned to the original recruitment centers after completion of their contracts.

It is important to note that, compared to the postwar period, during the war the number of braceros recruited through the program was mod-

est. Some 4,000 men were admitted in 1942, with a high of 62,000 in 1944 (Galarza 1964: 53). A total of 219,546 Mexican braceros were recruited between 1942 and 1947; of these, 200,000 were agricultural workers (Craig 1971: 44). Although braceros worked in 24 states, the vast majority worked in a few western states, mostly California (*ibid.*). Because of the long history of mistreatment of Mexican workers in Texas, the Mexican government insisted that Texas be excluded from the original agreement. The first braceros arrived in California in September 1942, two months after the agreement had been signed.

Despite the bilateral treaty and the Mexican government's attempts to protect its citizens, employers systematically violated conditions of the agreement (Galarza 1964; Gamboa 1990). Although the agreement had stipulated "prevailing wages" and employers had to be certified to employ braceros, "the provision was rendered virtually meaningless" (Calavita 1992: 22) as state extension services closely allied with local farm bureaus determined the wages farmers were willing to pay (Pfeffer 1980: 35). In fact, growers met at the beginning of each season to decide on the wages they were willing to pay, and wages paid often did not meet the required 30-cent minimum (Calavita 1992: 24).

Stipulations for housing and food were equally violated. Most of the housing provided by growers was inadequate and substandard, often little more than rudimentary places to sleep (Kirstein 1977; Hansen 1988; Gamboa 1990). Camps lacked adequate facilities, such as heating and fire protection. Food was of poor quality, and food issues were a constant source of discontent and work stoppages (Gamboa 1990). Health services were poor or nonexistent, and braceros suffered from poor hygienic conditions, inadequate food, and hard labor performed day in and day out. Opportunities to learn English were rare.

In addition to lacking basic amenities, camps had virtually no provisions for social life. There were no soccer fields, theaters, or movies (although sometimes movies were projected onto tent walls) and no provisions for regular religious services. Any social activities were highly improvised, and even such important Mexican holidays as Independence Day and Cinco de Mayo were rarely observed. As most camps were far from towns and business locations and did not include stores or canteens, braceros could not purchase any items they might have wanted or needed. If they ventured into nearby towns, they often encountered signs that they were not welcome.

Although the bracero agreement had made provisions for inspection and enforcement of the stipulated conditions, they were lax or nonexistent (Kirstein 1977). Technically under the guardianship of the federal government, camp managers made monthly reports on daily feeding and sanitation to the War Food Administration headquarters. The Mexican consulate did not have the manpower or perhaps the will to enforce the agreement from its side (Basok 2000).

Finally, expectations of profit-conscious farmers and impoverished Mexican men were at odds from the start. Young Mexican men were unprepared to cope with the unfriendly—often outright racist—treatment they encountered. Camp managers did not speak Spanish, and interpreters were nonexistent. As in concentration camps, men were known by their numbers, becoming close to nameless (Galarza 1964; Basok 2000). Good relations between braceros and their employers were the exception, not the rule, and farmers constantly pushed workers, even threatening them (Gamboa 1990: 66). In short, “relations between farm owners and workers were impersonal and autocratic, the working environment was oppressive and alienating” (Basok 2000: 227).

These conditions contrasted sharply with those encountered by German prisoners of war. Although as prisoners of war the Germans were hardly free to come and go as they wished, some had more freedom of movement in the United States than many Mexican workers, who were nominally free but in fact severely restricted by their labor contracts and living and working conditions.

German Prisoners of War on American Soil

When the United States entered World War II in December 1941, the government had no plans for interning enemy prisoners of war on American soil. Although a few thousand navy personnel and merchant crewman had been interned in the United States during World War I, the country had no previous experience with large numbers of prisoners of war on American soil (Powell 1989). It was only in response to British pressures that the War Department agreed to transport to the United States some 50,000 German soldiers captured on the battlefields of North Africa in late 1942 and hastily organized the administration of a prisoner-of-war program under the auspices of the Provost Marshal General's Office in the War Department (Pluth

1970). The first 2,000 prisoners, arriving in the fall of 1942, were placed in makeshift camps on military installations and former Civilian Conservation Corps camps. When the number of prisoners increased rapidly in the final months of the North Africa campaign in the spring of 1943, the Provost Marshal General's Office embarked on a large-scale project, constructing special prisoner-of-war camps.

The number of German prisoners arriving in the United States grew rapidly between 1943, when 173,000 arrived, and 1945, reaching 378,000 at the end of the war (Lewis and Mewha 1955: 90–91). Enemy aliens also included 50,000 Italian and 3,000 Japanese prisoners. The German prisoners of war interned in the United States arrived in three waves. The first wave (140,000 men) comprised members of the Afrika Korps captured on the battlefields of North Africa in 1942 and 1943; the second wave (50,000 men) consisted of soldiers captured during the invasion of Italy in 1943; the third wave (182,000 men) included soldiers captured between the Normandy invasion in 1944 and German capitulation in 1945 (Powell 1989: 40). All were transported to the United States on returning liberty ships and passenger liners like the *Queen Mary* (usually in convoys to guard against U-boat attacks) and disembarked in New York, Norfolk, and Boston. There they were processed (registered, deloused, given uniforms) and put on trains to prisoner-of-war camps.

