

“They did not feel like the Enemy”:  
German Prisoners of War in Michigan

A Capstone Project Submitted to the College of Online and Continuing Education in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Master of Arts in History

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A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Runk', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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## **Abstract**

Seventy years after the end of World War Two, many topics concerning the United States' involvement are rarely discussed. One of these topics is the German Prisoner of War (POW) camps that dotted the United States from 1942-1945/46. The United States began transporting POWs to the United States due to pressure from its Allies in Europe. Allied camps could no longer house captured troops. Land and economic food supplies within Allied camps were lacking, due to the British being unable to financially supply these necessities. With misgivings, due to the proximity to the American people, the United States began to erect camps. Approximately, 378,000 prisoners of war arrived from the European theater. Of those, 4,000-5,000 prisoners arrived in Michigan to begin a process of becoming economic laborers. Viewed as workers, according the residents, these men did not feel like the enemy. These laborers, though prisoners, allowed Michigan to maintain its economic stability.

Utilizing unpublished letters, contemporary newspaper articles, personal interviews, National Archive records, and secondary sources, it is possible to review how the camps and the prisoners in Michigan were viewed. These camps followed the confines of the Geneva Convention. However, escapes still happened from the camps. Despite these instances, without the prisoners during the war, Michigan's economy would have suffered due to the lack of farming crops. Without these prisoners, Michigan civilians would have been unable to realize the average German soldier was not the same enemy as a Nazi.

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## Introduction

Upon the United States' entry into World War Two, the potential of housing German Prisoners of War (POWs) loomed. British and French forces, as they began to win battles, captured prisoners. These prisoners had to be housed in camps, fed, and clothed. This cost money; given that the prisoners had to be sent behind enemy lines to prevent escapes. The capture of Rommel's Afrika Corps, by the United States and other Allies, created a situation which involved erecting camps, distributing food, and transporting these individuals. British forces could no longer house prisoners, due to space constraints. As such, they begged, their nearest ally, the United States, in 1942, to begin holding POWs. The United States government agreed reluctantly, as they feared escapes and endangering the population with so many prisoners on their soil.<sup>1</sup> Beginning in 1942, the United States began shipping German POWs stateside.<sup>2</sup> This decision eliminated the need to send food, clothing, and other provisions to foreign ports housing POWs. It eliminated the Allies' problem concerning space needed to house POWs. It also helped alleviate the labor shortage experienced by the United States.

The United States housed approximately 378,000 POWs from 1942-1945.<sup>3</sup> With so many men fighting in the war, factories and farms faced a lack of workers. The Geneva Convention allowed prisoners to work, so long as they received compensation.<sup>4</sup> The nation constructed many camps throughout the country. According to the Smithsonian Institute, approximately five hundred camps held prisoners throughout the South and Southwestern portions of the United

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<sup>1</sup> J. Malcom Garcia, "German POWs on the Home-Front," *Smithsonian Institute* (September 15, 2009) <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/german-pows-on-the-american-homefront-141009996/>.

<sup>2</sup> Arnold Kramer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America* (Lanham, MD: Scarborough House Publishers, 1996), xiii.

<sup>3</sup> Kramer. *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 3-5.

<sup>4</sup> Garcia, 2009.



States. Additionally, camps housed prisoners in the Great Plains, Midwest and Western areas of the country.<sup>5</sup> Areas in which camps existed include Massachusetts, Texas, Florida, California, Utah, Kentucky, Wisconsin, Nebraska, and many others. Michigan had about thirty camps within the state, composed of roughly 4,000-5,000 prisoners.<sup>6</sup> The prisoners worked in a variety of agricultural activities: logging, planting vineyards, picking crops, etc. Michigan residents farmed heavily and much of the economy subsisted on agricultural products. The labor shortage in Michigan threatened a loss of crops, thus diminishing the state's economy. This crop loss would have also threatened the availability of food surpluses, both for troops and citizens. Thus, the utilization of German POWs in the American agricultural fields, allowed the United States to maintain its economic stability.

Housing the prisoners created controversy as some residents believed that the German POWs experienced better treatment than American citizens. The United States, following the protocols of the Geneva Convention, ensured that the German prisoners had adequate food, housing, clothing, and other amenities, similar to those of American servicemen, both stateside and serving overseas. This treatment supported the Convention, as well as avoided reprisals from Germany. It was believed that should the German POWs receive ill treatment; American POWs would not be treated adequately.<sup>7</sup> Though enemies, the prisoners saved the economy of Michigan through their labor. Despite the accusation of better treatment, Michigan treated its POWs the same as farm workers.

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<sup>5</sup> Garcia, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Alan Clive, *State of War: Michigan in World War II* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1979), 48.

<sup>7</sup> John C Bonafilia, "'Hospitality is the Best Form of Propaganda': German Prisoners of War in Western Massachusetts, 1944-1946," *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 44, no. 1 (Winter 2016):44.  
<http://resolver.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.snhu.edu/openurl?genre=article&atitle=%27Hospitality+Is+the+Best+Form+of+Propaganda%27%3a+German+Prisoners+of+War+in+Western+Massachusetts%2c+1944-1946&title=Historical+Journal+of+Massachusetts&issn=02768313&isbn=&volume=44&issue=1&date=20160101&au=Bonafilia%2c+John+C.&spage=44&pages=44-75&sid=EBSCO%3aU.S.+History+in+Context%3aedsgcl.514101852&site=ftf-live>.

This study into the German POWs in Michigan continues the regional and state studies already completed. Previous studies have been completed concerning POW treatment and camps in Texas, Alabama, and others. However, reviewing the camps within each individual state, also allows for additional study of the population. Utilizing previously unpublished sources, along with newspaper articles, journals, and government documentation, the camp structure and prisoner treatment of Michigan camps can be examined. The outline of this project includes a review of the Nazi propaganda to understand how German soldiers viewed American citizens; a discussion reviewing previously published state studies; and finishing with a review of the various Michigan camps and the aftermath of certain German POWs who wrote to their American employers after they returned to their homeland.

## Chapter 1: Before Captivity Behind the Wire

January 30, 1933: Hitler is named Chancellor of Germany.

September 1, 1939: World War Two begins with the invasion of Poland by Germany.

December 7, 1941: Pearl Harbor, Hawaii bombed, prompting United States entry into the war as an Allied Power.

December 8, 1941: Germany declares war against the United States.

The German-American declaration of war, prompted a battle of propaganda on both sides of the Atlantic. Propaganda- “information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote or publicize a particular political cause or point of view” - influences how an individual sees the world.<sup>8</sup> Should an individual be raised to value their country, propaganda utilizing patriotic fervor resonates better than information against the country. Truthfulness within propaganda is limited, at best. The goal remains to influence citizens to follow a specified line of thinking. Creating biased opinions, citizens no longer reflect on whether the information being told to them is true.<sup>9</sup> Government-sanctioned propaganda inhibits citizenry to formulate independent thought, as the only information they receive comes from a biased source.

The United States would create propaganda, both as a deterrent of behavior and as a way to subvert the propaganda of the Germans in Germany. Utilizing such mediums as posters, radio shows, false stamps, the United States attempted to thwart enemy morale.<sup>10</sup> The creation of the Office of War Information (OWI) attempted to dissuade the negative disposition towards

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<sup>8</sup> “Propaganda,” Merriam Webster Dictionary.

<sup>9</sup> Consider current political fervor concerning ‘fake news’.

<sup>10</sup> See stamps bearing an image of Hitler, as used with the Reich, but bearing a different message. Becky Little, “Inside America’s Shocking World War II Propaganda Machine,” *National Geographic* (December 19, 2016), <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/12/world-war-2-propaganda-history-books/>.

propaganda left by the World War One Committee on Public Information. They adopted a “strategy of truth”, whereby the goal included “disseminat[ing] information to the public while refraining from attempts to persuade directly.”<sup>11</sup> The United States wanted the citizens to still formulate their own opinions, but they wanted to ensure those opinions match the government at large. Patriotic fervor, love of country, and fear of the Nazis showed in propaganda mediums, influencing the minds of the American people. They still had the ability to protest the government, guaranteed through their freedoms, but it was socially unacceptable to blatantly disregard the government during a period of war.

Germany, by contrast, focused on creating complacent people. Through the mediums of radio, censored movies, posters, and other avenues, Nazi Germany reminded their people about the dangers of foreign enemies and the problems subversion would cause.<sup>12</sup> Seen as restoring order, these forms of propaganda created passivity among the general population; thus, allowing the government to begin its programs without interference. Additionally, propaganda infiltrated the minds of Germans, as they believed the United States had no resources and would be unable to defeat the German State. The German soldiers, after being transported to the United States, appeared amazed at the buildings, cars, and farmlands they saw during their time as prisoners.<sup>13</sup> This implies the German government succeeded in its propaganda efforts to demonstrate Germany’s enemy as ineffective and weak.

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Howell, “The writers’ war board: U.S. domestic propaganda in World War II,” *Historian* 59, no. 4 (Summer 1997): 795.  
<http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9710166238&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>12</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Nazi Propaganda,” *Holocaust Encyclopedia* (2018)  
<https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005202>.

<sup>13</sup> See quotation from former POW. Heather Gilligan. “Even Nazi prisoners of war in Texas were shocked at how black people were treated in the South,” *Timeline* (October 26, 2017) <https://timeline.com/nazi-prisoners-war-texas-f4a0794458ea>

The soldiers were exposed to information, as censored by Josef Goebbels, the head of the Reich Ministry of Propaganda. Goebbels placed Adolf Hitler on a pedestal, almost to the point of deification.<sup>14</sup> Yet, his greatest fear during the war involved losing the war; and the most dangerous sin during the ‘crisis,’ was cowardice.<sup>15</sup> As such, he limited the publication of low morale of enemy troops, as the “German people must face the hard facts of war and must not nurture empty hopes.”<sup>16</sup> Limiting the publications involving the enemy troops appears counterintuitive, as finding out the other side failed, encourages troops to continue fighting, as they are winning. However, it also creates a situation of overconfidence. This may be what Goebbels hoped to avoid, given that the war did not appear to be shortening. But, as noted by Hitler, and Goebbels’ beliefs, that “Only a Nazi was a full-fledged human being”—a member of the master race- the overconfidence and superiority complex is inevitable.<sup>17</sup> The images of concentration camps and the genocide, shown after capture, shocked the soldiers, as these images never saw light within the Nazi-controlled state. Because of this, soldiers, along with the German populace, had trouble believing that the events shown by the Allied powers, was not itself, propaganda.<sup>18</sup> The people had been desensitized to any conflicting information. Only the information given by the Nazi government could be considered as fact. Yet, as shown from the news footage, and personal stories, the government gave false information, prevented opposing views, and dissuaded others from forming opinions.

On January 23, 1942, Goebbels noted the capture of Rommel’s Afrika Corps. By stating US President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, has lost his prestige, and that the South American

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<sup>14</sup> Josef Goebbels, *The Goebbels Diaries, 1942-1943*, translated by Louis Paul Lochner (New York, NY: Doubleday & Company Inc: 1948), 6.

<sup>15</sup> Goebbels, *The Goebbels Diaries*, 35.

<sup>16</sup> Goebbels, *The Goebbels Diaries*, 35.

<sup>17</sup> Goebbels, *The Goebbels Diaries*, 29.

<sup>18</sup> Goebbels, *The Goebbels Diaries*, 29.

countries were pressured into becoming allies to the United States, he shows that he believed the information his department was creating. Even though, the United States was sending aid to Britain and her allies. His comment, “One can hardly expect them to engage themselves on the side of so undependable a partner,” indicates the writings, pamphlets, news stories, and other methods of a weak, ineffective, United States, were believed.<sup>19</sup> Yet, the capture of Rommel’s corps in 1943, began the process of the United States housing Prisoners of War. The first individuals to arrive came from this confrontation. This arrival began the process of changing what the soldiers knew about the Nazi government, along with fighting the information previously given to them.

The propaganda initiated by the Nazi government, headed by Josef Goebbels, utilized “...correspondence courses and recently through a school for NSDAP speakers...” in order to spread its message throughout Germany.<sup>20</sup> Creating a top-down system, Goebbels created the propaganda and the regional *Gaus* distributed it.<sup>21</sup> The document discussing Nazi propaganda stipulated the movement “...protect the peasant through the ruthless education of our people to consume our own products...will emphasise our national honour and national pride by avoiding all that is foreign as far as possible.”<sup>22</sup> Additionally, the introduction of the ‘Fuhrer myth’ created situations where people became swept up in the theatrics. A local propaganda magazine indicated the purpose of the propaganda through the “...primary task of making the audience enthusiastic for our cause; secondly, it is intended to raise the money necessary for the further build-up of propaganda.”<sup>23</sup> This creation of an angelic being in Adolf Hitler, and the subsequent

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<sup>19</sup> Goebbels, *The Goebbels Diaries*, 38.

<sup>20</sup> J Noakes and G. Pridham, *Nazism: 1919-1945* Vol. 1 (Exeter, Devon, England: Short Run Press Ltd., 1983), 71.

<sup>21</sup> Noakes and Pridham, *Nazism: 1919-1945*, 70.

<sup>22</sup> Noakes and Pridham, *Nazism: 1919-1945*, 72.

<sup>23</sup> Noakes and Pridham, *Nazism: 1919-1945*, 75.

rallies imbuing him with spiritual abilities, was supported by the people, as society had disintegrated into such a state, that people saw positives in the Nazi foreign and domestic policy. The party combined individual interests with a unified national community, which people supported as it furthered individual's interests and circumstances to follow the propaganda.<sup>24</sup> The soldier in the Army, may not have followed Hitler initially. But, after requiring a loyalty oath to the Fuhrer, the soldiers obeyed.

Soldiers within the German Army, came from many different backgrounds.<sup>25</sup> These ethnic differences, however, dissuaded how they were perceived. Despite soldiers being from many different, German-controlled countries, all fell under the same designation. As these soldiers entered the United States, American citizens would attempt to catch glimpses, as the soldiers had all been deemed 'Nazis' by the government.<sup>26</sup> The soldiers arriving in the country were the men whom they had been warned against. These men initiated and supported the atrocities happening on the Eastern Front and continued to fight against the United States. However, the reality is more complicated.

These men came from varying backgrounds. Some experienced German occupation. Many had been raised in authoritarian homes, where obedience to authority could not be questioned. Following that line of thinking, soldiers, generally, did not question orders and information from the government. As is the case with human behavior, not everyone fit into this cookie-cutter pattern. The government's supposition and order to never surrender, resulted in men fighting, despite knowing they did not have any chance of winning.

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<sup>24</sup> Noakes and Pridham, 1983, 75.

<sup>25</sup> Kramer, 1996, 3.

<sup>26</sup> Little, 2016.

Following the war, individuals questioned the mentality of fighting to the end. Orders to continue fighting in Berlin, or fighting after being surrounded at Stalingrad, confused many. Belief in propaganda, formulates loyalty. No ability for opposition, formulates blind obedience. Two theories emerged to explain the behavior of German soldier's fighting: seduction and supervision. The seduction theory indicated "...assent accorded by the overwhelming majority of the population...generated by the sophisticated techniques of fascist mass organization and the supposed irresistibility of Goebbels's propaganda."<sup>27</sup> The supervision theory indicated an "assert[ion] that the systems of control, internal espionage, and policing in the Third Reich were so efficient that even the faintest attempt at opposition was sure to lead to the concentration camps."<sup>28</sup> Yet, the historical acceptance remains tainted as using only these two theories to explain the acceptance and acquiescence of the population and soldiery, does not take into account all aspects of human behavior. Some individuals simply do not fit into a mold dictated by psychology and psychopathy.