In its initial phase, the prisoner-of-war program was guided by two concerns: the security of the American public and humane treatment of the prisoners according to the 1929 Geneva Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners of War. To ensure security, the new camps were large compounds, usually accommodating several thousand prisoners. They were located in relatively isolated areas in the South and Southwest and were heavily guarded.⁷

Following the Geneva Convention's mandates that prisoners of war be treated humanely and that their accommodation and food be the same as that of the captors' own armed forces, prisoner-of-war camps were well supplied with army cots, blankets, showers, and food, including meat, milk, and vegetables. Most camps included canteens where prisoners could purchase incidentals, such as chocolate bars, soft drinks, and cigarettes. Medical and dental care were provided by medical officers. There were opportunities for leisure pursuits, including sports (especially soccer), music performances, and theaters. Prisoners had access to books, newspapers (albeit censored), and musical instruments. Many camps had their own newspapers, edited and written by prisoners themselves. Some camps offered university

courses through nearby university extension services, and fellow prisoners who had been teachers in civilian life offered a variety of courses, including English. Many camps also developed impressive theater and musical performances frequently attended by American military officers and their families as well as prisoners. Prisoners were permitted to write two letters and one postcard per week and receive unlimited mail from home. Prisoners who had close relatives in the United States—grandparents, parents, siblings, aunts, or uncles—were allowed to correspond with them, and at the discretion of the camp commander, they could receive visits from such relatives (Waters 2004: 62–63).⁸

The interests of prisoners were represented by a spokesman whom they elected to voice grievances and requests of the camp community to the camp commanding officer. The spokesman also represented prisoners with members of the Swiss legation, the International Red Cross committee, and the Young Men's Christian Association, which oversaw the humanitarian treatment of prisoners in accordance with the Geneva Convention Article 43 (Krammer 1991: 36–42). Indeed, some Americans protested that German prisoners of war were treated too well and were “coddled.” In some areas the prisoner-of-war camps came to be known among the local population as “the Fritz Ritz” (Krammer 1991: 28). Striking a more ironic note concerning his prisoner-of-war experience at Camp Ruston, Louisiana, Alfred Andersch (1946), one of Germany's most respected postwar authors, referred to his camp as the “golden cage” (*goldener Käfig*).

Although the Geneva Convention specifically permitted captor nations to use the labor of their captives, the Provost Marshal General's Office did not have specific plans for these enemy soldiers, seeing them primarily as a “burdensome security problem” (Smith 1945: 45). In the first few months after their arrival, only a small number of prisoners were put to work providing services in the camps or military installations—working as cooks and bakers, doing laundry, repairing shoes and motor vehicles. For security reasons, the idea of putting large numbers of these “Nazi” prisoners to work did not appear as a viable option.

Yet as the United States experienced serious manpower shortages in the spring of 1943, the Provost Marshal General's Office decided to make more systematic use of the prisoners' labor in the camps and on military bases, where prisoners were increasingly employed in menial and clerical jobs. Although this decision freed American military personnel for more impor-

tant tasks directly associated with the war effort, it did not alleviate the persistent and ever-growing labor shortages in the civilian labor market. Despite the importation of temporary workers from Mexico, Jamaica, the Bahamas, and Newfoundland and new selective service deferment regulations for agricultural workers, such shortages were particularly pressing in agriculture (Wilcox 1947).

From Prisoner of War to Contract Worker

Recognizing the labor potential of the German prisoners of war, the War Manpower Commission, in charge of ensuring an adequate labor supply on the home front, urged the War Department to make prisoner-of-war labor available in the private labor market. Yet it was not until April 1943 that the War Department seriously considered the War Manpower Commission's persistent warnings that the shortages of manpower on the home front could threaten the American war effort. Recognizing that the "*pool of several hundred thousand employable German Prisoners of War confined to the United States*" was "one of the answers to this problem" (Provost Marshal General 1945: iii), the War Department agreed to make prisoner-of-war labor available to the civilian labor market (Fairchild and Grossman 1959). Despite this seemingly obvious solution to manpower problems, the decision was "tortuous," and it took an additional four months to work out the details of the final agreement among the War Department, the War Manpower Commission, and the War Food Administration (*ibid.*; Krammer 1991: 86–88).

To ensure adherence to the rules and conditions imposed on the employment of prisoners of war in private industry by the Geneva Convention, the War Department insisted that it have ultimate control over the process. According to Article 31 of the Convention, prisoners of war cannot be employed in work "having direct connection with the operation of war, in the manufacture and transport of arms or munitions of any kind, or on the transport of material destined for combat units" (McKnight 1944: 54). Additional restrictions applied to rank and physical abilities. Officers were exempt from work, and noncommissioned officers could be required to work only in supervisory positions. Even enlisted men could not be required to perform "degrading and menial" and "unhealthy and dangerous" work or work that was beyond their physical abilities. To comply with these rather vague provisions, a Prisoner of War Employment Reviewing Board was established to

determine what constituted “permissible employment” (Lewis and Mewha 1955: 114–15).

For its part, the War Department (1943) insisted that “all requests for prisoner of war labor be channeled through military authorities by the War Manpower Commission” and that all contracts be executed and administered by the War Department. It was the War Department, not the War Manpower Commission, that had ultimate authority in determining the allocation of prisoner-of-war labor. The employment contract was between the employer and the War Department, and it could not exceed three months.

Employers seeking to employ prisoner-of-war labor confronted a bureaucratic certification process. They had to submit a request to the local employment office of the War Manpower Commission indicating the type of work needed. They also had to demonstrate that no other labor was available to do the job and had to assure the government that prisoners’ rights would not be violated and that their wages and working conditions would be equal to those of free labor (Krammer 1991: 85). If these specifications were met, the employer received a certification that was passed to local military officials, who determined the number of prisoners in consultation with the Department of Agriculture’s Extension Service. Employers paid the going wage rate for free labor for the type of work performed. Prisoners in turn were paid 80 cents per day in scrip redeemable for merchandise in the camp canteen, with the difference going to the federal treasury.

Despite this bureaucratic process and some initial hesitation on the part of employers, skepticism dwindled, and demand for prisoner-of-war labor soon outstripped supply (Pluth 1975). This was particularly true in agriculture, where the temporary labor recruited from Mexico and Jamaica was not sufficient to fill available jobs in the period between late 1943 and early 1946 (Lewis and Mewha 1955: 126). Employers’ organizations from different parts of the country began to compete directly for prisoner-of-war labor allocations. For example, in a letter to the War Manpower Commission in Washington, DC, dated May 13, 1944, the Tri-State Packers Association in Easton, Maryland, complained that in 1944 Illinois was allocated “practically three times as many prisoners” as Maryland for use in canning plants and field operations, although Illinois “yields only fifty-seven percent as much processable food” as Maryland (Tri-State Packers Association 1944). Similarly, a memorandum from the regional director of the War Manpower Commission (1945a) in Cleveland, Ohio, complained to the Washington office concerning

the scarcity of prisoner-of-war labor in Ohio and Michigan, noting that “our entire food supply program for 1945 is dependent upon using prisoner-of-war labor as the ‘backbone of the male labor supply’” and urging immediate action. Toward the end of the war, 95 percent of “employable” prisoners worked on army bases or as contract laborers for private employers (Pluth 1975). Of the 140,000 men employed in contract labor, two-thirds worked in agriculture and related industries, such as canning. The remaining third were employed in a variety of industries and projects, including laying and maintaining railroad tracks, working in chemical fertilizer plants, meatpacking, the fighting of forest fires, flood control, and snow removal (Krammer 1991).

The growing importance of German prisoner-of-war labor was well illustrated by the Army Service Forces’ increasing concerns with their effective use. Thus the War Department’s (1944a) prisoner-of-war circular of April 24, 1944, reminded all regional service commands of the general policy requiring that every employable prisoner of war be used in essential skilled and unskilled work of types permitted by the Geneva Convention. A few days later, on May 6, another circular from the Army Service Forces to the commanding generals noted that “the manpower situation demands that every available prisoner of war must be employed in essential work” and urged that “maximum efficiency be obtained from every available man-hour” so that “the essential needs of agriculture and food processing industries for prisoners of war labor be satisfied to the greatest possible extent” (War Department 1944b). Within two years the concerns of the prisoner-of-war program had been transformed from “maximum security to maximum utilization” of their labor (Tissing 1976: 24).

While this transformation was clearly fueled by perceived manpower needs, the need for labor alone cannot fully explain this turn of events. After all, when they first arrived on American soil, German prisoners of war had been widely perceived as a dangerous lot of “Nazi supermen” (Smith 1945) eager to escape and sabotage the American home front. Although such initial fears seemed justified in the context of total war, they were not borne out by experience. The number of attempted escapes turned out to be small, and those who managed to escape were usually caught within 24 hours. More important, there was not a single act of sabotage (Krammer 1991: 114–46).

Part of the explanation for this transformation must be sought in the unusual conditions and circumstances that characterized the American

prisoner-of-war program from the beginning. These conditions set the stage for an evolving administrative policy that facilitated the turn toward “maximum utilization” and helped transform “Hitler’s soldiers” into “folks like us” and “boys next door” (Billinger 2000).⁹

From Nazi Prisoner to Trusted Worker and Friend

From the start what distinguished the U.S. prisoner-of-war program from most other prisoner-of-war programs was the very fact that the camps were located in the United States, where large areas of land were sparsely populated and daily life was not directly affected by the war. The vastness of the United States made it difficult for prisoners to escape or, if they did, to remain at large or return home.

The location of camps in remote and relatively isolated areas helped foster an initial sense of security for both captors and captives. In contrast to American prisoners of war, who could escape from Germany to nearby Switzerland or Sweden or who, if escaping to France, could expect to receive help from the French underground, German prisoners of war had nowhere to go. Although some prisoners held in the southwestern United States dreamed of escaping to Mexico, the inhospitable surroundings and considerable distances made their dreams difficult to realize. A spectacular but foiled attempt to break out of Camp Papago Park, Arizona, illustrated the enormous difficulties. Twenty-five German navy men interned there escaped through a 250-foot tunnel that they had dug, hoping to make their way to Mexico. Their leader, Captain Jürgen Wattenberg, was “one of the shrewdest and most reckless Nazi officers in or out of captivity” (*Newsweek* 1945b). Yet all of the escapees were caught within a few days (Moore 1978). Thus, although at first prisoners were deemed dangerous, heavily guarded, and allowed little contact with Americans, their relative isolation and security, reinforced by the facts that escapes were rare, that those who tried were usually recaptured within a day or two, and that there was not a single act of sabotage, were central to building the basic trust necessary for the full-scale employment of prisoners and the gradual relaxation of security measures.