People acquiesce, condone, or resist behavior in different ways. Soldiers within the German Army, though fed the same propaganda concerning the Jewish people, and other deemed undesirable, reacted to their duties differently. Whilst some reacted with enthusiasm, others were highly disturbed. Battalion 101, a specialized battalion, operating on the Eastern Front, reports soldiers celebrating while killing Polish and Russian Jews.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, letters from Captain Hoffmann, a captain on the Eastern Front, indicate a personal struggle about the deeds. He allowed men to decline killing duty, should they believe themselves incapable.<sup>30</sup> This

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<sup>27</sup> Detlev J.K. Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition, and Racism in Everyday Life*, translated by Richard Deveson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), 67.

<sup>28</sup> Peukert, 1982, 67.

<sup>29</sup> See Chapter entitled "Police Battalion 101: The Men's Deeds". Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1996).

<sup>30</sup> Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 3-5.



contradiction presents questions concerning the soldier's acceptance of the events around them. As soldiers arrived into the United States, the shock of the country's resources caused many to question the authority of the Reich. Goebbels, and others, insistence on a weak United States backfired, as the men rolled through the country, arriving at camps erected according to the standards established by the Geneva Convention. This physical contradiction to what they had been told, caused soldiers to question the information of the government. They started to question the propaganda.

The soldiers within the German Army had internalized the Fuhrer myth. Having been raised in authoritarian families, whereby the father's word reigned, following laws given by an authoritarian government, required little behavioral change.<sup>31</sup> As the soldiers continued their training, they swore an oath to the dictator, rather than the country. This belief in greatness, superiority, and obedience encompassed the fibers of being. They learned to obey their parents and the government without question. As noted by a previous concentration camp internee, Dr. Elie Cohen, a psychologist, the soldiers carried out Hitler's orders with blind obedience.<sup>32</sup> The soldiers transported to the United States, grew up within this structured environment.

Arriving at various camps within the United States, the soldiers experienced culture shock. They arrived in a country, where contradictions happened and questions were asked. For example, African-Americans experienced treatment as second-class citizens, while German prisoners of war experienced 'white-only' treatment, despite varying ethnic backgrounds.<sup>33</sup> American citizens questioned the treatment of prisoners, as they believed the prisoners received better care and luxuries unavailable to the normal citizenry. Additionally, the German soldiers,

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<sup>31</sup> Dr. Elie A. Cohen, *Human Behavior in the Concentration Camp*, translated by M. H. Braaksma, (New York, NY: Grosset & Dunlap, 1953), 242-245.

<sup>32</sup> Cohen, *Human Behavior in the Concentration Camp*, 242-245.

<sup>33</sup> Gilligan, 2018.

on occasion, questioned the differential treatment, as African-American men treated them humanely, despite being treated differently.

The entire study of German prisoners of war within the United States, encompasses a thread of history that is not readily apparent to the average person. Many citizens are unaware the United States held prisoners during World War Two. Previous studies of states and regions have been completed, but interest has dwindled. The subject, of POWs in the United States, appears to have lost recognition. Discussing the propaganda and indoctrination of the soldiers prior to their transportation to the United States, increases understanding of the soldiers' backgrounds. This increased knowledge creates interest concerning the psychology of the soldiers, which can be studied at a later date. However, for the purpose of this study, the understanding of the soldiers' backgrounds allows people to understand American citizens' perceptions of the prisoners. The prisoners started to arrive in 1943. In some cases, they stayed until 1946. Upon returning home, some returned to the United States, where they became naturalized American citizens. Former prisoners returning to their country of imprisonment indicates the propaganda they once internalized no longer held sway.

## Chapter 2: Entwined in the United States

Following the end of World War Two, historians wrote pieces discussing the various camps throughout the United States, the prisoners themselves, and the general life of an inmate. Interest in this study has waned within the last forty years. Additionally, no book has been published concerning the POWs in Michigan. Dissertations and journal articles received publication; however, no book exclusively discusses the fate of Michigan's POWs. Discussing the general background, and international treatment of POWs throughout the United States, allows for a comparison with the Michigan camps. The United States followed a general theme of adhering to the Geneva Convention, and treating the POWs humanely. However, each camp within the United States was unique and its inhabitants each experienced something different.

The transportation of German prisoners of war into the United States was met with trepidation. The American government did not willingly accept the task of housing POWs, as they feared it would endanger its citizens, given that the camps would be required to be located near cities and the civilian population.<sup>1</sup> As an ally to England, who faced a growing shortage of housing space, the logical place to house POWs was in the United States. The first shipments of troops began arriving in 1942, following the capture of Rommel's Afrika Corps. They were housed in many different states across the country and numbered approximately 398,000 individuals.<sup>2</sup> After the war, these individuals received transportation back to Germany or to other labor camps. Some POWs completed additional incarceration in England or France. Other prisoners attempted escape. One, Georg Gaertner, fled the American camp and lived as an

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<sup>1</sup> J. Malcom Garcia, "German POWs on the Home-Front," *Smithsonian Institute* (September 15, 2009), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/german-pows-on-the-american-homefront-141009996/>.

<sup>2</sup> Arnold Kramer, *Nazi Prisoners of War In America* (Lanham, MD: Scarborough House Publishers, 1996), xiii.

American citizen for almost 40 years. Fearing Soviet occupation, he decided it would be better to take the chance of running from the government, rather than being transported back to Germany.<sup>3</sup>

One of the more comprehensive books giving a narrative of the German POWs is Arnold Kramer's, *Nazi Prisoners in America*. This book details the various camps within the United States, the men who ran the camps, and the men within them. Written by a professor at history of Texas A & M, the growing interest in the subject demanded additional publications. However, this book educated readers in 1979. At the time of publication, this renewed interest had prompted "a dozen state and local studies, numerous oral history projects, one novel..."<sup>4</sup> Forty years later, interest in the subject has waned. But, the impact of the work remains. At the time, it held the recognition as one of the most detailed studies. Whilst discussing the camps conditions, Kramer describes escapes which took place, the labor program, and the reeducation program. An interesting note, upon publication of this work, Kramer received a call from the last escaped POW who still resided in the United States. The book prompted the man to call and turn himself in. This led to a subsequent publication by the fugitive, who discusses his camp experiences, escape, and time as a fugitive.

Kramer's in-depth source analysis, involved locating records from the Provost Marshall Office at the National Archives, as well as personal testimonies, letters, and previously published secondary sources. The ill-treatment of prisoners is mentioned, but not fully analyzed, as he discusses how the American soldiers stripped German soldiers of their medals, decorations, and other insignia as they entered the camps.<sup>5</sup> Additional information gathered from Kramer's work

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<sup>3</sup> Georg Gaertner with Arnold Kramer, *Hitler's Last Soldier in America* (New York, NY: Stein and Day, 1985), 17.

<sup>4</sup> Arnold Kramer, *Nazi Prisoners in America* (Lanham, MD: Scarborough House, 1996), xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Kramer, *Nazi Prisoners in America*, 6.

include the fact that not every member of the German army was German. Some individuals were from Mongolia, Switzerland, and other countries.<sup>6</sup> The army was a mixing pot of individuals. This blending of peoples under one army blurred the lines of who was considered an enemy. If the German army did not include all ethnic Germans, then the American propaganda encouraging that Germany was the enemy, was not entirely accurate. The Allied army fought against an ideal, not just a physical army.

Kramer's publication has been used as source material in nearly every publication concerning the German POWs since. This utilization demonstrates the author's credibility at producing a historically accurate and informative piece. However, the text does not give information concerning every camp within the United States. It focuses on the larger camps within many of the states. Michigan is mentioned, but only two camps, Camp Evelyn and Fort Custer, are discussed.<sup>7</sup> This narrative framework, gives general information, allowing historians to further investigate the issue by mining additional publications concerning state and local studies.

An additional general narrative, written by Lewis H. Carlson, entitled, *We were Each Other's Prisoners*, discusses the treatment of POWs from a different perspective: their own words. Drawing on interviews with one hundred fifty individuals, both German and American, Carlson, tells the story of imprisonment from the people who experienced it.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, Carlson draws on both published and unpublished materials to supplement the interviews and verify their authenticity. Highly regarded, the work is cited in many secondary sources. This gives the work a high standing among the historical community who has researched the fate of

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<sup>6</sup> Kramer, *Nazi Prisoners in America*, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Kramer. *Nazi Prisoners in America*, 268-270.

<sup>8</sup> Lewis H. Carlson, *We were Each Other's Prisoners: An Oral History of World War II American and German Prisoners of War* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1997), xv.

the German POWs. Though an oral history, rather than a narrative history, it still explains the social and cultural happenings between the different factions. The German army placed a high value on heroism and authoritativeness; the American army on humanity. Both found the prospect of being a prisoner disheartening. The ultimate act of sacrifice involved dying for one's country, not being held behind wire in a foreign land.<sup>9</sup> Yet, German prisoners had better opportunities than their German counterparts held in Soviet POW camps. American-held POWs experienced the ability to take English classes, have plenty to eat, and amenities, such as toothbrushes. Yes, instances of ill treatment by the guards existed; but, the men held within Allied controlled camps experienced "reasonably well" treatment.<sup>10</sup> Besides giving detailed descriptions of these men's experiences, Carlson also discusses methodology and the Geneva Convention to ground readers in the ordeals a POW faced.

The Geneva Convention, signed by forty-two countries, detailed stipulations concerning prisoners of war. Among these provisions were "...interrogations, the privileges of rank, the quantity and quality of food, clothing, and housing, sanitary conditions, medical care, disciplinary measures and allowable punishments, mailing privileges, allowable work assignments, prisoner representation, and even the location of the camps themselves."<sup>11</sup> These conventional stipulations held that prisoners were to be kept within humane conditions. All signors of the Convention were expected to follow the stipulations. Prisoners of war, regardless of their originating country had to be treated in a similar fashion to an enlisted soldier.

However, as noted by stories within Carlson's piece, it was not always the case. The signors did not always honor the document following the outbreak of war. Germany, as a signor

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<sup>9</sup> Carlson, 1979, vii.

<sup>10</sup> Carlson, 1979, viii.

<sup>11</sup> Carlson, 1979, xxi.

of the Convention, did not always follow the stipulations in their treatment of American soldiers. The Soviet Union, however, did not sign. Thus, their treatment of POWs, though inhumane, did not violate the terms of the 1929 Geneva Convention. Yet, Carlson, Kramer, and Antonio Thompson, author of another narrative book, acknowledge that the United States adhered or exceeded the stipulations laid out within the document.

Antonio Thompson's arguments within *Men in German Uniform: POWs in America during World War II*, include "that despite severe difficulties faced in every aspect of the prisoner of war program, and although exceptions existed, the United States adhered to and exceeded its obligations under the Geneva Convention" and "the men captured in German uniform represented a conglomeration of many of the European and Asian peoples."<sup>12</sup> These arguments indicate an adherence to the 1929 Convention, but also that the men deemed 'German' came from different backgrounds. Utilizing governmental records and previously published secondary sources, Thompson additionally states that only four, broad-based, studies of German POWs in the United States have been completed. Among those are Kramer's and Carlson's studies. Both works are cited within this volume. Thompson reviews the aspects of housing and feeding the POWs, as well as discussing the labor program. He contends that exceptions to humane treatment happened, however, no extensive analysis of mistreatment happens within this text. No documentation, nor extensive analysis behind those exceptions is investigated, nor explained. Escapes are mentioned, camps are compared, and ideological perspectives analyzed; yet, Thompson determined the mistreatment of POWs did not warrant further examination within his book.

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<sup>12</sup> Antonio Thompson, *Men in German Uniform: POWs in America during World War II* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 2010), xii-xiii.

Ronald Bailey brings the story of POWs to life, through photographs and stories, within the *Time-Life* publication, *Prisoners of War: World War II*. Drawing from rare photographs, personal testimonies, government documents, and narratives, this publication grounds the reader in reality. It is possible to see the difficult conditions prisoners had to live in, compared to the conditions documented in the American camps. Bailey indicates the treatment of German prisoners held in American camps, exceeded the stipulations of the Geneva Convention. The prisoners were amazed, when they found “clean barracks and good health care, food so plentiful that they wrote their families to stop sending... parcels, and canteens full of consumer goods not seen in Europe for years.”<sup>13</sup> Yet, this fair treatment of prisoners led to criticism from the American public. Citizens believed prisoners received better food rations and care than American soldiers overseas or the general population. In response, the War Department issued a report stating the conditions of the camps matched conditions of American soldiers (GIs) and fell within the confines of the Geneva Convention.<sup>14</sup> Bailey also discusses the labor program. The use of prisoners to alleviate the nonessential sections of the economy saved the country.<sup>15</sup> These areas helped by POW labor included work on military bases, farms, food processing, logging, and mining. Yet, the argument can be made that some of these areas deserve ‘essential’, rather than ‘less/nonessential.’ Farming had been listed as a ‘nonessential’ area of war needs. Yet, this occupation kept the country fed. The decision to use enlisted men from the POW camps gave farmers access to cheap labor. The men were paid a small commissary stipend, while the rest of the payment was paid to the United States government. Work for enlisted POWs was mandatory,

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<sup>13</sup> Ronald H. Bailey, *Prisoners of War* (Chicago, IL: Time-Life Publishers, 1981), 142.

<sup>14</sup> Bailey, 1981, 142.

<sup>15</sup> Bailey, 1981, 148-149.



their commanding officers could choose to work. Without the POW labor system, the inability to harvest crops from farms would have resulted in further rationing of foodstuffs.

An additional book which covers the generalities of camp life and the fate of the POWs is Judith M. Gansberg's, *Stalag U.S.A.* One of the earliest written studies (1979), Gansberg's work, details the conditions within the camps, along with the top-secret reeducation program attempted by the United States government in violation of the Geneva Convention. Utilizing newspaper articles, government documents (which at the time had been recently declassified), and personal testimonies, she argues that the goal of the government besides fair treatment was to change the thinking of the German POWs. They worked hard to convince the soldiers that American democracy was better, hoping that these men would return to Germany and succeed in creating a more democratic republic. Gansberg also gives examples of mistreatment of German POWs by Americans. In contrast to the other general books, she has specific examples. One camp commander, after dealing with misbehavior, decided to turn off the water allotted to the prisoners.<sup>16</sup> On occasion, camps underfed the prisoners.<sup>17</sup> Arguments can be made as to whether this constitutes mistreatment or an oversight. However, adherence to the stipulations of the Convention helped alleviate the treatment of American-held POWs, or so the War Department believed.<sup>18</sup> Gansberg gives examples of mistreatment, yet determines overall, that the United States treated its prisoners well.

Of importance within Gansberg's book is the information concerning the reeducation program attempted by the United States government. This book informed the public of this program first. Following the publication of her research, Ron Theodore Robin, published, *The*

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<sup>16</sup> Judith M. Gansberg, *Stalag U.S.A.* (New York, NY: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1979), 11.

<sup>17</sup>Gansberg, 1979, 38.

<sup>18</sup> Gansberg, 1979, 38.

*Barbed-wire College: Reeducating German POWs in the United States during World War II.*

Within this, he asked why the government-sponsored program was deemed ineffective. His response indicated that “the answer appears to be that these mobilized professors believed that they had accomplished an assignment that was far more important than the formal military mission of democratizing a benighted enemy.”<sup>19</sup> These individuals involved in the reeducation program hoped to influence the soldier enough that they changed the regime of Germany into a republic following the war.

Robin utilizes government records, local and national archives records, personal testimony, along with both primary and secondary source materials, to educate readers that the United States attempted to culturally and socially influence others. The inception of the program was established in violation to military etiquette and the Geneva Convention. Its ultimate goal detailed that it would “provide ideological alternatives to National Socialism for the cross section of the German nation represented in the prison camps.”<sup>20</sup> It attempted to propose “a campaign of truth in which the facts would speak for themselves.”<sup>21</sup> The thought behind teaching the POWs about American democracy, was the hope the prisoners would change their outlook concerning National Socialism and its benefits. Unfortunately, many German soldiers saw it as propaganda; due to their limited support of National Socialism. German propaganda had infiltrated the minds of the soldiers, thus American information about democracy appeared as misinformation. Had more individuals been ardent supporters of National Socialism, the program may have been more successful. The difficulty in changing one’s outlook lies in what that individual originally

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<sup>19</sup> Ron Theodore Robin, *The Barbed-wire College: Reeducating German POWs in the United States during World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), ix.