The war itself, the destruction and daily struggle for survival among civilian populations, was far removed from American soil. Although Americans worried about their sons and husbands in combat, daily life in the

United States was relatively normal and not directly affected by the ravages of war. There were no daily bombings, and people did not starve, although some foods were rationed, as well as gasoline. Indeed, many prisoners, especially those arriving after 1944, expressed amazement at the peaceful, intact, and illuminated cities they saw as they disembarked in New York, Norfolk, or Boston. They marveled at the luxurious Pullman trains, brightly lit cities, and large numbers of automobiles they saw on their way to camps in Texas, Arkansas, Alabama, Nebraska, Florida, and Michigan. They were also impressed by the supply and quality of the food they received. While they worried about their families at home, many were glad to have escaped the fighting to find themselves in the relative security and comfort of camps located far away from the turmoil of war. While the civilian population was concerned about the war and their loved ones so far away, the relative security at home allowed many to relax their initially hostile or cautious attitudes toward "Hitler's soldiers."

The War Department's 1943 decision to make German prisoners of war available for the civilian labor market was clearly a response to perceived manpower needs. That decision, however, was shaped by conditions associated with the location of camps on American soil, which had fostered confidence that these "involuntary" migrants could be used effectively and without fear in the private labor market. These conditions had shown that the vast majority of German prisoners of war were not interested in escaping or engaging in sabotage but, with the exception of some fanatic Nazis among them, were ordinary men who wanted to survive and who often considered themselves lucky to have escaped to a peaceful existence as prisoners of war on American soil.

The turn toward "maximum utilization," however, also required significant changes in the existing administration and camp structures based on "maximum security." The centralization of decision making about all aspects of the prisoner-of-war program in the War Department in Washington and the location of large camps in the South and Southwest turned out to be a hindrance to the flexible and efficient use of prisoners as contract workers. To increase flexibility and efficiency, the Army Service Forces decentralized decision making, liberalized previous restrictions on camp locations, developed new types of camps, and made changes in security policy.

The responsibility for establishing new camps, planning their location, size, and layout, and allocating prisoners, which had been centrally deter-

mined by headquarters in Washington, was decentralized to the nine regional service commands considered more in tune with local conditions and needs. To facilitate the optimal use of labor, the Provost Marshal General's Office also requested that a specific field representative of the War Manpower Commission be delegated to act as liaison with the commanding officer of each prisoner-of-war camp (War Manpower Commission 1943a). Reversing earlier concerns about isolation and security, the Provost Marshal General's Office established new camps in locations where labor was most needed, including in the Midwest and near both coasts. While in August 1943 the majority of camps had been in Texas and Oklahoma, by 1945 one-fifth were located in the Midwest (Krammer 1991: 26), with camps in every state but Nevada, North Dakota, and Vermont. The office also created a new type of temporary camps, called side camps or branch camps, which were "established solely for work" (McKnight 1944: 49). These were located in the vicinity of large agricultural production, housing between 150 and 1,000 captives, their size determined by specific labor needs in a particular area. Most of the 340 branch camps throughout the United States hardly resembled traditional prisoner-of-war camps, as prisoners were often housed in old ballrooms, college dormitories, or tents.

The new camp structure was accompanied by a more relaxed security policy. The initial policy of "lock them up inside barbed wire and keep them there" was replaced by a policy of "calculated risk," specifically aimed at facilitating and optimizing prisoner-of-war employment, as officials came to realize that the risk of escape and sabotage was minimal (Krammer 1991: 114–46). The new security policy included using prisoner-of-war officers and noncommissioned officers as supervisors and interpreters (War Manpower Commission 1943b).

The use of fewer guards made more Americans available for work in areas where German prisoners could not be employed, and prisoners were found to work more efficiently and effectively in smaller groups with less supervision. It was common for only one guard to supervise groups of more than 100 prisoners and for this lone guard to fall asleep, leaving working prisoners basically unsupervised. For example, a rural industries supervisor of the War Manpower Commission, reporting on his visit to Camp Remer, Minnesota, noticed "the absence of guards with rifles" and mused that perhaps the guards were concealed at a strategic distance or that "the prisoners of war were given full privileges of the honor system" and "working much

the same as any other lumber camp employing free labor” (quoted in Pluth 1975: 299). Similarly, Hermann Jung (1972: 179) cites reports from the International Red Cross noting the absence of guards at several camps its members visited.

Prisoners and American servicemen generally liked working at branch camps. The structure was less formal, the pace slower, and the security more relaxed than at the main camps. The small-town settings provided considerable opportunity for interaction with local residents. Particularly in small towns of the Midwest, it was not uncommon for prisoners to attend movies, swim in municipal swimming pools, and attend local church services (Fiedler 2003: 287).

Although employers did not express universal satisfaction with the efficiency of their prisoner-of-war workers, by the end of the war the labor of German prisoners of war had become an integral part of the wartime labor supply. Even as the war was winding down in Europe in the spring of 1945, employers’ organizations pressured the War Department to bring additional prisoners from Europe. Thus a letter from the War Department (1945) to the Pennsylvania Forest Products Committee, dated April 3, assured the latter that in answer to its previous request, it would be allocated some additional 100,000 “from overseas for employment in urgent war production programs and agriculture.”

Prisoner-of-war labor was most appreciated in agriculture and canning. In a letter dated December 26, 1944, the Association of New York State Canners (1944) informed the brigadier general, Aliens Division, POW Division, of a resolution passed at its most recent convention that expressed “extreme” satisfaction “with the services of POWs during 1944” and the hope “for future uses.” Lumber industry leaders’ assessments of prisoner-of-war labor were more mixed. While complaining that prisoners were less productive than native labor, lumber industry employers recognized that prisoners helped keep mills and wood crews operating (Fickle and Ellis 1990).

It is hardly surprising that some employers expressed anxiety in November 1945, when, in accordance with the Geneva Convention, prisoners were to be repatriated. Some lobbied the president and Congress to try to hold onto their newfound labor supply.¹⁰ Although the War Manpower Commission (1945b) had notified all regional directors in August 1945 that the War Department intended to return all German and Italian prisoners of war “at the earliest practical moment” and instructed them to “discontinue the uses

of prisoners of war in contract employment,” three months later—six months after VE Day—only 73,178 German prisoners had left the United States, and many did not return to Europe until the summer of 1946, more than one year after VE Day. Yet, in the end, all lobbying efforts by employer organizations, individual employers, and American relatives of prisoners proved in vain, and all German prisoners of war were repatriated. The last German prisoners left for Europe in July 1946. Though they were returned to Europe, most did not go directly to Germany but served as forced laborers in England, France, and Belgium. While their involuntary sojourn in the United States had come to an end, that sojourn was not without consequences.

Unanticipated Consequences

Opportunities for repeated interaction between captors and captives were extremely limited during the prisoners’ initial capture, processing, and transport to the United States. Once prisoners had been assigned to camps and settled into a routine, however, such opportunities gradually opened up for the small minority of prisoners who worked in the camps and on army bases (Powell 1989: 197–202). Decisions to make more systematic use of the labor of prisoners of war first on army bases and in camps and later in the private sector significantly expanded opportunities for German prisoners of war to meet Americans and get a glimpse of “the American way of life” (Fernholz 1997).

As the percentage of German prisoners who were working increased from 60 percent in February 1944 to 73 percent in May 1944 to 91 percent in April 1945, almost all prisoners were exposed to some Americans by the end of the war (Brigadier General Thomas L. Bryan Jr., quoted in Lewis and Mewha 1955: 125). The nature and degree of such contacts varied, depending on the location of work, that is, on military bases, in camps, or outside the camps as contract workers, as well as the type of work performed.¹¹

Although contact for prisoners working in camps and military installations was more limited because they did not travel outside them, such prisoners often worked directly with American military personnel, serving as interpreters, performing office tasks, preparing food, laboring in health services with American doctors, and repairing vehicles in the motor pool. Prisoners also had contact with civilian contractors providing services such as painting or food delivery for the camps.

Prisoners working in private contract labor were exposed to more varied experiences than those restricted to work on military bases and in base camps. Because the new work-related (side) camps were located close to where their labor was needed, they were not necessarily in isolated areas. New camps were located across the United States, and prisoners frequently were moved from state to state and from one camp to another, wherever their labor might be needed. As they were transported by train, they saw and experienced much of the American countryside and observed its vastness, diversity, and immense resources. Small groups of prisoners of war traveled with guards on public transportation and even ate in restaurants (Blum 1976: 190–91; Overmans 2000: 237). In one instance in Louisiana, prisoners were allowed unguarded weekends in New Orleans (Butler 1973). As larger contingents traveled through major metropolitan areas, their trains frequently stopped in passenger stations, where prisoners observed the comings and goings of the population and sometimes engaged in conversation with civilians.¹²

Compared to the large camps constructed to safeguard prisoners and minimize their contact with Americans, the side camps were small and informal, and security in them was lax. Farmers, and sometimes their wives or daughters, picked up prisoners in the morning and returned them to the camps in the evening. In the Midwest in particular, it was not unusual for farmers to invite prisoners into their homes or provide them with additional food and treats, such as candy bars or beer (Cowley 2002: 25). One prisoner reported that while interned at a side camp of Fort Allen, Louisiana, prisoners were allowed to attend a performance by the Ringling Brothers Circus in the spring of 1944 (Schlauch 2003: 142). One of my respondents, Heinz Eishaur (2004), who was interned in Camp Campbell, Kentucky, also reported attending a circus.

While the frequency of these events and relationships between German prisoners and Americans cannot be quantified, evidence that they were common can be gleaned from several sources, including the Army Service Forces records, anecdotal reports in published articles and books, and autobiographies by former prisoners (Pabel 1955; Hörner and Powell 1991; Oberdieck 1995; Ertel 1996; Erichsen and Nelson-Erichsen 2001; Metzroth 2004; Thill 2004; Schmid 2005). Additional sources are postwar correspondence between Americans and former German prisoners of war (Tissing 1973; Luick-Thrams 2002; Schlauch 2003; Pepin 2004); interviews with farmers, guards, civilian employees, townsfolk, and former prisoners collected for the

Prisoners of War in New Mexico Agriculture oral history program (New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum n.d.); and my own interviews.

Aware that contacts and interactions between Americans and prisoners were not restricted to formal exchanges between captor/supervisor and captive/worker, the Armed Forces Office reminded the commanding generals of the nine service divisions that “fraternization of any kind will not be tolerated” and urged immediate action concerning violations of the rules. An earlier memorandum referred to the interception of letters written by prisoners, which indicated that prisoners and guards had participated in drinking parties and exchanges of gifts. They also revealed that guards had delivered messages from prisoners and allowed them to accept the hospitality of civilians while on outside work details (Provost Marshal General 1944a, 1944b). Furthermore, aware of the social and political dimensions of the labor program, the *Handbook for Work Supervisors of Prisoner of War Labor*, published by the Army Service Forces, noted that “the prisoner of war labor program gives the prisoners a chance to closely observe the average American citizen, the way he lives, the opportunities afforded to him, and his relationship with his government and fellow citizens.” It warned that “careless talk about the uncertainty of the future, our racial problems, our national leaders both civil and military, our relations with the rest of the Allied Nations, and even the mild complaining that most of us do naturally does have an undesirable effect on the opinions prisoners hold with regard to American life and ideas” (Provost Marshal General 1945).