<sup>20</sup> Robin, 1995, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Robin, 1995, 26.

believes. In the case of many soldiers, National Socialism waned in comparison to authoritarianism or other outlook. People primarily wanted peace, whatever way it looked.

Though top-secret, this program experienced controversy. Individuals within the program doubted in the soldiers' ability to be 'rehabilitated.' The program lacked initiative from sponsors and workers to be effective. Misgivings about the program also happened given the number of escapes that prisoners attempted on American soil. According to Kramer, recapture happened to all, but one prisoner.<sup>22</sup> Robin, acknowledges some tried to escape, and gives a percentage of escape attempts. According to him, the number of German prisoners who attempted to escape amounted to roughly one-half of a percent (0.5%) of the total German population incarcerated. However, Robin does not delve into the reasons to why this is. Given the additional information found in subsequent authors, the treatment of POWs by their American handlers, fulfilled enough personal satisfaction to make them want to remain inside. The prisoners experienced enough food, had access to adequate shelter, were not subjected to torture interrogations, and had the opportunity to work or pursue leisure activities. Other than being surrounded by barbed-wire, the experiences may have been similar to a holiday vacation.

For those who attempted escape, one book, *The Faustball Tunnel*, by John Hammond Moore, describes an attempted escape from an Arizona camp in 1944. Though only one account, this book shows that attempts were made for various reasons. The men from this camp hoped to return home. To accomplish this goal, "twenty-five German naval officers and seamen dug a 178-foot tunnel..." underneath the camp.<sup>23</sup> Utilizing personal testimony, the declassified records from the Provost Marshall's Office, journals, dairies, newspaper articles, and some secondary source material, Moore vividly describes the actions of the men who pulled off one of the largest

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<sup>22</sup> Kramer, 1996, xiii.

<sup>23</sup> John Hammond Moore, *The Faustball Tunnel* (New York, NY: Random House, 1978), xii.

POW escapes in America. This piece shows that escapes did happen and prisoners attempted to return home. Others wanted to see the world beyond the wire, meet American women, or attempt it as a result of boredom.<sup>24</sup> However, it also indicates that United States' military captured the men again, leaving only one fugitive at large until 1984.

Besides escaping and little-known narrative history concerning POWs in America, there are additional subsets to the general information about this era in America's history. Derek R. Mallett discusses how the American military attempted to gather intelligence from captured generals living inside the camps. Various authors have written articles documenting the relationship of Canada and the United States in housing POWs; the physiology behind POW treatment; the contradictions between POW treatment and the African Americans; and the POW labor programs. Though the preceding authors have mentioned areas of this, these specific analyses further the understanding of how the POWs were treated and how the American public viewed these individuals.

Derek Mallett's publication, *Hitler's Generals in America*, focuses on how the American military community attempted to gather intelligence from the generals in order to prevent attacks and stop the advancement of the Germany army. Focusing on the differences of treatment between the British and American camps, Mallett argues the Americans limited the authenticity of the German cultural hierarchy.<sup>25</sup> This involved treating officers differently than enlisted men. The Americans treated all prisoners the same at the beginning of the war; however, towards the end, as documented by other authors, the American military began housing officers separate from their enlisted men. The officers did not have to work, as the other prisoners did. However,

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<sup>24</sup> Moore, 1978, xii.

<sup>25</sup> Derek R. Mallett, *Hitler's Generals in America: Nazi POWs and Allied Military Intelligence* (Lexington, KY: The University of Kentucky Press, 2013), 5-6, 11, 13-14.

this change did not occur at the onset of the war. The Americans learned from the British model concerning prisoners, and began to follow it, after realizing that more intelligence could be gathered.

Following capture, the British would place officers in stately accommodations, in the hopes of cooperation.<sup>26</sup> This cooperation from the officers allowed Allied intelligence to gather information, as well as, diminish the hold of National Socialism. The thought behind such an operation lay in the fact that these high-ranking individuals held power inside the cultural hierarchy of Germany. As such, they would be instrumental in forming a new government following an Allied victory. The Americans copied their British allies. As the first generals arrived, “they placed the generals in a lavish environment enhanced with secret microphones and set about gathering information...”<sup>27</sup> By using these lavish conditions as a smoke screen, they hoped to achieve information prisoners would talk about privately, rather than in interrogations.

However, the American treatment of officers, as POWs, caused criticism. Inspectors noted two different conditions between the officers’ and enlisted men’s camps. The reports concluded the officers needs did not meet the standards necessary. The officers did not have the ability to acquire personal books, they were not given adequate supplies to alleviate their boredom; and the clothing and shoes issued had been deemed inadequate.<sup>28</sup> Yet, as prisoners, the lavish settings of the camp and the ability to access these recreational activities appear contradictory to how domestic prisoners are treated. Humane treatment stipulated the men needed to be clothed, fed, and housed, with a small amount of activity. However, to be able to live as prior to capture, appears odd. Hence, the original American policy of treating everyone

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<sup>26</sup> Mallett, 2013, 21-22.

<sup>27</sup> Mallett, 2013, 53.

<sup>28</sup> Mallett, 2013, 71.

the same. But, as the war dragged on, the Americans changed how officers experienced prisoner life, as they became important in gathering intelligence information. The information gathered, though minute, allowed Allied troops to win battles. It may have been a small price to pay, if it meant winning the war.

The journal articles documenting various subsets of the United States' POW experience indicate that the American government tried to treat its prisoners well, but the public, and the prisoners themselves, noted contradictions in behavior and standards. Jean-Michel Turcotte discusses the relationship between the United States and Canada regarding the treatment of POWs. Utilizing numerous government documents from both the United States and Canada, Turcotte asserts that "Canada, a middle Power, was not entirely excluded from Allied diplomacy regarding POWs and was more than a mere "jailer" or agent of Britain with no significant influence in the decision-making process."<sup>29</sup> Canada, not listed as a primary Ally, held POWs in similar conditions to the United States. Decisions to transport prisoners to Canada came as a result of Canada having large expanses of land. As both the United States and Canada had space necessary for housing POWs it became imperative for the countries to work together, sharing strategies and common ideas for security and understanding the German prisoners transported to their respective countries.<sup>30</sup> Without cooperation, prisoners who successfully escaped into Canada could have found sanctuary. But, similar parameters allowed both countries, as well as Britain to hold to a policy benefiting all involved.

Matthias Reiss discusses the perceptions of the POWs, as well as their perceptions of Americans. Within, "Bronzed Bodies behind Barbed Wire," he argues for "restoring the balance

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<sup>29</sup> Jean-Michel Turcotte, "'To Have a Friendly Co-Operation between Canadians and Americans': The Canada-United States Relationship Regarding German Prisoners of War, 1940-1945" *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 28, no. 3 (September 14, 2017): 384. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2017.1347433>.

<sup>30</sup> Turcotte, 2017, 385.

by emphasizing the importance of the German prisoners' bodies as a central category for understanding their experience of captivity in the United States during World War II."<sup>31</sup> This argument insinuates that the American population decided the treatment of POWs based upon their appearance. The Americans thought of the German prisoners in terms of how they viewed themselves.<sup>32</sup> The arrival of German prisoners into the United States was one of spectacle, whereby individuals flocked to train stations to see them arrive, and yet, were astonished to find that the prisoners did not look too different from the Americans.<sup>33</sup> Such a perception clouded the definition of an enemy. Therefore, fraternization between prisoners and American civilians became common, despite War Department orders to stop it. Additionally, the masculine view of the German soldier, made Americans think about their 'boys' in uniform fighting overseas. This American stereotype of 'good character,' rather than 'Nazi-fanatic,' indicates this fraternization and masculine view. Otherwise, the reception of former POWs following the end of the war cannot be adequately explained.<sup>34</sup> Had the prisoners been seen as enemies, reunions at former camp sites would not be viewed as celebrations, nor would American citizens attend and listen to the prisoners' stories.

The other avenue pursued by Reiss, concerns the comparison between the treatment of the German prisoners of war and the African American soldiers during World War II. The German POWs noted the differences experienced by the African American soldiers tasked with watching them.<sup>35</sup> The African-American soldiers experienced segregation and assignments to menial

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<sup>31</sup> Matthias Reiss, "Bronzed Bodies behind Barbed Wire: Masculinity and the Treatment of German Prisoners of War in the United States during World War II," *The Journal of Military History* 69, no. 2 (April 2005): 476. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jmh.2005.0122>.

<sup>32</sup> Reiss, 2005, 476.

<sup>33</sup> Reiss, 2005, 478.

<sup>34</sup> Reiss, 2005, 488.

<sup>35</sup> Matthias Reiss, "Solidarity Among 'Fellow Sufferers': African Americans and German Prisoners of War In the United States during World War II," *The Journal of African American History* 98, no.4 (Fall 2013): 538. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5323/jafriamerhist.98.4.0531>

tasks. Though the African-American soldiers claimed the German POWs experience better treatment, Reiss argues that the situation has more complexity than the initial statements suggest.<sup>36</sup> The conditions experienced by both groups of “socioeconomic conditions and the perception of shared underdog status established a sense of closeness...”<sup>37</sup> This undiscussed topic regarding the POWs indicates that historical review has moved from the discussion about the camps to the prisoners’ interactions with the population. It also enhances the gender, social, and cultural studies surrounding this topic. The issue of German POW interactions no longer focuses on the ‘white’ side of the color line. The use of numerous primary and secondary sources by Reiss, allows an interpretation highlighting the differences and similarities experienced by both groups. One, fighting for their country, while embodying the contradictions of freedom and equal status. The other, transported to the country in chains, yet sharing the distinction of being second-class.

Both African Americans and German POWs worked side by side within the confines of the labor program. Doing so, established the similarities experienced by both.<sup>38</sup> Yet, the labor program established by the United States’ government, utilizing POWs, earned them the title of other ‘braceros.’ These individuals migrated to harvest locations for pay. Though unpaid, the POWs experienced drastically different situations characterized by the American migrant workers. Barbara Schmitter Heisler discusses this within her article, “The “Other Braceros.”” Within the context of this article, Heisler asserts, the German prisoners established social relationships with their captors, going from ‘Nazi criminals’ to ‘just like us.’ Yet, the temporary workers (braceros) from Mexico “encountered personal rejection, exclusion, and discrimination”

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<sup>36</sup> Reiss, 2013, 531.

<sup>37</sup> Reiss, 2013, 533.

<sup>38</sup> Reiss, 2013, 533.



despite having come to the country to help it through a labor shortage.<sup>39</sup> Like the African American soldier, Mexican braceros experienced racial and social discrimination, not fully experienced by the German POWs. This presents an impasse and questions regarding the experiences of POWs. If American citizens and allies experienced exclusion, why did the enemy, who looked “American,” experience treatment so humane, it brought about criticism? The Geneva Convention stipulations required the United States to treat the prisoners humanely; yet, the amenities (cigarettes, certain foods, etc.) associated with camp life could be deemed unnecessary. In comparison to how the Soviet Union treated German POWs, the United States, it can be argued, equated freedom or a stay at a luxury resort.

Many stories exist concerning the treatment of prisoners at the hands of the Soviet Union. For this particular topic, the care, treatment, and reeducation propaganda utilized by the Soviet Union allow for comparisons to the same programs offered by the United States. Adelbert Holl, describes his experiences as a POW in the Soviet Union, in his book, *After Stalingrad*. His experience encompasses long marches through the snow, days of hunger, and beatings.<sup>40</sup> Had Holl been captured by American forces, his experiences would have been different. The Americans transported prisoners in train cars. They were housed in barracks built to the same specifications as American military bases. The American government supplied adequate food and torture was not allowed.

Another personal account, published by the Russian Research Center at Harvard University, gives further details about prisoners’ treatment at Soviet hands. It indicates that each prisoner’s experience differed, but all experienced a harder imprisonment than their Allied-held

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<sup>39</sup> Barbara Schmitter Heisler, “The “Other Braceros”: Temporary Labor and German Prisoners of War in the United States, 1943-1946,” *Social Science History* 31, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 241. [www.jstor.org/stable/40267939](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40267939).

<sup>40</sup> Adelbert Holl, *After Stalingrad: Seven Years as a Soviet Prisoner of War*, translated by Tony Le Tissier, (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword, 2016), 5, 7, 17, 29.

counterparts. This text describes one train transport lasting eighteen days, with only fifteen minutes allowed outside the train car, as the Russians searched their personal belongings.<sup>41</sup> The Russians also utilized the prisoners of war for labor purposes. Surprisingly, beginning in 1946, the Russians instituted a payment policy for POW labor, similar to the United States. Yet, the prisoners paid for food, lodging, and clothing, making the idea of paid labor obsolete.<sup>42</sup> The prisoners worked by hand, dealt with inadequate medical facilities, interrogations, and propaganda defacing National Socialism, in the hopes of turning prisoners toward Communism.<sup>43</sup> The propaganda initiated by the Soviet Union attempted to indoctrinate the German prisoners of war.

Wilfred O. Reiners, discusses the indoctrination policies in *Soviet Indoctrination of German War Prisoners 1941-1956*. Though used as a study to compare the political indoctrination techniques of Communist China and the Soviet Union, this piece demonstrates how the Soviet Union attempted to change the thinking of their German prisoners.<sup>44</sup> Similar to the practices in the United States, the Soviet Union used POWs to further propaganda and political ideologies. By having prisoners create radio broadcasts, flyers, and engage in lectures, they used the men as pawns to make it appear as though these men spoke for the German people.<sup>45</sup> Utilizing numerous unpublished government documents and restricted materials, Reiners shows that, despite treating prisoners worse than the United States, the Soviet Union and the United States shared a common goal in indoctrinating their prisoners. Both sides wanted to

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<sup>41</sup> Russian Research Center Harvard University, *Prisoner of War Camps in Russia: The account of a German prisoner of war in Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1951), 1

<sup>42</sup> Russian Research Center, 1951, 7-8.

<sup>43</sup> Russian Research Center, 1951, 10, 16, 20, 22, 31-32.

<sup>44</sup> Wilfred O. Reiners, *Soviet Indoctrination of German War Prisoners* (Cambridge, MA: Center for International Studies Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1959), 1.

<sup>45</sup> Reiners, 1959, 7-9

end National Socialism and determined that changing the way these prisoners saw the world, would change the political ideology of the country.

An additional prisoner of war camp overseen by the Soviet Union, involved a camp in Kazakhstan. This camp was known as Prison Camp 29. This camp operated within a classified section of the Soviet Union's government, thus many of the prisoners' fates are unknown. The conditions in this camp varied from others as it operated solely as a labor camp, picking cotton in the region. This created a freer society within the camp.<sup>46</sup> Prisoners grew their food, received wages for their work, and experienced a lower mortality rate than other camps in the Soviet Gulag (Soviet prison system).<sup>47</sup> In comparison to experiences of American-held prisoners, the prisoners of Prison Camp 29 received lesser care. However, their experiences exceeded those held inside standard Soviet POW camps. Prison Camp 29 demonstrated a 'middle' concerning POW treatment.

The varying degrees of treatment experienced by prisoners of war internationally, prompted some individuals to write about their experiences. As noted previously, Holl discussed his experiences at the hands of the Soviet Union. But what of those individuals who experienced captivity within the United States? What are their personal experiences? Books by Aaron D. Horton, Georg Gaertner, and Helmut Hörner give personal accounts of time spent behind barbed wire in the United States.