Anecdotal accounts of casual and informal relationships between German prisoners, their guards, and American civilians are in various scholarly and popular writings and reports. These include numerous reports of farmers who provided food and treats to prisoners and invited them into their homes to eat (Powell 1989: 205; Thompson 1993: 64; Heintz 1998: 119–20; Cowley 2002: 25, 153). In some cases, as Penny Clark (1988: 24) observes, farmers treated their German prisoner-of-war workers as friends “or even members of the family.” While traveling between the camps and the fields, guards and drivers stopped at roadside stores to buy beer and soft drinks, leaving prisoners unattended in the backs of trucks while local people offered them cigarettes or went into the store to buy them chocolates, candies, and fruit (Powell 1989: 205). There are accounts of romantic relationships between German prisoners and American women (Oberdieck 1995; Carlson 1997; Fiedler 2003; Waters 2004; Reiss 2005).

Although my respondents are not representative of German prisoners of war interned in the United States, my interviews with several of them reveal a variety of personal contacts with American military and civilians, ranging from friendly and casual interchanges to lasting personal relationships. With the exception of two officers who did not work, my respondents include men who worked primarily in camps or on military bases and men who worked in private contract labor, mostly in agriculture. The gamut of relationships in both groups ranged from casual, friendly, and fleeting to personal and lasting. In addition to the casual and friendly contact reported by almost all respondents, about half developed more significant personal relationships with American military personnel and civilians inside and outside the camps.

Prisoners who worked predominantly inside camps and military bases tended to remain in the same camp for prolonged periods or for the entire time of their imprisonment. While these men had fewer opportunities to see the United States, their stay in one place provided them opportunities to develop close relationships with Americans.

While working in the cold storage facility in Camp Algona, Iowa, Alfred Mueller (2003) struck up a friendship with the contractor who delivered vegetables to the camp. After the war the contractor's father-in-law served as a sponsor, allowing Mueller and his wife to emigrate in 1949. The two families and their children remain close friends. Hans Waecker (2003), who was interned at Fort Robinson, Nebraska, where he worked first as a sign painter and later as an interpreter, developed friendly relationships with Gordon Rettew, the camp's painter, and an American captain named Jason Silverman. Waecker, who was trained as an artist, painted portraits of Captain Silverman and his daughter and, after emigrating to the United States in 1951, visited Silverman but was unable to locate Rettew, who had originally offered to sponsor him but was not qualified to do so. While raising pigeons for the signal corps at Fort Benning, Georgia, Otto Liebergesell (2002) made friends with an American serviceman who sponsored Liebergesell's emigration in 1951. Heinz Eishaur (2004), who was a medic in the German army, worked as an interpreter for Dr. Guy Brown in the medical unit at Camp Campbell, Kentucky. The two men developed a friendship and stayed in touch after the war. Brown offered to sponsor Eishaur if he wanted to come back to the United States. Taking up the offer, Eishaur and his wife emigrated in 1954. While interned at Camp Preston, Idaho, Johann Gruenheit's (2003) job was

to procure food supplies for the camp. In this capacity Gruenheit drove a jeep around the Idaho countryside (accompanied by a guard, whose presence was strictly pro forma) and met several local farmers, two of whom took a liking to the young German and offered to sponsor his emigration. One of these farmers, Mr. Moser, eventually served as sponsor when Gruenheit and his family emigrated to the United States in 1953.

Prisoners working in private contract labor were frequently moved from camp to camp, and such movements often involved considerable distances. Their stay in each camp tended to be relatively short, ranging from one to three months. While offering plenty of opportunities to see different parts of the country and opportunities to interact with civilians outside the confines of the camps, the relatively short stay made it more difficult to develop more intense personal relationships. As was the case for those working in camps and on military bases, most of my respondents who worked in contract labor recalled having friendly relationships with their employers and guards (Schmoling 2002; Fiedler 2004).

Ludwig Norz (2004), who worked in agriculture while interned in several camps in Arizona, Montana, and Washington State and now lives in Big Rapids, Michigan, recalled that he learned a lot about America, noting that “when we were working outside the camps we saw the way people lived.” Similarly, Ernst Floeter (2002), who was interned in several camps in the Midwest and New Mexico, enjoyed the opportunities provided by the transportation between camps to see much of the United States and learn more about America. Despite the hard work of picking cotton in New Mexico, Floeter was enchanted with the landscape and the people when interned at Camp Hatch. Working on the farm of a Mr. Mundy, Floeter developed a friendship with Mundy’s son, Billy. After emigrating to the United States in 1956, Floeter became friends with Bill, Mundy’s grandson, and with Bill’s wife and has visited them regularly.