Horton, an assistant professor at Alabama State University, discusses the experiences of Alfred Andersch and Hans Werner Richter, in the book, *German POWs, Der Ruf, and the Genesis of Group 47*. These men became involved in the United States' propaganda effort, as

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<sup>46</sup> Aimar Ventsel and Baurzhan Zhanguttin, "Prison Camp No. 29 for the Prisoners of War from the Second World War on the Territory of Kazakhstan between 1943-1949," *Folklore* 63 (2016): 9.  
<http://www.folklore.ee/forlore/vol63/camp29.pdf>

<sup>47</sup> Ventsel and Zhanguttin, 2016, 12-14.

they wrote the POW newspaper, *Der Ruf*.<sup>48</sup> The goal of the newspaper “intended to promote American ideals among the German POWs in the United States.”<sup>49</sup> Written by individuals determined to have ‘anti-Nazi’ sentiments, the paper hoped to create positive reactions against National Socialism. Results among the prisoners varied. Generally, responses remained positive; however, cases of negative feedback and responses exist in camp records.<sup>50</sup> The overall success of the project continues to be debated. Influencing through print mediums is harder than speaking. But, a favorable outlook towards what is written, encourages readers to remember and discuss it.

Georg Gaertner, in collaboration with Arnold Krammer (author of *Nazi Prisoners in America*), wrote about his personal experiences as a POW who escaped successfully and lived as a fugitive within the United States. He eluded capture by the FBI for forty years.<sup>51</sup> Yet, he experienced humane treatment behind the wire. He did not experience beatings, nor hardline interrogations. As he spoke English, he translated orders from the guards. He fled the camp due to fear of the Soviet Union. Had he been repatriated, he would have returned to the Soviet controlled bloc.<sup>52</sup> Gaertner’s story indicates that men attempted escape from the camps for various reasons. Some wanted to see the cities and meet girls; others, considered escape a patriotic duty of German.<sup>53</sup> Regardless of the reasons, Gaertner’s story supplements accounts of escapes and the documents indicating all fugitives, but one, were recaptured.

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<sup>48</sup> Aaron D. Horton, *German POWs, Der Ruf, and the Genesis of Group 47: The Political Journey of Alfred Andersch and Hans Werner Richter* (Madison, WI: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2014), ix.

<sup>49</sup> Horton, 2014, 55.

<sup>50</sup> Horton, 2014, 56, 59.

<sup>51</sup> Georg Gaertner with Arnold Krammer, *Hitler’s Last Soldier in America* (New York, NY: Stein and Day, 1985), 17.

<sup>52</sup> Gaertner, 1985, 25-26, 57.

<sup>53</sup> Gaertner, 1985, 17-18.

Another, vivid, personal account written by Helmut Hörner, describes his treatment in America. He spent time in many different camps across the Eastern and Midwestern portions of the country.<sup>54</sup> Assisted by a published historian, Hörner's account supports the argument prisoners experience humane treatment, as well as the awe in which they viewed the United States. Hörner describes the port cities as "impressive."<sup>55</sup> He also demonstrates the different employers the POWs dealt with during the labor program. Some farmers worked well with the prisoners; others, along with the guards, tried to exploit them.<sup>56</sup> The POWs experienced varying degrees of treatment, as some Americans only saw them as 'Nazis,' while their contemporaries saw them as "traitors and deserters." This designation on occasion amounted to violence within the POW camp system.<sup>57</sup> Thus, the humane, and sometimes controversial treatment, of POWs did not prevent violence from happening. Sometimes, the violence came from within, as hardened Nazi supporters attempted to continue supporting the German regime, and would not accept defeat, nor surrender from their fellow countrymen.

The personal stories and general information further the understanding of how the United States treated POWs. However, the individual state studies offer more information to support the claim of humane treatment, following the Geneva Conventions, and alleviating a labor shortage, resulting in economic growth. Though not every state which had camps has been studied, many states including, Texas, Alabama, Florida, Kentucky, and others all have publications describing the camps, the perceptions of the people, and the treatment of the prisoners.

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<sup>54</sup> Helmut Hörner, *A German Odyssey: The Journal of a German Prisoner of War*, translated and edited by Allan Kent Powell, (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1991), 260.

<sup>55</sup>Hörner, 1991, 261.

<sup>56</sup>Hörner, 1991, 309. See diary entry for July 11, 1945. Hörner describes an encounter with a farmer who treats his laborers badly and a guard who attempts to make them continue working after curfew.

<sup>57</sup> Hörner, 1991, 274. See editorial note concerning the violence among POWs, done by POWs.

One of the most commonly cited state studies involves the work by Ruth Beaumont Cook. Her book, *Guest Behind the Barbed Wire*, describes the largest POW camp in the United States. This camp, known as Camp Aliceville, located in Alabama, housed approximately six thousand prisoners.<sup>58</sup> The whole of Alabama housed about 17,000 individuals, yet, this is one of the first publications that discuss this camp.<sup>59</sup> Cook, a local historian, discovered few Americans knew about the existence of POW camps, prompting her to write about this topic. Additionally, she claims that though the United States followed the stipulations of the Geneva Convention, as knowledge of the atrocities of the European theater, and Nazi regime, became known, the treatment of POWs changed. It did not become inhumane, simply less friendly. According to Cook, “POW rations were cut, privileges were revoked, and labor requirements were increased.”<sup>60</sup> Yet, these changes in the care of POWs did not fully take effect until the Allies felt secure in their victory and their military men remained out of harm’s way.

The civilians had mixed perceptions of the POWs. Upon arrival in Aliceville, one POW commented, ““They were disappointed in us. They expected us to be more arrogant.””<sup>61</sup> A U.S. citizen describes feeling compassion for them, as they looked like a bunch of young boys, rather than someone fierce.<sup>62</sup> This demonstrates the effects of American propaganda among the citizenry. As the POWs arrived in America, the people expected to see the Nazis and enemies that they had heard about. Seeing young men and boys, many who looked similar to family members fighting overseas, shocked them. It caused people to wonder who the enemy actually was.

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<sup>58</sup> Ruth Beaumont Cook, *Guests Behind the Barbed Wire* (Birmingham, AL: Crane Hill Publishers, 2007), 15.

<sup>59</sup> Cook, 2007, 15.

<sup>60</sup> Cook, 2007, 15-16.

<sup>61</sup> Cook, 2007, 164.

<sup>62</sup> Cook, 2007, 164-165.

The POWs themselves, found their perceptions of Americans altered. Hermann Blumhardt, a former POW, noted his barracks contained individual personal items and organized. This calmed his fears of “mistreatment, starvation, and slave labor,” fears which matched a reality for prisoners held by the Soviet Union.<sup>63</sup> Consequently, the German prisoners must have determined that the Soviet Union and the Western Allies would treat prisoners the same way. Thus, arriving to a camp where food, clothing, bedding and other items, were in ample supply, shocked the prisoners. They had not expected to be treated in this way. Again, this points back to the propaganda initiated by the German government warning about mistreatment. It could also be a result of stories from the Eastern Front, as the soldiers receiving positive treatment did not arrive in the United States until 1943/1944. By then, the war on the Eastern Front had been raging for years. The fighting involved extermination and eradication, rather than capturing soldiers. Stories of Soviet treatment of prisoners scared soldiers into fighting to the death to avoid capture.

Stories of humane treatment by the Allies, specifically the Americans, existed as well. Ernst Floeter demonstrates this, as he mentions within his personal testimony, he wanted to captured by either the British or the Americans because they would treat him better than the Soviets.<sup>64</sup> This hope of capture by Western Allies, inspired by publications by British and American forces, hoped to “encourage the Germans to treat American and British captives more humanely than they otherwise might have.”<sup>65</sup> This supports the idea that the United States followed the Geneva Convention stipulations, and in some cases exceeded them, in order for

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<sup>63</sup> Cook, 2007, 164-165.

<sup>64</sup> Ernst Floeter, interview by Robert Garrett, October 7, 2008, Grand Ledge, Michigan, *Seeking Michigan*. <http://seekingmichigan.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/p4006coll117/id/8>

<sup>65</sup> Cook, 2007. 182.

American POWs to receive similar treatment. However, whether the rumors and publications worked, yields mixed results.

Cook furthers her analysis by describing the recreational activities the POWs created to alleviate their boredom. Activities such as soccer, English classes, and theater helped the soldiers deal with captivity, before the work programs began to be utilized. Additionally, the matter of religion is also examined. The American citizens found it difficult to comprehend that German soldiers, who claimed to be Christian, could support Nazi doctrine.<sup>66</sup> Christians are called to love others. But, the Nazi regime supported a policy of killing those deemed unfit. In the minds of Americans, this was a contradiction.

Michael Luick-Thrams examines the correspondence of German POWs from Iowa to personalize the experiences of the soldiers. Focusing on Camp Algona, between the years of 1943-1946, Luick-Thrams, demonstrates the humanity behind the historical experiences.<sup>67</sup> By exploring numerous letters from POWs residing in the United States, the soldiers express their feelings, homesickness, treatment, and daily life. Soldiers write about the concern they have for their families, as letters between them arrive infrequently.<sup>68</sup> Others write asking for items that are lacking within the camp.<sup>69</sup> The general theme of the letters is one of homesickness, hoping the war will end soon, the fact that they are well, and worried about how their family fared during the war. However, certain elements of the letter are redacted, noted within the books as “made illegible by censor,” indicating that prior to being mailed, Americans read the letters.<sup>70</sup>

Authenticity may be questioned. But, it is not surprising that the American military read POW

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<sup>66</sup> Cook, 2007, 185, 193.

<sup>67</sup> Michael Luick-Thrams, *Signs of Life: Lebenszeichen*, translated by John Chaimov, et. al. (Dresden, Germany: TRACES, 2002), i-ii.

<sup>68</sup> Luick-Thrams, 2002, 18.

<sup>69</sup> Luick-Thrams, 2002, 18. See letter dated 29 January 1945. The letter writer, Richard, is writing home asking for items such as a pocket watch, fountain pen, wallet, and a razor.

<sup>70</sup> Luick-Thrams, 2002, 46. See multiple references throughout the book.



letters prior to them being sent. It would have been ill-advised to allow secret information or plans to be sent back to Germany in letters from soldiers. They may also have been checking for stories of mistreatment. Fearing reprisals from Germany, letters speaking of ill-treatment would have resulted in American prisoners of war being treated badly. Overall, life for the prisoners in Camp Algona consisted of work, sleep, play, and waiting behind barbed wire.

Glenn Thompson, a humanities scholar who received his degree in 1951, documents Camp Atlanta in Nebraska within his book, *Prisoners on the Plains*. Camp Atlanta opened in 1943. In order to protect the civilian population, and make them observant, the War Department issued a statement detailing safeguards the people should follow to lend aid and support.<sup>71</sup> The labor program initiated in the Plains States helped alleviate the labor shortage but did not eradicate it. Despite the prisoners putting in 100,000 man-days, the demand for laborers exceeded the supply of workers.<sup>72</sup> These individuals picked “small grains, potatoes, beets, beans and fruit.”<sup>73</sup> The public reaction to these individuals working within the community was one of concern, yet not panic, as they did not know what to expect. People expressed curiosity about both the POWs themselves and how the American soldiers were going to handle them.<sup>74</sup> Hearing about an enemy nearby, caused some members of the population to be uneasy. After watching them work, and seeing American guards, the people relaxed. Friendly conversations happened and some friendships continued after the war.

As soldiers began working in the area of Camp Atlanta, mutual trust and working relationships formed. Said one individual, “I baked cherry pies for them quite often as it was one

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<sup>71</sup> Glenn Thompson, *Prisoners on the Plains* (Holdrege, NE: Phelps County Historical Society, 1993), 13.

<sup>72</sup> Thompson, 1993, 21.

<sup>73</sup> Thompson, 1993, 21.

<sup>74</sup> Thompson, 1993, 29.

of their favorites.”<sup>75</sup> Although American civilians experienced rationing, United States servicemen and German POWs generally received the same foodstuffs. In some cases, the soldiers shared their food with the civilian population because they had access to items rationed by the government and, thus, not available for purchase.<sup>76</sup> With the soldiers and POWs having access to coffee, lard, and other items, while civilians limited access, accusations of better treatment towards American prisoners is not surprising.

Camps existed in the Northwest regions of the United States, as well as the Plains areas. It may be surprising given that the American government relocated Japanese-American citizens from the West Coast, due to the fear of a “fifth column” and Axis sympathies.<sup>77</sup> Placing captured Axis prisoners on the West Coast, near the civilian population appears counterintuitive, as it created the possibility for subterfuge. However, the labor needs of the West Coast required camps to be created. Camps in the Northwest primarily were located in mountain and farming regions, away from major cities. The United States government feared the Japanese on the West Coast, yet allowed German and Axis prisoners to be housed there. This appears to be contradiction, as housing enemies in an area where civilians are forcibly removed, does not limit the possibility of sabotage.

Tomas Jaehn, discusses Camp Rupert, a POW base camp, which sent men to satellite camps in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Montana.<sup>78</sup> Camp life involved living near the farms where the prisoners worked. Yet, the treatment, as outlined by the Geneva Convention, did not get overlooked. The barracks accommodated the prisoners well and the prisoners had liberty to

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<sup>75</sup> Thompson, 1993, 67.

<sup>76</sup> Thompson, 1993, 67.

<sup>77</sup> Greg Robinson, *By Order of the President* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 3, 7.

<sup>78</sup> Tomas Jaehn, “Unlikely Harvesters: German Prisoners of War as Agricultural Workers in the Northwest,” *The Magazine of Western History* 50, no. 3 (Autumn, 2000): 47, 51. [www.jstor.org/stable/4520253](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4520253).

establish teams for recreational activities. Religious services could be attended.<sup>79</sup> Once again, the demand for labor outran the supply. Farmers begged the government to send workers in 1943, but the first workers did not arrive until 1944.<sup>80</sup> Generally, Northwest farmers did not complain about having to pay wages, however the “rules and regulations” concerning supervision and overtime pay brought complaints. Farmers found it hard to follow army regulations, given the other duties they had to perform on a daily basis. A farmer’s chores prevented his ability to supervise prisoners.<sup>81</sup> The general sentiment of the POWs in the Northwest, matched those in other areas of the country. The men held the designation of POW, but the farmers saw them as workers.

The majority of the camps were located within the confines of the Southern United States, be it Southeast or Southwest. This was done to keep the prisoners far from the war industries that dotted the Midwest and Eastern portions of the United States.<sup>82</sup> But, camps also existed within these areas, as the United States housed more prisoners and farmers demanded labor to help with their crops.

Jeffrey L. Littlejohn examines Camp Huntsville, the first prisoner camp. Located in Texas, it housed approximately 4,700 individuals during its operation from 1943-1945.<sup>83</sup> As POWs arrived at camp, the prisoners attempted to divide themselves, as the noncommissioned officers did not have to work.<sup>84</sup> Successful at first, some noncommissioned officers were able to avoid work details. Once the American military became aware of this, safeguards were put in place to determine the status of each prisoner. Life within the camp consisted of morning roll

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<sup>79</sup> Jaehn, 2000, 50.

<sup>80</sup> Jaehn, 2000, 49-50.

<sup>81</sup> Jaehn, 2000, 52.

<sup>82</sup> Kramer, 1996, 26.

<sup>83</sup> Jeffrey L. Littlejohn and Charles H. Ford, *The Enemy Within never did Without: German and Japanese Prisoners of War at Camp Huntsville, 1942-1945* (Huntsville, TX: Texas Review Press, 2015), i.

<sup>84</sup> Littlejohn and Ford, 2015, 13.

call, breakfast, manual labor, break for dinner, recreation, and then lights out. Treated humanely, the soldiers found the hardest element of imprisonment to be separation from their families. But, the POWs, though censored, continued to write to their families. Their letters spoke of good treatment and having enough food.<sup>85</sup> Few complaints came from farmers who hired the POW laborers for cotton picking. One complaint, however, involved the inability of the prisoners to meet a similar quota for a hired women or child. Farmers believed that the hierarchy of soldiery inhibited the work ethic of the POWs.<sup>86</sup> It was thought that the prisoners assigned to work took offense, and so, would work slower as protest.