Kurt Pechmann (2002) and Willi Strahler (2003) struck up friendships with farmers for whom they worked while at camps in Illinois and Wisconsin, and in both cases these farmers and their relatives later served as their sponsors. Strahler, who was transferred from a large camp in Texas to a side camp in Marshfield, Wisconsin, befriended several local farmers for whom he worked, especially Mr. Anderson and Mr. Yetter. After returning to Germany, Strahler stayed in touch with both families, and the Yetters eventually served as sponsors when Strahler and his family emigrated to the United

States in 1956 and initially worked on the Yetter farm. Strahler also told me that he traveled with a guard to Chicago, where, visiting a German club, the servers were surprised at Strahler's excellent command of German.

While interned in Camp Grant, Illinois, Heinz Richter (2003) worked for an "elderly farmer" who "was like a father to me and sometimes took me fishing." Henry Ruhe (2001, n.d.), who was interned in several camps in California, met a civilian, Mr. Lykins, while picking citrus fruit near camp Corcoran, California. Ruhe reported meeting Lykins while strolling from his work assignment at the citrus grove. Lykins was building a house nearby and engaged the young German, developing a friendship with him over the following weeks. Lykins gave Ruhe a dictionary and helped him improve his English. Harry Hetz (2003), who was interned in several side camps working in agriculture in the Chicago area, recalled that while at Camp Billy Mitchell Field, Wisconsin, he and four fellow prisoners were regularly invited for Sunday meals with the George Tesch family and also attended a big Christmas party in 1945.

While they were not uncritical of many aspects of the United States, especially the racial problems and poverty they observed, German prisoners of war were most impressed by the "democratic relationships between officers and enlisted men" and the "informal, easy-going interactions between people in general" (Provost Marshal General 1946). On the American side, some private citizens complained that prisoners were "coddled," especially in light of the fact that American boys were treated poorly by the Germans, and others saw all prisoners as incorrigible Nazis (*Newsweek* 1945a). Yet many Americans who had direct contact with prisoners tended to be sympathetic toward these young men so far from home, and farmers "consistently described them as 'cooperative,' 'well-mannered,' 'intelligent,' and 'good natured'" (Krammer 1991: 92).

Braceros and Prisoners of War: Lessons from History

As was the case for braceros, employers of prisoners of war became dependent on this source of labor. Even as the war was winding down in Europe, employers pressured the War Department to send an additional 150,000 prisoners from Europe. The majority of these prisoners did not arrive until July 1945, two months after VE Day. Although the Geneva Convention mandated

that prisoners were to be returned after a war had ended, the United States was slow to act on that directive, as noted above.

While the decision to keep German prisoners of war in the United States was controversial and included strategic considerations, lobbying efforts on the part of employers and their organizations, especially those representing agricultural and lumber interests, played a significant role. In late 1945 President Harry S. Truman responded positively to petitions by the secretary of agriculture and some members of Congress by announcing a 60-day delay of all planned repatriations. In the end, however, Truman refused to give in to further requests to extend the prisoner-of-war program or to allow individual prisoners to remain in the United States. Truman gave two reasons for his decision, one referring to labor market and economic concerns, the other to legal considerations. As for the former, he argued that further extensions were unnecessary and could not be justified in view of the fact that returning veterans would be available to fill jobs vacated by returning prisoners of war. As for the latter, he cited the Geneva Convention's mandate to repatriate prisoners as soon as possible after the war (Lewis and Mewha 1955: 173).¹³

Although in the closing weeks of the war it appeared that the bracero program would also pass into history (Garcia y Griego 1981: 21), the very same arguments advanced by the government in favor of terminating the prisoner-of-war program did not result in the termination of the bracero program. In their 99th meeting in August 1945, the War Manpower Commission's (1945b) Labor Policy Management Committee concluded that arrangements were being made to "cease further importation of Mexicans," and in November 1946 the State Department notified Mexico that it wanted to terminate the current agreement, as Mexican workers were no longer needed. Notwithstanding these intentions, the lobbying efforts of employers proved successful in ensuring the continued recruitment and employment of Mexican braceros long beyond the program's original time frame (Galarza 1964: 48).

While the economic arguments for terminating the prisoner-of-war program seem unconvincing, the legal arguments were on more solid ground. During the war the United States had adhered to the rules of the Geneva Convention. The government often referred to these when responding to accusations that prisoners were being coddled. Yet once the war had ended and American prisoners in German hands had been returned, the rules of the Convention were no longer of prime concern. While it may be difficult

to speak of outright violations of the Convention, the government began to interpret the rules more loosely. It decided to extend the stay of prisoners until July 1946 and, along with the Allies, not to return most prisoners to Germany but to send them to work for an additional one to two years in England, France, and Belgium. Since the use of conscript prisoner-of-war labor is neither sanctioned nor officially forbidden by the Convention (Krammer 1991: 239), this decision was problematic at best. For many German prisoners who ended up spending one to two additional years at forced labor in Britain or France, this experience certainly placed a shadow on their otherwise positive views of the United States. In light of these conscriptions, the argument that prisoners had to be returned as soon as possible after the war seems questionable. Yet from the point of view of American employers, who only knew that the prisoners had left American soil, the Geneva Convention provided a solid and for the most part convincing legitimation for the decision to terminate the prisoner-of-war program.