This camp experienced problems. Nazi fanaticism appeared in many camps. Individual discipline within the POW ranks could occasionally result in violence. A problem faced by guards at Camp Huntsville, was “simply, Nazi soldiers were beating, intimidating, and demanding deference from anti-Nazi soldiers who had been captured with them.”<sup>87</sup> To counteract this, camp officials created a program which segregated the Nazi and anti-Nazi factions. This method failed to stop all violence. The camp even experienced a riot on November 25, 1943. This riot resulted from tension between the two factions. One individual died, due to his approaching the fence, after being ordered to halt. Not part of the initial riot, the chaos resulted in guards being on edge. Additional problems from the reports detailing the riot, included mentions of refusing to work, and work slow-downs.<sup>88</sup> This camp created the model other camps followed for treatment of prisoners and how to combat problems.

Michael R. Waters analyses Camp Hearne, another camp in Texas. His book, *Lone Star Stalag*, tells the stories of the soldiers who lived and worked within this camp. Also operating

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<sup>85</sup> Littlejohn and Ford, 2015, 21-23, 28-29, 33, 37-38.

<sup>86</sup> Littlejohn, 2015, 29.

<sup>87</sup> Littlejohn, 2015, 43.

<sup>88</sup> Littlejohn and Ford, 2015, 50-54.

from 1943-1945, this camp housed 4,800 POWs.<sup>89</sup> Like other camps, this establishment housed people from many different parts of the world, held a portion of Rommel's Afrika Corps, and set POWs out into the labor force.<sup>90</sup> The prisoners' impressions indicated contentment about their living conditions, food, healthcare, and access to recreational activities. However, a prominent complaint listed by POWs was the Central Texas climate. The prisoners deemed it too hot and uncomfortable.<sup>91</sup> The prisoners experienced good treatment and the American soldiers handled problems effectively. Though the War Department prohibited fraternization between POWs and the citizenry, the POWs still left good impressions upon their American employers.<sup>92</sup> Problems with the camp included the distillation of alcohol by POWs. But, the camp personnel rectified it. Funerals, due to illness or accidents, happened within the camp compound. Thus, not only did the United States house German POWs on their soil, they also buried them.<sup>93</sup> Allowing for burials gave the prisoners a sense of peace. Also, the United States sent some of the bodies back to Germany following the war.

The camps in Utah followed a similar model exhibited by the Texas camps. This is described by Allan Kent Powell in *Splinters of a Nation*. The care and treatment of POWs matched that of the other camps. However, one Utah camp gained national and international attention following an incident on July 8, 1945.<sup>94</sup> At a camp outside Salina, Utah, an American fired a machine gun into the sleeping quarters of prisoners in the early morning. He fired 250 rounds, killing nine people and wounding many others.<sup>95</sup> He was prosecuted and dismissed from

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<sup>89</sup> Michael R. Waters, *Lone Star Stalag: German Prisoners of War at Camp Hearne* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), 3.

<sup>90</sup> Waters, 2004, 14, 52-53.

<sup>91</sup> Waters, 2004, 16-17.

<sup>92</sup> Waters, 2004, 53.

<sup>93</sup> Waters, 2004, 70-75.

<sup>94</sup> Allan Kent Powell, *Splinters of a Nation: German Prisoners of War in Utah* (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1989), 1.

<sup>95</sup> Powell, 1989, 1.

the military. Other than this incident, the camp operated in a similar model to the other camps.

The prisoners worked, played, ate, and slept in relative comfort. This treatment was governed by the principles:

- (1) A genuine belief by the great majority that the prisoners were entitled to humanitarian treatment; (2) a concern about how America would be viewed if it did not live up to the letter and spirit of the Geneva Convention; (3) a conviction that well-treated prisoners would be more productive workers; (4) a belief that if German prisoners were well treated, there was a greater likelihood that American prisoners in Germany would be treated better; and (5) a calculation that news of how well prisoners were treated by Americans would find its way back to the ranks of fighting German soldiers and that a consequence morale would decline... and German soldiers would surrender more quickly.<sup>96</sup>

Fort McClellan, Alabama, another camp in the Southern United States is the focus of Jack Shay's book, *The Fort McClellan POW Camp*. Operating from 1943-1946, this camp, constructed to complement 3,000 internees, gave its prisoners a positive experience. While camps dealt with the stigma of executions and other improper treatment, Camp McClellan "saw no reported prisoner-on-prisoner executions...and few escape attempts, inmate strikes, and suicides."<sup>97</sup> The camp offered classes, sports teams, other activities, and work, with pay (eighty cents a day). This positive experience, and a limited amount of ideological tensions, as noted with Camp Hearne, allows Fort McClellan to be seen as a productive, humane camp, rather than one plagued by problems.

Florida also housed POWs. Robert D. Billinger, Jr., analyses the camps and its internees in his book, *Hitler's Soldiers in the Sunshine State*. The Florida camps, though POWs complained about the climate, are generally remembered fondly by both American and German

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<sup>96</sup> Edward John Pluth, "The Administration and Operation of German Prisoner of War Camps in the United States during World War II," (Ph.D. diss., Ball State University, 1970), As quoted in Powell, 1989. 76.

<sup>97</sup> Jack Shay, *The Fort McClellan POW Camp: German Prisoners in Alabama, 1943-1946* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2016), 7-8.

individuals alike.<sup>98</sup> Billinger's argument focuses on the humanity of the prisoners. It is the concept of learning that the "enemy is human."<sup>99</sup> Billinger asserts that the official policy of the United States' government inhibited the press coverage of the POWs. The government noted a "real concern that public awareness would bring either public fear or public criticism of government handling of the POWs and inhibit the most efficient use of POW labor within the United States."<sup>100</sup> As such, the media coverage of the Florida POWs took three forms: government-sponsored, local newspaper coverage, and the infrequent descriptions and mugshots associated with a prisoners' escape.<sup>101</sup> The government was unwilling to show fraternization or friendships developing, nor the humane treatment experienced by the POWs. Had the United States been more willing to broadcast its treatment of prisoners, the experiences of American POWs could have been improved. It may even have influenced other countries to change their POW policies.

In a similar manner to other camps, the Florida camps experienced riots, coddling charges, and a reeducation program. Death also played a factor within these camps. Prisoners held here died from disease, accidents, and natural causes. Prisoners attempted escape. These various themes can be associated with each individual camp within the United States. Despite the humane treatment, the camps dealt with problems, death, educating, and feedback, both positive and negative.

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<sup>98</sup> Robert D. Billinger, Jr, *Hitler's Soldiers in the Sunshine State: German POWs in Florida* (Tallahassee, FL: University Press of Florida, 2000), xi.

<sup>99</sup> Billinger, 2000, xiv.

<sup>100</sup> Billinger, 2000, 1.

<sup>101</sup> Billinger, 2000, 1.

The camps in the Midwestern portion of the United States utilized POWs to pick different crops than other sections of the country. But, the camps ran in a similar fashion to the Texas model, and encountered problems.

Antonio S. Thompson discusses the Prisoner of War camps in Kentucky, in his book, *German Jackboots on Kentucky Bluegrass*. Arriving in 1943, Kentucky detained approximately 9,000 soldiers during the course of the war.<sup>102</sup> The first arrangements to detain POWs included placing them in existing military bases. Following that, the government approved numerous secondary sites, such as Breckenridge, connected by rail and bus lines to transport the POWs to their new destinations.<sup>103</sup> Initially cautious at the beginning of the labor program, Kentucky farmers saw value in utilizing POW labor, as they committed no overt act of sabotage.<sup>104</sup> Utilized as workers, the prisoners worked on farms, at business, and in other war-related industries. But, problems still existed. The civilian population felt fear about having German prisoners so close to their families.

Kentucky civilians dealt with fear, as safety of their families got called into question. They also complained about the proximity of the camps to local communities. Farmers complained about the POW rules and regulations, adhering to how these men could be worked, and for how long.<sup>105</sup> The POWs, themselves, having taken classes on American democracy, staged protests against their treatment, creating sit-down and work strikes. Yet, overall, the labor program in Kentucky was successful.<sup>106</sup> The food situation caused a degree of criticism. The Geneva Convention stipulated POWs had to receive the same allotments as American

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<sup>102</sup> Antonio S. Thompson, *German Jackboots on Kentucky Bluegrass: Housing German Prisoners of War in Kentucky, 1942-1946* (Clarksville, TN: Diversion Press, Inc., 2008), 1.

<sup>103</sup> Thompson, 2008, 21.

<sup>104</sup> Thompson, 2008, 54-55.

<sup>105</sup> Thompson, 2008, 53, 73.

<sup>106</sup> Thompson, 2008, 74.



servicemen. Thus, this amounted to between 2,000 to 3,000 calories a day. The POWs also received food items rationed within the general population. The citizenry found it disheartening that the foods limited by the government were given to the POWs. Items such as beef, bacon, and veal could be seen on a POWs camp's menu.<sup>107</sup> Thompson notes that the food served to German POWs held in the United States, did not match that received by American POWs held in Germany. This brought another round of criticism, as the American government treated its prisoners better than its soldiers. The soldiers from both sides should have been treated the same, in the public's eye. This notation indicates the hopes that by treating German prisoners well, the American prisoners would receive the same treatment, did not come to fruition.<sup>108</sup> Equal treatment across international borders rarely happens. Differences in customs, government, and ideas of humane treatment influence how a prisoner is treated.

Missouri housed prisoners as well. Though not broken down by nationality, the Missouri POW camps housed approximately 15,000 Axis prisoners.<sup>109</sup> Regardless of nationality, be it German or Italian, life in camp remained the same for both groups. They also experienced similar camp conditions. The government continued to utilize the prisoners in work programs and attempted to educate them.

According to Fiedler, author of *The Enemy Among Us*, the POWs "ate well and were quartered under the exact same conditions as the Americans assigned to guard them, and the prisoners were often accorded a great deal of freedom."<sup>110</sup> The POWs in Missouri camps enjoyed privileges similar to those in other camps: good food, mail, theatre, sports, adequate clothing,

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<sup>107</sup> Thompson, 2008, 82-83.

<sup>108</sup> Thompson, 2008, 84-85.

<sup>109</sup> David Fiedler, *The Enemy Among Us: POWs in Missouri During World War II* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>110</sup> Fiedler, 2010, 3.

and other recreational activities. The food items caused many internees to gain weight, given the amount and variety available to them.<sup>111</sup> The labor program, paying \$0.80 cents a day, amounted to the Treasury Department gaining \$100 million in revenue based upon POW labor. The wage of the prisoners was allotted for their commissary purchases. There, prisoners could purchase cigarettes, chocolate, pencils, paper, and other goods not supplied by the government. Much of that money, however, went to the feeding, housing, clothing, medical, and other expenses associated with the POW program. The ability to work for a wage, allowed the program to be considered self-sufficient.<sup>112</sup> Problems within the camps followed a similar pattern to other camps. The military handed the problems, and their consequences in a similar manner across the United States.

Betty Cowley continues the regional and state studies of the POW camps, by focusing on Wisconsin, in her book, *Stalag Wisconsin*. Discussing each individual camp, she analyses the work and treatment of the POWs, through the use of government documents, newspaper articles, and personal recollections, both of prisoners and civilians. The camps in Wisconsin housed roughly 5,000 German soldiers during the course of the POW program.<sup>113</sup> One of the unique differences with the Wisconsin labor program, was that the farmers who hired POWs, sometimes had German heritage and spoke the language fluently, allowing for personal relationships and mutual trust.<sup>114</sup> The camps offered the same amenities offered at other camps, as these stipulations and guidelines followed the War Department and Geneva Convention regulations. Though not exceedingly common, resistance and violence occurred in the Wisconsin

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<sup>111</sup> Fiedler, 2010, 17, 20-23.

<sup>112</sup> Fiedler, 2010, 37.

<sup>113</sup> Betty Cowley, *Stalag Wisconsin: Inside WWII prisoner-of-war camps* (Oregon, WI: Badger Books, Inc., 2002), 12.

<sup>114</sup> Cowley, 2002, 25.

camps as well. One incident occurred at Camp McCoy, where they dealt with a near riot, as Nazi and anti-Nazi factions fought against each other. Other forms of resistance included “suicide, aggression, passive resistance, and sabotage.”<sup>115</sup> Though Cowley, does not list each act of resistance per camp, she notes that each type happened within the Wisconsin camps. Thus, even the act of defiance between the camps, remained the same regardless of camp location.

Though the War Department attempted to keep prisoner camps away from industrial sections of the country, as previously noted, camps came to be erected in New England. Allen V. Koop and John C. Bonafilia discuss camps in New Hampshire and Massachusetts. Both camps followed the labor, housing, food, and other regulations established by the government. But, each camp was also unique.

Koop’s book, *Stark Decency: German Prisoners of War in a New England Village*, documents the story of Camp Stark, a POW camp located in the White Mountains. This camp holds the distinction of being New Hampshire’s only World War II prisoner of war camp.<sup>116</sup> Utilizing personal recollections of prisoners, the few surviving records from the National Archives, and secondary sources describing POW camp life, Koop recounts Camp Stark. The camp ran in a similar fashion to others. Yet, the residents surrounding this camp, were not hostile upon the German prisoners’ arrival. They saw human beings, not the Aryan superhumans, propaganda spoke of. The men looked disheveled and beaten down, prompting many to turn to pity and befriend the prisoners as the internment lasted.<sup>117</sup> Seeing images of humans in despairing situations prompts others to help. Modern examples include the commercials describing horrible conditions in African countries, where the organization is asking for

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<sup>115</sup> Cowley, 2002, 37.

<sup>116</sup> Allen V. Koop, *Stark Decency: German Prisoners of War in a New England Village* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 1988), 1.

<sup>117</sup> Koop, 1988, 14-15.

donations. Some people feel compelled to help alleviate another's suffering. Watching soldiers leave a train, looking depressed, and having little with them, changed the outlook some American civilians had of the German enemy.

John C. Bonafilia discusses Camp Westover Field in Massachusetts. The most prisoners held here equated to roughly seven hundred and one prisoners. Humane treatment within the camp ranked highly as a goal. The American government wanted their prisoners to be treated humanely, thus the goal of the military guards included following through with this order. By doing this, the government hoped to influence the prisoners to support democracy as they would have a powerful voice when they returned to postwar Germany. The experiences within the camp "would shape their opinions and feelings concerning American and could possibly affect future relations between the nations."<sup>118</sup> As such, the government strove to positively influence the soldiers towards their ideology. However, the kindness of the citizenry appears to have had a wider effect than government propaganda.<sup>119</sup> Camp Westover operated in a similar fashion to the other camps. A camp schedule established a routine. Expectations of work, on- or off-base, under supervision, encompassed most of the prisoners' day. The camp offered recreational activities similar to those in other camps.

Regular inspections by local, national, and international agencies ensured the conditions at the camp remained adequate. The camp practiced reeducation programs, to further influence the prisoners.<sup>120</sup> The effectiveness of the program continues to be debated. Camp personnel and

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<sup>118</sup> John C. Bonafilia, "'Hospitality is the Best Form of Propaganda': German Prisoners of War in Western Massachusetts, 1944-1946," *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*. 44, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 45. [http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.snhu.edu/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=T002&resultListType=RESULT\\_LIST&searchResultsType=SingleTab&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&currentPosition=1&docId=GALE%7CA514101852&docType=Article&sort=RELEVANCE&contentSegment=&prodId=AONE&contentSet=GALE%7CA514101852&searchId=R1&userGroupName=nhc\\_main&inPS=true](http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.snhu.edu/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=T002&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=SingleTab&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&currentPosition=1&docId=GALE%7CA514101852&docType=Article&sort=RELEVANCE&contentSegment=&prodId=AONE&contentSet=GALE%7CA514101852&searchId=R1&userGroupName=nhc_main&inPS=true)

<sup>119</sup> Bonafilia, 2016, 47.

<sup>120</sup> Bonafilia, 2016, 48-49, 50-53.

inmates interviewed after the war indicate the program positively impacted POWs. The use of English classes, prompted some POWs to learn more about the United States' governmental system.<sup>121</sup> Overall, the camp practiced and fulfilled the requirements set when housing POWs. The POWs and personnel remember the camp in a positive light. The effectiveness of American treatment leans towards the positive, given the number of positive memories, letters, and newspaper articles citing human treatment of the German POWs. The effect on American POWs in Germany as a result of this policy, remains debated.

Each of the state studies, regional studies, personal stories, international treatments, and general background information on the German POWs in the United States helps to analyze the POW camps located with Michigan. These camps operated in a similar fashion, as they offered work, food, care, and play to the POWs. The work completed by the POWs centered around the agricultural industry, But, the relationships and positive experiences of the POWs, indicate Michigan camps, and its citizens followed the convention, and helped save their state's economy.

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<sup>121</sup> Bonafilia, 2016, 65.

### Chapter 3: Enclosed in the Mitten State

The onset of World War Two, placed Michigan into a state of war. As men enlisted into the military, it left the farms, processing plants, and other industries without manpower. As manpower diminished, the farmers and other employers attempted to supplement their workforce with women, children, and migrants.<sup>1</sup> However, these individuals had the power of demand. They attempted to gain higher wages and better working environments, given the labor shortage. Thus, farmers then looked to the United States Government's War Department to allow the requisition of PW (initial designation for POW) labor. The first group of German POWs arrived at Benton Harbor, Michigan on October 2, 1943. From that time, Michigan housed approximately 4,000-5,000 soldiers at roughly thirty different camps throughout the Upper and Lower Peninsulas. Initially viewed as the enemy, these POWs became seen as workers to their American handlers, who built relationships, helped to promote the agricultural economy, and dismantled perceptions. As noted by an Oceana County resident, "They did not feel like the enemy."<sup>2</sup>

After the arrival of troops in October, 1943, Fort Custer, Michigan, located in Battle Creek, became the location where all POWs were processed, prior to transportation to the satellite camps. At Fort Custer, they worked in agricultural fields, picking beets, corn, apples, cherries, and other crops. The men received eighty cents a day, as stipulated in the Geneva Convention. Residents' concerns for their safety diminished in their need for labor. The overall work ethic of the POWs impressed Michiganders. They worked an eight-hour day and appeared

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<sup>1</sup> Clive, 1979, 46-47.

<sup>2</sup> Esther M. and Marge P., interview by author, Shelby, Michigan, June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018. Transcript in Appendix.

pleased to be working.<sup>3</sup> This may have been because the work happened outdoors, or simply, because it broke up the monotony of camp life.

A prisoner's arrival to the camp began with a shower, delousing, new clothing (complete with the black PW stamp), a meal, and paperwork.<sup>4</sup> Upon completion of the paperwork indicating name, age, rank, skills, height and weight, birth place, etc., the soldier officially became a POW.<sup>5</sup> Following that, they would be assigned to a work detail and begin working as demand grew. Farmers could requisition POW labor twenty-four hours prior to the day they needed labor, by contacting the local POW Labor office.<sup>6</sup>

Michigan camps operated from 1943-1946. After the war, the men returned home through repatriation. Yet, their experiences would leave fond memories. Camp sizes varied, as the government created satellite camps. The main camp, located at Fort Custer, sent troops to smaller, satellite camps, erected closer to the site of labor demand. Each camp was regulated according to the Geneva Convention. Escape attempts and work slowdowns occurred within certain camps. Some camps engaged POWs in farm labor or food processing. Other prisoners were involved in logging or pulpwood production.

The names of Michigan camps are as follows:

#### Camps in the Upper Peninsula (U.P.)

- Camp AuTrain;
- Camp Evelyn;
- Camp Raco;
- Camp Sidnaw;

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<sup>3</sup> Ester M. and Marge P. Interview, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Kevin T. Hall, "The Befriended Enemy: German Prisoners of War in Michigan," *Michigan Historical Review* 41, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 58. [www.jstor.org/stable/10.5342/michhistrevi.41.1.0057](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5342/michhistrevi.41.1.0057).

<sup>5</sup> "P.O.W. Classification Questioner," Record Group 389. Entry A1 461. Box 2659. Location 290/34/28/03. File: *PMG Inspection Reports Custer, Mich.* Obtained from the National Archives Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

<sup>6</sup> "To Users of Prisoner of War Labor," Government Document, *German War Prisoners WWII Oceana County; Emergency Farm Labor Program-1944* 15. Oceana County History Society, Shelby, MI.

- Camp Pori;
- Camp Wetmore.

#### Camps in the Lower Peninsula (L.P)

- Camp Allegan;
- Barryton;
- Benton Harbor;
- Blissfield;
- Caro;
- Coloma;
- Crosswell;
- Fort Custer;
- Dundee;
- Freeland;
- Fremont;
- Grant;
- Grosse Ile Township;
- Hart;
- Camp Lake Odessa;
- Camp Mattawan;
- Mass;
- Milan;
- Odessa Lakes;
- Camp Owosso;
- Romulus Army Air Field;
- Shelby;
- Sparta;
- Fort Wayne;
- Waterloo.<sup>7</sup>

The largest concentration of camps centered around the midsection of the state, as this point had the closest proximity to Fort Custer, where the prisoners were processed.<sup>8</sup> A Conscientious Objector for Americans camp existed as well. This camp housed those individuals who refused to fight for moral or religious reasons. Located in Germfask, Michigan, in the Upper

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<sup>7</sup> "List of German POW Camps in Michigan," *POW Camps* Terry E. Wantz Research Center, Fremont, Michigan.

<sup>8</sup> "List of German POW Camps in Michigan," Fremont, Michigan.



Peninsula (U.P.), this camp detained approximately eighty individuals during the course of the war.<sup>9</sup> One of the first camps established in the U.P, it experienced a riot, and called for more controls, as the detainees circumvented authorities.<sup>10</sup> Though important, this writing focuses on the individual POW camps in Michigan, not on American citizens who refused to fight.

The five POW camps in the U.P housed fewer inmates than those in the Lower Peninsula. The government established the camps to fill labor shortages in the lumber industry. Of the 3,500 individuals requested, 1,250 arrived, despite certain misgivings that logging constituted dangerous work. Dangerous work violated the terms of the Geneva Convention. Upon studying the logging industry and noting the minimal injuries, the government officials determined logging did not constitute dangerous work. Thus, logging as work for the POWs commenced.<sup>11</sup> As the prisoners arrived, the local newspaper wrote articles about them. The *Marquette Daily News* reported their transportation in a professional fashion, with no comment concerning fear or safety concerns of the residents.<sup>12</sup> The men designated to lumber camps, cutting pulpwood, arrived from Rommel's Afrika Corps. The camps consisted of "barracks, watch towers, kitchen and dining hall, library, infirmary, and other necessary facilities."<sup>13</sup> These buildings had been previously built, as the compound was a former Civilian Conservation Corps camp.

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<sup>9</sup> Upper Peninsula POW Camps *POW Camps* Terry E. Wantz Research Center, Fremont, Michigan.

<sup>10</sup> See *World War II- Conscientious Objector Camps in Michigan, 1940-1945*. MSS 317. Box 15, Folder 8. Northern Michigan University Archives. Marquette, Michigan. "Controls Need to be Tightened," *Marquette Daily Mining Journal*. February 23. 1945. Available on Microfilm at Northern Michigan University Archives. Marquette, Michigan.

<sup>11</sup> William R. Lowe, "Working for eighty cents a day: German prisoners of war in Michigan, 1943-1945," (master's thesis, Eastern Michigan University, 1995), 79.

<sup>12</sup> "War Captives to Work in U.P. Woods," *Marquette Daily Mining Journal* December 13, 1943. Available on Microfilm at Northern Michigan University Archives. Marquette, Michigan.

<sup>13</sup> Russell Magnaghi, "Prisoners of War Camps in the Upper Peninsula," *Harlow's Wooden Men*. n/d. MSS 317. Box 2. Folder 12 *Prisoner of War Camps in the Upper Peninsula* Northern Michigan University Archive, Marquette, Michigan.

The POWs received training from local supervisors. Then, they broke into work groups and assigned a job. Of the five camps within the U.P, the most covered camp was Camp Evelyn. Camp Evelyn began in 1943. The camp housed prisoners working in logging. Upon government inspection, it was noted that no Protestant minister held services, or that no championships existed during the recreational activities, to supplement the recreational sports. Sponsored by the YMCA, tournaments began and the camp rectified the concerns.<sup>14</sup>

Another camp in the U.P., Camp Evelyn, utilized prisoners in the chemical and logging industry. Governmental inspections of the camp reveal that no concerns existed at the time. Beginning operation in 1944, the camp personnel remember the POWs, singing and laughing as they rode to their new location. It lasted until 1946, when the military closed down all camps and the prisoners began returning home.<sup>15</sup>

Camp Pori and Camp Raco, of the Upper Peninsula, also operated from 1944-1946. Again, these camps followed the Geneva Convention stipulations. The inmates worked in the logging and chemical industries. The government approved this camp after the success of Camp Evelyn. Of note with Camp Pori, the prisoners were able to attend classes in “languages, mathematics, and shorthand.”<sup>16</sup> Raco carries the honor of being the last camp built in the U.P. Due to the few POWs in the area, as well as a limited employment market, the Raco POWs arrived to work sites from the Pori camp. Little information is known about Camp Sidnaw, but it followed the stipulations and work orders dictated by the government. Inspection reports indicate the camp followed all guidelines and the prisoners experienced no problems.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Dr. Howard Hong, “Report of Visit to Prisoner of War Branch Camp, AuTrain, Michigan,” September 2, 1944. RG389. *POW Special Projects Division, Administrative Branch*. Box No. 1621. File Number 255. Modern Military Branch. National Archives. As quoted in Lowe, 1995, 87.

<sup>15</sup> Lowe, 1995, 88.

<sup>16</sup> Lowe, 1995, 90

<sup>17</sup> Lowe, 1995, 92.

In contrast to the Upper Peninsula, the camps located in the Lower Peninsula held higher numbers of prisoners and they were utilized in different industries. Fort Custer remained the processing center for prisoner transportation. Transporting prisoners by train to various destinations across the state, creating smaller camps, allowed the civilian population the opportunity to build relationships with the prisoners. Though not the largest camps within the state, Camps Fremont, Hart, Shelby, Allegan, Odessa, and Freeland (encompassing the outlying cities of Mount Pleasant, Saginaw, Frankenmuth, and the Tri-County Airport camp) each retain records. These camps followed the principles of maintaining humane treatment and allowing the inmates to work. Enlisted men experienced mandatory work details, while officers had the option to work. Some camps offered reeducation programs, other attempted to expand and become permanent locations, given the demand for labor. All found that utilizing POW labor brought increased productivity.

The base camp at Fort Custer, built during World War One, housed an active Army base during World War Two. It is still an active base today. Beginning in 1943, the camp started to hold prisoners. Government records indicate there were multiple attempts to expand the size of the camp. The War Department denied each request. Built as a sub-camp, it was considered a temporary camp under the control of military officials from Illinois. The camp did expand. But, it did not expand to become a permanent camp. The expansion came about due to a request to renovate and expand the Percy Jones General Hospital, the medical facility on site.<sup>18</sup>

The personnel at Fort Custer attempted to expand the camp, in order to house more POWs. The goal was to expand the camp to house between two and three thousand prisoners. On

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<sup>18</sup> "Major Howard W. Smith Jr. to Provost Marshall General's Office Letter," March 3, 1945. Record Group 389. Entry A1, 457. Box 1428. Location 290/34/15/03. *Fort Custer, Michigan-Construction* Obtained from the National Archives. Washington D.C.

January 19, 1943, L.D. Worsham, a Colonel in the Corps of Engineers, sent an investigative report to the Chief of Engineers in Washington D.C. Within this report, he outlined five different sites for a possible permanent camp. Included within the report is additional information concerning recommendations and estimated costs of this endeavor. Of the sites listed, Site 3, located at the 184<sup>th</sup> Field Art. Area, the estimated cost equated to \$328,400 (circa 1943 dollars or \$4,673,981.04, today). Site 5, another recommended site, involved building an entirely new camp, with watch towers, buildings, and utilities, had an estimated cost of \$1,064,440.<sup>19</sup> This amount in today's dollars would be equated to approximately \$15,168,208.47, respectively.<sup>20</sup> Expansion of Fort Custer would have allowed farmers access to additional POW labor. The details concerning cost indicate the United States government had to pay a certain amount in order to build the camp. But, with the program being almost self-sufficient, expanding the site would have been almost free to the Treasury Department.

Ultimately, the government rejected the proposals and made the decision to keep Fort Custer, as a sub-camp. The objections towards Fort Custer's expansion, more specifically, the cheaper building site with existing facilities (Site 3) included:

1. The northeast corner of the compound is only 100 feet from highway No. 12.
2. The compound buildings on the west side are approximately 25 feet from the double fence.
3. The theatre and chapel are too near the compound.
4. The internment camp is 4 or 5 miles from the base hospital.
5. The street on the west side of the compound apparently will not be closed to the theatre traffic.
6. Gas and oil station and motor repair shops on the south side of the internment camp are too near.
7. The creek on the north side of the internment camp reduces the recreation area to approximately on tenth of its normal size.

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<sup>19</sup> "Letter from L.D. Worsham to the Chief of Engineers, Washington D.C.," January 19, 1943. Obtained from the National Archives. Record Group 389. Entry A1, 457. Box 1428. File: *Fort Custer, Michigan Construction Location* 290/34/25/03.

<sup>20</sup> "Inflation Calculator," *Car Insurance Data*. Accessed August 5, 2018.

8. The patrol road under the present plan would have to be on the north side of the creek.
9. The buildings within the compounds are too close together.
10. Arrangements sloppy and will be constant source of complaint. (mess halls too small, 2 small rec. bldgs. instead of 1 large) etc.
11. Bldgs. Primarily occupied by colored troops and one adjacent to other existing facilities for colored troops.
12. Site too near other facilities and would {illegible} proper security measures. (Note: Objections 10-12 are handwritten, not typed).<sup>21</sup>

However, the government fielded requests for an expansion of Fort Custer, again in 1944. The request came as a result of study determining sufficient work exists for the camp.<sup>22</sup> This request followed an earlier request December 4, 1943, to remove the sub-camp designation from Fort Custer, and fully establish it as a POW camp.<sup>23</sup> Previous reports indicated expanding Fort Custer would be a loss. It had been determined that there was not enough agricultural labor within the state to support a permanent POW camp. Michigan is an agricultural state. Much of the central portion of the state consists of farms. The idea that insufficient work existed is odd.

Despite the attempts to change the designation of Fort Custer, the camp followed the Geneva Conventions standards. The Sixth Service Command issued orders to their commanding officers concerning the treatment of prisoners, the conduct of American officers, the job descriptions of the American officers, and general orders to be followed by all individuals, German or American.

As the POWs transferred to work sites, their care and supervision fell to the contracting agency, the supervising agent, and the non-commissioned officer (N.C.O.) in charge of the detail. Yet, the government still required these individuals to follow certain mandates regarding

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<sup>21</sup> "Objections to Site No. 3 at Fort Custer, Michigan," Obtained from the National Archives. Record Group 389. Entry A1, 457. Box 1428. File: *Fort Custer, Michigan Construction* Location 290/34/15/03.

<sup>22</sup> "Letter Colonel Joseph F. Battley to Brigadier General B.M. Bryan," January 1, 1944. Obtained from the National Archives. Record Group 389. Entry A 1, 457. Box 1428. File: *Fort Custer Construction* Location 290/34/15/03.