Such legitimation was not available in the case of the bracero program. Although the bracero program was based on an international agreement, it was ultimately an agreement between unequal powers that was weak to begin with and lacked a specific time frame and any meaningful enforcement powers. Although the agreement allowed for termination of the program by either of the signatories within a three-month period of the intent to terminate, it did not provide any specific end point. In contrast, the Geneva Convention was a multilateral agreement, the rules and conditions of which were relatively strictly enforced by the International Red Cross. During the war the fact that Germany held Americans as prisoners of war provided the U.S. government with additional incentives for adhering to the rules. After the war the Convention served as a strong legitimation for returning the prisoners of war to Europe, if not necessarily to Germany. In the case of the braceros, the Mexican government's limited bargaining power in negotiating the bilateral agreement derived from its support of the American war effort and did not provide much support to its citizens once they had arrived in the United States. Once the war ended, that bargaining power further diminished, and the renegotiation of the bracero program in 1947 returned the power fully to American employers.

Although the presence and employment of German prisoners of war were relatively brief and little physical evidence of their presence remains today, it lives on in the memories of participants and the growing literature

devoted to the subject. An important legacy of the prisoner-of-war program in the United States was the often unexpected positive experiences and human relationships between “enemies” at times of war. These experiences and relationships were fostered by changing circumstances associated with the imprisonment and work opportunities encountered by participants. Interned in large camps in the South and the Southwest, German prisoners of war were isolated. Changing conditions associated with the employment program, however, opened numerous opportunities for personal contacts with Americans inside and outside the camps. In contrast, conditions surrounding the uses of *bracero* labor ensured that they remained isolated, having little or no contact with Americans. In the end, as both groups labored in American fields and factories, making significant contributions to the American war effort, the Germans turned out to be “just like us,” while Mexicans remained strangers and outsiders.

Notes

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- 1 Although it was amended several times, this agreement remained relatively unchanged until 1947. A new agreement was negotiated in 1948. Although Mexican workers represented by far the largest contingent of temporary foreign labor brought to the United States, other sources included the Bahamas, Barbados, Canada, Jamaica, and Newfoundland. For details on these programs, see Rasmussen 1951.
- 2 My attempts to reach these individuals by telephone or at different addresses proved unsuccessful, as telephone numbers had been disconnected or simply were not available in the public record. Given the age of this population, I assume that most of these individuals had died or were in nursing homes. Two additional individuals responded to the letter but indicated that they were too ill to be interviewed. I also received responses from two wives who informed me that their husbands had passed away, and I learned from another source that a third man had died a few years ago. This left 34 respondents willing and able to be interviewed.
- 3 One of the interviews (with Heinz Richter) was conducted on the telephone but was otherwise identical to the face-to-face interviews.
- 4 This article is part of a larger study of former German prisoners of war who emigrated to the United States. The study extends beyond their experiences as pris-

oners of war and focuses on how these experiences shaped their later decisions to emigrate.

- 5 This article is based on interviews with 30 men between 2002 and 2004. Three of the remaining men who had consented to interviews died in 2005. I was able to interview the fourth man by phone. He was caring for his wife, who had suffered a serious stroke, and did not feel that he had the time or energy for a face-to-face interview.
- 6 Ten percent of the wages was deducted, placed in rural savings funds, and then transferred to Mexico's Agricultural Credit Bank. None of the braceros received the money. Former braceros have mounted a campaign to recoup it (*El Universal* 2004).
- 7 A memo of August 24, 1943, from the War Department (1943) to the commanding generals of the nine regional service commands outlined the need for a general policy for the increasing number of prisoners of war arriving in the United States. The memo clearly states that "safeguarding, housing and subsistence" were to come first, followed by employment. However, if the two conflicted, security was always to be given priority.
- 8 Due to previous German emigration to the United States, it was not uncommon for German prisoners of war to have close relatives who were American citizens or permanent residents.
- 9 In his detailed account of the history of American administrative policy, Edward Pluth (1970: 4) notes that "the American experience with German prisoners of war was unique in modern American history," as it allowed administrative policy to evolve over time and to adjust to changing circumstances.
- 10 Schott (1995: 281) reports that Louisiana planters reacted to news about "American victory in Europe with foreboding," fearing they would lose this source of "fee labor." Jeffrey Geiger (1996: 168) reports that farmers in California's San Joaquin Valley suggested a "parole plan" for prisoners, where Germans would be kept to work on farms to help "produce food to be sent to their homelands." Similarly, a report by Eldon Nelson, a State Department representative accompanying the Red Cross on a visit to Camp Algona, Iowa, in September 1945, noted a conversation with Robert Wilson, a representative of the Minnesota Cannery Association, who was "disturbed about rumors that the prisoners [would] be returned" and who "expressed the desire that some prisoners be retained if possible." See also numerous letters from individual farmers and American relatives of prisoners petitioning that individual prisoners might stay in the United States. All were summarily turned down, the government citing the Geneva Convention's requirements that prisoners of war be returned to their countries of origin. This collection is in RG 389, Records of the Provost Marshal General's Office, Entry 467D, Records of the Legal Branch, General Correspondence, 1942-57, National Archives II, College Park, MD.
- 11 Even if they had such opportunities, we cannot assume that all prisoners of war were interested or inclined to interact with Americans or were curious about the American way of life. Those who did were probably in the minority, and they most likely excluded Nazis and strong sympathizers.
- 12 *Newsweek* (1945c) showed a photograph of smiling American "girl friends" as they

said good-bye to German prisoners of war leaning out of a train. The prisoners of war were being transferred from California to New Mexico.

- 13 After official repatriation plans were made public in August 1945, 60,000 prisoners were returned in December; 70,000 in January 1946; 70,000 in February; 83,000 in March; and 43,000 in April. Remaining behind were 141 men serving prison sentences, 134 men who were hospitalized, and 25 men who had escaped and were still at large. Eventually all prisoners were returned.

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