<sup>23</sup> "Letter Brig. General W.E. Guthner to Provost Marshall General's Office," December 4, 1943. Obtained from the National Archives. Entry A1, 457. Box 1428. File: *Fort Custer, Michigan Construction* Location 290/34/15/03.

behavior, escape, and the work details, themselves. A general rule, explicitly spelled out stated, “PW are housed, treated, and worked, at all times strictly in compliance with the regulations of the Geneva Convention of July 27, 1929, and all War Department Circulars, Subject: Regulations Governing Prisoners of War.”<sup>24</sup> Disciplinary actions were handled by the Camp Commander. Local farmers and employers could not discipline the POWs, as the POWs’ discipline fell under military regulations.

An employer’s ability to utilize POWs depended upon approval of a written request. Within this application, the requestor had to include: nature of work, location, length of time required, dates for the work, name of the supervisor, whether tools had to be used, and if the company was providing transportation.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, the government restricted employers from creating groups of two or three men sub-details, as the number of guards on the job site would be insufficient. The government example has a detachment with ten men and two guards. Given this, it is possible to extrapolate the number of men to guard ratio as five to one. Each guard oversaw five men. The supervising agent and employer were required to contact the Camp Commander once an escape had been noticed.<sup>26</sup> Maintaining a low guard to prisoner ratio allowed both sides to create friendships. It also allowed farmers and civilians to bend the War Department stipulations concerning fraternization.

The POW guards, known as sentinels, adhered to many rules and regulations whilst completing their duties. For an eight-hour shift, the guards held full responsibility for what happened to the prisoners.<sup>27</sup> They ensured POWs wore the correct clothing, did not have access

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<sup>24</sup> “Major H. Wiersema Memo. Subject: S.O.P. for PW Working Outside Prisoner of War Camp,” February 29, 1944. Obtained from the National Archives. Record Group 389. Entry A1 461. Box 2659. File” *PMG Inspection and Field Reports Fort Custer, Michigan* Location 290/34/28/03.

<sup>25</sup> “Major H. Wiersema Memo. Subject: S.O.P. for PW Working Outside Prisoner of War Camp,” 1944.

<sup>26</sup> “Major H. Wiersema Memo. Subject: S.O.P. for PW Working Outside Prisoner of War Camp,” 1944, 2.

<sup>27</sup> “Guard Orders PW Chasers,” March 4, 1944. Obtained from the National Archives. Record Group 389. Entry A1 461. Box 2659. File: *PMG Inspection and Field Reports Fort Custer, Michigan* Location 290/34/28/03.

to firearms, and restricted access to buildings and civilians. The government regulations also emphasized the following rule:

A sentinel will not permit any unauthorized person to talk to the PW. He will not allow PW to make purchases, receive money, tobacco, mail, or anything from any person outside the PW camp. He will not talk to the PW he is guarding, except to give them orders.<sup>28</sup>

Many instances of violations existed. One resident remembers giving his POW workers beers during their shift. The guard, upon being asked, approved the request, when he was not looking. As reported, the guard said, "I'm not looking all the time."<sup>29</sup> The people saw the POWs as workers and human beings. They did not embody the enemy Nazis, American propaganda portrayed.

The sentinels followed certain rules. But, a sentinel faced the threat of court martial should a POW escape while on a work detail. Guards could not permit escapes, either through neglect or prisoner attempt. Doing so placed the American soldier at the mercy of the military court, even if the escape consisted of an opportunity.<sup>30</sup> Another area of caution, the sentinels exercised loosely, involved the POWs communicating with women. Government stipulations indicated that no POW could communicate with female military personnel or civilians. Listed as "contact," this term was interpreted as "no conversation, no exchanging of any article whatsoever and no association."<sup>31</sup> The War Department deemed any fraternization between POWs and military personnel or civilians as strictly forbidden. Yet, as documented above, and in subsequent camps, this order was regularly violated. Fraternization encompassed a range of interactions not limited to eating in the mess halls, talking with the prisoners, or exchanging

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<sup>28</sup> "Guard Orders PW Chasers," 1944.

<sup>29</sup> Anita Boldt, "Prisoners of World War II: Oral History and Research," (May 1991) Accession 1995.40. Frankenmuth Historical Commission, Frankenmuth, Michigan.

<sup>30</sup> "Guard Orders PW Chasers," March 4, 1944. Obtained from the National Archives. Record Group 389. Entry A1 461. Box 2659. *File: PMG Inspection and Field Reports Fort Custer, Michigan* Location 290/34/28/03.

<sup>31</sup> "Special Guard Order PW Chasers," March 15, 1944. Obtained from the National Archives. Group 389. Entry A1 461. Box 2659. *File: PMG Inspection and Field Reports Fort Custer, Michigan* Location 290/34/28/03.

gifts, canteen products, or cigarettes.<sup>32</sup> One wonders how all of these interactions could have been eradicated. Human beings are social creatures. Unless the American soldiers had no contact whatsoever, with the German POWs, fraternization was a possibility.

To ensure compliance with all rules and regulations, the War Department conducted inspections of the camps. Inspections helped determine whether a camp would expand to meet its labor demand. Despite government rejections in 1943, Fort Custer's positive inspections allowed in to become a permanent camp. Activated as a permanent camp January 28, 1944, documents of Fort Custer indicate the expansion of the camp continued.<sup>33</sup> A report written April 26, 1944 shows the government approved the expansion to a 2,000-prisoner capacity for Fort Custer and that the camp adhered to all government regulations. This indicates that the process of expanding was ongoing. The inspector deemed the security measures adequate. Sanitation, medical conditions, food, and general cleanliness received high praise. The education program offered on site notes classes were held in many languages, but a lack of technical books in the German language.

Discussing the labor program, the inspector reported all POWs, except those who were sick, worked. A policy of using lower pay to combat poor quality work, helped to dissuade the POWs from performing below par. Once assigned, the camp supervisors advised to stop the rotation of POWs, as it would lower the amount of time necessary to train a new POW worker. Problems understanding the clarification concerning POW workers was noted by the supervisors. The inspector recommended further clarification and issued a circular outlying the treatment

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<sup>32</sup> "Administrative Memorandum Number 5" March 29, 1944. Obtained from the National Archives. Record Group 389. Entry A1 461. Box 2659. File: *PMG Inspection and Field Reports Fort Custer, Michigan* Location 290/34/28/03.

<sup>33</sup> "Report of visit to POW Base Camp, Fort Custer, Michigan on 3 April 1944," April 26, 1944. Obtained from the National Archives. Record Group 389. Entry A1 461. Box 2659. File: *PMG Inspection and Field Reports Fort Custer, Michigan* Location 290/34/28/03.



required of American soldiers regarding German POWs. Overall, the report supports the idea that Michigan camps followed the Geneva Convention and treated its prisoners humanely. The camp followed War Department regulations and prisoners worked a range of jobs, allowing the state to experience productivity. These jobs included picking, processing, and jobs around the camp.

A subsequent report dated, June 25, 1945, however, indicates that the supervision was very poor and that the work details showed prisoners “are doing just about as they please.”<sup>34</sup> Though the report is dated after Germany’s surrender, German POWs were still held on American soil. A partial reason may be the returning American soldiers being undisciplined in POW treatment, angry at the experiences of serving overseas, or treating the German POWs poorly. Their general discipline and treatment followed the regulations, but the American soldiers struggled with following the same rules. Soldiers returning from the front, due to injury or war’s end, may have felt anger, resentment, and jealousy at the treatment of the prisoners. They wanted to make them feel discomfort, but not enough to demand a court martial. Another reason may be due to the camp command being willing to allow visitors and temporary passes to POWs, dependent upon approval.

Letters requesting visitors and indicating who had permission to visit, could influence the POWs to try and circumvent authority. As the POWs could not fraternize with the general population, the discovery of visitor’s passes was surprising.<sup>35</sup> Recommendations of this inspector included working the prisoners the full eight hours a day; designate zones for transportation to

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<sup>34</sup> “Report of Visit to Prisoner of War Camp, Fort Custer, Michigan,” June 25, 1945. Obtained from the National Archives. Record Group 389. Entry A1 461. Box 2659. File: *PMG Inspection and Field Reports Fort Custer, Michigan* Location 290/34/28/03.

<sup>35</sup> See Temporary Pass, PW Form #28, and PW Form #27. Located in Record Group 389. Entry A1 461. Box 2659. File: *PMG Inspection and Field Reports Fort Custer, Michigan* Location 290/34/28/03. National Archives, Washington. D.C.

allow adequate time; transport prisoners during lunch details or have them bring lunch with them; set a time for the noon meal; and arrange for overtime to allow for work to be completed.<sup>36</sup> Even without the following recommendations, the work of the POWs and the camp turned a profit. A profit and loss statement for the POW Canteen showed a profit of \$581.64 (\$8,147.06, today).<sup>37</sup>

Camp Fremont, located in Fremont, Michigan, began in 1944, as the local Gerber Factory indicated a loss in production and a need for labor.<sup>38</sup> The factory, which produced baby food and other canned food products, suffered a labor shortage as men enlisted in the military. This camp holds the distinction of being one of four camps that utilized men through the winter.<sup>39</sup> A county agricultural agent, Clarence Mullet, headed the POW camp effort, explaining that “any loss of production now, through manpower shortage, would not only be a serious loss to the war effort, but would handicap post-war prosperity of the community.”<sup>40</sup> The community of Fremont found the use of prisoner labor more advantageous than utilizing local citizenry and migrant workers. The prisoners would work in an area until no longer needed, being transported to the next location, saving the community housing costs. The cheaper labor saved employers money and eliminated the competition for labor among businesses. The payment of 80 cents a day, paid in paper money, could only be utilized at the prisoner canteen for items sold there, allowing more physical currency to remain in the community.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Temporary Pass, National Archives.

<sup>37</sup> Prisoner of War Camp Canteen Profit and Loss Statement, February 25, 1944- March 22, 1944. Obtained from the National Archives. Record Group 389. Entry A1 461. Box 2659. File: *PMG Inspection and Field Reports Fort Custer, Michigan*, Location 290/34/28/03.

<sup>38</sup> Lowe, 1995. 54.

<sup>39</sup> Terry E. Wantz, “German War Prisoners,” *POW Camps* Terry E. Wantz Research Center, Fremont, Michigan.

<sup>40</sup> Wantz, “German War Prisoners,” Fremont, Michigan.

<sup>41</sup> Wantz, “German War Prisoners,” Fremont, Michigan.

The first group of twenty-five prisoners arrived May 16, 1944. Twelve guards traveled with them, lowering the ratio of prisoners to guards to roughly two to one.<sup>42</sup> The camp, built on site at the Gerber factory began as tent-city. However, as winter came, and the demand for prisoners still existed, the owner of Gerber, decided to build a large building to house the POWs during the winter months. Tents had been deemed unacceptable for a Michigan winter. The company constructed a single, large building, rather than a series of smaller ones. This building, measuring roughly 18,000 square feet, included “a dormitory, kitchen, mess hall, latrine, showers, and a recreational area.”<sup>43</sup>

Prisoners attempted escape from this camp. Three men escaped in July, only to be captured two miles north of Hart, a community about thirty-five miles to the northwest. Upon recapture, the disciplinary action taken equaled that of military personnel going AWOL (absent without leave).<sup>44</sup> A second escape happened in September, where the prisoner only escaped two miles from the camp.<sup>45</sup> The men walked away from their work details. No reasons are given in the surviving documents. It is clear from their recapture; they did not know what direction to go in. Also, most being unable to speak English, they stood out within the communities.

Life inside the camp centered around a mess hall supplied by Americans, but cooked by Germans. They cooked their own food, preferring greasier and heartier meals than those prepared by American soldiers. The complex included a swimming hole, and was surrounded by a barbed wire fence extending the length of the compound, which included watch tower, pursuant to the Geneva Convention stipulations.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Wantz, “German War Prisoners,” Fremont, Michigan.

<sup>43</sup> Sidney C. Brooks, *History of the Fremont Canning Company and Gerber Products Company: 1901-1984* (Fremont, MI: Gerber Products Co., 1986), 64. As quoted in Lowe, 1995, 56.

<sup>44</sup> Wantz, Terry E. Wantz Research Center, Fremont, Michigan.

<sup>45</sup> Wantz, “German War Prisoners,” Fremont, Michigan.

<sup>46</sup> Wantz, “German War Prisoners,” Fremont, Michigan.

Smaller camps dotted the state. Camps within the communities of Sparta and Lake Odessa connected with camps in Muskegon, Shelby, and Hart. The camps lay within forty to fifty miles of each other, yet each of these cities for a short period of time, be it a month or longer, held a prisoner of war camp.

The camp at Sparta had been built in 1944, at the request of local growers. The peach and apple season, having done reasonably well for growing, need two hundred, or more, workers in order to harvest the crop within an adequate timeframe. Initially, residents worried about their safety; but, an FBI agent reassured them in a newspaper article on August 31, 1944, which stated the men ““were not criminals.””<sup>47</sup> Residents, though instructed not to, violated orders by driving by the camp. Government and military attempts to fully separate civilians and the POWs backfired. Growers held conversations with those who spoke English, discussing family life, ideology, and work ethic. Said one fruit grower, who used POWs, ““They were all nice fellows.””<sup>48</sup> Newspaper articles in October 1944, describe the benefits of using POW labor. As the camp closed later that month, the farmers conceded that without the POW assistance, they would have been hard-pressed to harvest all of the crops. The group of prisoners impressed the farmers, and no serious trouble had been reported. No escapes are listed.<sup>49</sup> The general consensus of the farmers indicates a feeling of contentment and relief. The fruit and other crops needed to be picked. The POWs amounted to the labor necessary to complete the job. Fortunately, the men who worked at the Sparta camp caused no problems and satisfied the farmers.

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<sup>47</sup> Jim Mencarelli, “The Peach Ridge P.O.W.s,” *The Grand Rapids Press* September 15, 1974, Obtained from Sparta Historical Society, Sparta, Michigan. 3.

<sup>48</sup> Mencarelli, 1974, 4.

<sup>49</sup> K.K. Vining, “War Labor Camp to Benefit Farmers,” *Sparta News* October 26, 1944. Obtained from Sparta Historical Society, Sparta, Michigan.

Another smaller camp, located about forty miles to the east, called Lake Odessa camp, also housed POWs. These men had been hired out by the local canning companies, in order to assist in the food processing part of harvest season. However, this camp only operated during the 1945 growing season, after which, the prisoners were transferred to camps at Bay City, Saginaw, and the Freeland area.<sup>50</sup> The short length of Lake Odessa camp was due to the factories only needing workers for a short period of time. The erection of the camp had been decided in order to lessen the amount of time transporting the prisoners from another camp. Hired out by the local Lake Odessa Canning Company, this camp employed a fluctuating range of prisoners, from one hundred twenty-five to a possible peak of three hundred seventy-four.<sup>51</sup> Yet, despite the small size, this camp experienced disciplinary problems. Prisoners sabotaged crops due to their being assigned to work in the fields. The prisoners felt farm work to be beneath them. Two different escape attempts resulted in county-wide searches. The men, after being recaptured, endured a train ride back to Fort Custer. Despite these escape attempts, general memories about the conduct of the prisoners are good. But, the Americans noticed discontent, as the swimming pool, built and paid for by the POWs got filled in, following one of the escape attempts.<sup>52</sup> This punishment, a loss of an amenity they had paid for, must have made POWs angry. They were being punished for another person's actions. One person determined the fates of all.

Based out of Shelby, Michigan, Camp Shelby, located in Western Michigan, transported men to work sites in Mason, Oceana, and Muskegon County, Michigan. These small work-camps required prisoners to pick produce, work in canning factories and other odd jobs. Very limited information exists concerning the Muskegon camp, however, requests for POW labor

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<sup>50</sup> Lowe, 1995. 66.

<sup>51</sup> Sharon B. Miller, "Prisoner of War Camp in Lake Odessa 50 years ago remembered..." *The Lakewood News* June 6, 1995, Obtained from the Lake Odessa Community Library, Lake Odessa, Michigan.

<sup>52</sup> Miller, 1995.

still existed in September 1945. Camps existed after the end of the war due to the slow reparation process and the continuing need for labor. However, Fort Custer notified growers as of October 31, 1945, the only POW labor available in Michigan would be used for the wood camps and sugar beet harvest. This limitation on POW labor, most likely is due to the end of the war and the beginning of the reparation process. As the POW labor program drew to a close, employers had to be careful. The POWs were ““not to be used on any kind of construction work, even though it be around the farm;”” possibly due to the increased risk of injury.<sup>53</sup>

The camps centered around the towns of Hart and Shelby, Michigan have more surviving records. The Hart camp had been created to decrease the time needed to transport the prisoners to work. Originally, the prisoners had to be transported from the Shelby camp to their work detail locations. The towns of Hart and Shelby lay within about ten miles of each other. Yet, the amount of labor dictated the creation of a small sub-camp. Contracted out to the W.R. Roach Canning Company, the prisoners assisted in food processing and picking. The crops included apples, cherries, and asparagus. The camp, itself, had been built on the western edge of the Hart Fairgrounds.<sup>54</sup> One escape is noted on August 26, 1944. The prisoner, Franz Imler, walked off his job site. Authorities found him after a couple of days, in a neighboring county.<sup>55</sup> Officially, the camp closed on October, 28, 1945. The Treasury received \$115,000 from the POW labor. This value equals approximately \$1,575,014.44, in today’s currency.<sup>56</sup> The Treasury payments came from the farmers and employers of the POWs, who after paying the 80-cents a day to the prisoners paid the rest of the wages to the government.

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<sup>53</sup> “C.A. Vancoevering Memo,” September 25, 1945 *Silver buckle Celery and Onion Farms, POW Labor* Reference Number 2007.076.021. Obtained from Lakeshore Museum Center, Muskegon, Michigan

<sup>54</sup> Lowe, 1995. 60.

<sup>55</sup> “German Prisoners leaves Hart Work,” *Ludington Daily News* August 26, 1944.

[https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=b0M2c\\_1WBrUC&dat=19440826&printsec=frontpage&hl=en](https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=b0M2c_1WBrUC&dat=19440826&printsec=frontpage&hl=en)

<sup>56</sup> “German Prisoners leaves Hart Work,” 1944.

The camp located at Shelby, Michigan had been built at the Shelby High School athletic field.<sup>57</sup> The Shelby Cooperative and the Ocean Canning Company contracted these men to work within the farmers' fields and within the processing plants.<sup>58</sup> One resident, who had a personal connection to the plant, remembers living across the street from the canning factory and watching her stepfather manage the POWs. She remembers no complaints from the prisoners, only that the prisoners seemed content at how they were treated.<sup>59</sup> The positive experiences are further evidenced in letters sent back to Mr. Royal, the owner of Oceana Canning Company, describing conditions in Germany.<sup>60</sup> The returning POWs experienced hunger and a lack of money and clothing.

The camp had regulations similar to those laid out at Fort Custer. The employers had to keep a distance between working women and girls. No treats could be given to the prisoners, though records indicate this happened anyway. The request for details had to be placed twenty-four hours before, and the guard did not have to supervise the men. The government set a quota for bean picking; it amounted to 200 pounds per man, and if not attained within eight hours, the men could be held at the job site for ten hours.<sup>61</sup> Additionally, each grower who used POW labor signed a Grower's Agreement, agreeing to comply with the War Department and military rules, regulations, and guidelines.<sup>62</sup> Though farmers signed the documents, it did not stop violations. Farmers talked and helped their workers as much as they were able. They were treated with respect.

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<sup>57</sup> Lowe, 1995. 74.

<sup>58</sup> Lowe, 1995, 74.

<sup>59</sup> Esther M. and Marge P., interview by author. June 6th, 2018, Shelby, Michigan

<sup>60</sup> See Chapter 4. Additional letters can be found at Oceana County Historical Society, Shelby, Michigan. *WWII Prisoners of War and Royal Letters*. Of note, many of these letters still remain untranslated.

<sup>61</sup> "To Users of Prisoner of War Labor," *War Prisoners WWII Oceana County, Emergency Farm Labor Program, 1944*. 15. Oceana Historical Society, Shelby, Michigan.

<sup>62</sup> "Shelby Co-Op Inc. (Grower's Agreement)," *War Prisoners WWII Oceana County, Emergency Farm Labor Program, 1944* 23a. Ocean Historical Society, Shelby, Michigan.

This camp had problems similar to others. Escapes were attempted and prisoners attempted to sabotage the crop. This could be leaving the crop in the field, not picking fast enough, or destroying it. Reports of a sit-down strike exist in the memories of local residents, though newspapers did not report it.<sup>63</sup> Security expected by the government, at this camp, involved the guards watching the troops. Security existed, but the fences did not follow the full regulations and the prisoners enjoyed a certain degree of freedom. They had their own tents, places to stay, items to eat, and they were treated well.<sup>64</sup> Working on the bean, apple, and cherry crops, the prisoners are reported to have come to work and picked for an entire day, regardless of whether the picking needed to be completed. Should the factory have an overflow of produce, the farmers were contacted and ordered to forgo picking for the day. However, the men still arrived from the camp, and continued to pick after their sacks had been confiscated; it is reported that they used their shirts to continue harvesting the crop.<sup>65</sup> The apparent reason for this is a misunderstanding. The German prisoners did not speak English and the American farmers did not speak German. Therefore, they were unable to communicate that the crop should not be picked on that day. Though only supposed to last through the summer crop season, the POW camp lasted through the fall, which created challenges for the school, who had to bus their football team to the neighboring town to compete.<sup>66</sup> The structure of a POW camp on the high school athletic field inhibited the players from being able to practice or play their games.

The work at this camp turned a profit. It is estimated that the Treasury received between \$90,000-100,000, on crops valued at approximately \$426,787.<sup>67</sup> The profit for the Treasury,

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<sup>63</sup> Unable to locate local newspapers with reports of a sit down strike.

<sup>64</sup> Esther M. interview, 2018.

<sup>65</sup> Esther M. and Marge P. interview, 2018.

<sup>66</sup> Esther M. and Marge P. interview, 2018.

<sup>67</sup> James G. Wolph Jr. "Chronology of the Prisoner of War Camp Fort Custer, 1946," TMs, p. 5. Record Group 389, POW Camp History. Box No. 1290, File Number 314.7. Modern Military Branch, National Archives, As cited in Lowe, 1995, 74.



today would have amounted to roughly \$1,232,620- 1,369,577.78. This profit indicates that the prisoners helped Michigan retain its economic stability, while also maintaining the food standards needed to support the military, prisoners, and citizenry.

Without the prisoners, the farmers would have been unable to fully harvest their crop, leading to a loss of money, and a shortage of food. The prisoners received warm treatment, as the farmers put the importance of harvesting over the fact that these men were the enemy. Yet, the question of escapes and sabotage remains. If the prisoners were treated so well, why did some attempt to escape? Some prisoners found agricultural work beneath them. If an individual was a doctor, and then had to become a farm worker, that would have been a major blow to their ego. Some people simply refused to work for their enemy. As one resident comments, ““They were not the enemy.””<sup>68</sup> The prisoners working in the Shelby camp had been seen as men and workers, not the propagated Nazis.

Camp Allegan, a small camp, located in Allegan County, just south of Muskegon, in Holland, Michigan, also housed POWs during the war. Limited information is available, as it only operated for a short time, due to labor demands in the area. Begun in 1944, the camp employed the POWs to work picking a diverse number of crops. These included onions, strawberries, melons, asparagus, peaches, and sugar beets.<sup>69</sup> The population of the camp, varied depending upon the labor need. The local news informed citizens of the opening of the camp and the possibility of requesting labor, on May 18, 1944. The camp had been expected to open on the 22<sup>nd</sup>.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Esther M. interview, 2018.

<sup>69</sup> Lowe, 1995. 34-35.

<sup>70</sup> “Kellogg Camp to House Prisoners,” *Holland City News* May, 18, 1944. Obtained from the Joint Archives, Hope College, Holland, Michigan.

By July, the prisoners also began work at the Heinz Co. Done as an emergency measure, the employers hoped to dissuade the fears of the citizenry by stating that the military guarded the prisoners well and transported them to, and from, the Allegan camp.<sup>71</sup> Additional areas of emergency labor included the Gun swamp area, during cherry season. These emergency work details were the result of a labor shortage and a large amount of crop that needed to be harvested. Interestingly, prisoners worked alongside boys and girls from the local 4-H, and migrant workers, in violation of the War Department regulations.<sup>72</sup> The separation between POWs and civilians was not relevant, as the need for labor rose higher and the need to gather the harvest outweighed the threats to security. Towards the end of 1945, as the war ended, Allegan became one of the few camps to remain open, after the other remaining camps closed. While camps such as Fremont, Shelby, Lake Odessa, and others closed, Allegan remained. The net sum estimated to have been paid to the United States Treasury by the contract office, amounted to \$1,642,906.79 (approximately \$22,500,886.31 today). This figure represented the profit of the prisoner of war labor for the Allegan camp, from January 1 to November 17, 1945.<sup>73</sup> As no escapes are reported in local newspaper, it appears that the farmers and prisoners had a mutual understanding. Or, as another prisoner stated, “It is not the guards or snow fence that keeps us in—it’s the Atlantic Ocean.”<sup>74</sup>

The Freeland area camps included sub-camps in Bay City, Saginaw, Mount Pleasant, Midland, and nearby Frankenmuth, Michigan. Primarily located out of the Tri-City Airport, now the MBS Airport, these camps followed the criteria laid out by Fort Custer and the Sixth Service

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<sup>71</sup> “Employ 29 German War Prisoners at Heinz Co.” *Holland City News* July 6, 1944. Obtained from the Joint Archives, Hope College, Holland, Michigan.

<sup>72</sup> “300 German Prisoners on Farm Work in Allegan,” *Holland City News* July 20, 1944. Obtained from the Joint Archives, Hope College, Holland, Michigan.

<sup>73</sup> “Prison Camp in Allegan County will Remain Open,” *Holland City News* December 6, 1945 Obtained from the Joint Archives, Hope College, Holland, Michigan.

<sup>74</sup> Mencarelli, 1974, 4.

Command.<sup>75</sup> The camp began in 1944, and continued through 1945. These farmers employed the men on sugar beet farms. In Frankenmuth, the prisoners talked with the farmers who hired them. Members of the community, one of Michigan's surviving German communities, conversed with the prisoners. They discussed the town and the prisoners' families back in Germany.<sup>76</sup> The mutual understanding, both ethnic and linguistic, would have put the prisoners at ease. They would have been more willing to work alongside farmers who spoke their language. The prisoners may have also discussed the treatment of the American citizens by their government, given that these citizens were of German descent.

The employers transported POWs to, and from, the camp, pursuant to the War Department regulations. Details of twenty to twenty-five men usually arrived with only one guard. The citizens gave the POWs food. The men appreciated this, as the only food prepared for the work details was sandwiches. Food the citizens shared included homemade bread, soup, sausage, roast beef, sauerkraut, and others.<sup>77</sup> This demonstration of sharing by the citizenry shows the humanity. The citizens of this area did not see these men as Nazi enemies.

Descriptions of the Tri-City airport facilities indicate a camp of twenty barracks and two mess halls. The POWs decorated their barracks with pin-up magazine photos, books, candy, and cigarettes. The clothing followed regulations as it was dotted with the PW patch. The prisoners created sports teams, made furniture, or played musical instruments, as well attended educational classes.<sup>78</sup> Mail from families arrived to the camp, and the POWs had permission to send letters

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<sup>75</sup> Lowe, 1995, 51.

<sup>76</sup> Lowe, 1995, 51. Arnold Kern, "'War Prisoners Harvesting Sugar Beets 1945,'" March 1995 Frankenmuth Historical Commission, Frankenmuth, Michigan.

<sup>77</sup> Kern, 1995.

<sup>78</sup> Stuart Frohm, "MDN Reporter visited POW camp in 1944," *Midland Daily News* February 24, 2010 <https://www.ourmidland.com/news/article/MDN-reporter-visited-POW-camp-in-1944-6976578.php>.

home. As noted by POWs, they took ideas home with them.<sup>79</sup> The humane treatment stayed with the prisoners after they returned home. Some wrote back to America, thanking the people they worked for. Others tried to become American citizens.

Some American citizens made allegations against the camps. Unfortunately, no names are listed within the newspaper articles. The government's decisions to allocate food and certain treatment to the POWs demonstrated it would be firm, but fair. The allegations of preferential treatment came as a result of the POWs receiving "liberal amounts of food or other products that were either in short supply or unavailable to the public."<sup>80</sup> Rumors of extravagant cigarettes sales among POWs, which had been rationed to the general public, caused anger among locals. However, investigations ruled the rumors unfounded. Additionally, Fort Custer and other camps tried to suppress the rumors by publishing the investigation and stating that cigarette sales in the canteens had been limited to one pack a day, per person within Michigan camps.<sup>81</sup> Another form of contention may have been the German soldiers flirting with American women at the camp sites, as noted by citizens in the area.<sup>82</sup> This would have sparked jealousy among American men and fear among the parents. German soldiers were the enemy; why would these women be receptive of the flirtations? It was dangerous. Yet, it may have been something to alleviate the boredom on both sides. German POWs missed their wives and girlfriends, while the American women missed their husbands and boyfriends. It could simply have been a way to have social contact.

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<sup>79</sup> Anita Boldt, "German POW: Inmates, took something home," *The Saginaw News* 1985. Frankenmuth Historical Commission, Frankenmuth, Michigan.

<sup>80</sup> Duane Ernest Miller, "Barbed-Wire Farm Laborers: Michigan's Prisoner of War Experience during World War II," *Michigan History* (September/October 1989): 16 Obtained from Frankenmuth Historical Commission, Frankenmuth, Michigan.

<sup>81</sup> Miller, 1989, 16.

<sup>82</sup> Avi Stern. "When Tri-City canceled all its flights," *Saginaw News*. June 14, 1992. Obtained from Castle Museum of Saginaw County. Saginaw, Michigan.

A much smaller sub-camp connected to the Freeland/Tri-City camp had been located at Mount Pleasant, Michigan. The sub-camp at Mount Pleasant held approximately 600 POWs hired to pick the sugar beet crop. Information about this camp is very limited.<sup>83</sup> Archives within Central Michigan University have no information regarding the camp in their city. Previous research, by William Lowe, indicates that the Treasury received \$95,000 in profit from the POW labor.<sup>84</sup> This value in 1945, equates to roughly \$1,301,098.89 in today's currency.<sup>85</sup>

The government built roughly thirty to thirty-five camps within Michigan's borders. The POWs housed in the state had been hired out to pick local crops and work in the food processing plants. The economic data shows the federal government profited from the POW labor program. The program showed self-sufficiency, as the POWs paid for items and built certain structures at the compounds. The existence of the POW labor program, allowed Michigan to continue meeting its agricultural production needs. These needs not only supplied food to the local citizenry and the POWs, it also provided food for the Allies and the war effort. The labor shortage in Michigan, had it not been supplemented by POW labor, would have resulted in a less than successful harvest. The crops would have rotted prior to being picked. Farmers would have lost money, in a time where money was scarce. Loss of food crops would have increased the rationing of food nationwide.

The citizenry of Michigan, though initially viewing the POWs as enemies, found that they were only men. The POWs impressed farmers with their work ethic and helped keep Michigan's economy stable. As time continued, the American citizens in Michigan, saw the POWs as workers and laborers, rather than the enemies.

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<sup>83</sup> Lowe, 1995, 69.

<sup>84</sup> Lowe, 1995, 69.

<sup>85</sup> Inflation Calculator," *Car Insurance Data* <https://www.carinsurancedata.org/calculators/inflation/328000/1943>.

## Chapter 4: Returning Home: POW Letters

Following the war's end on May 8, 1945, the United States government began the process of repatriating the POWs home. However, some POWs did not return directly to their homelands. Some continued to serve at POW camps in Britain or France, until 1947/1948. The last POWs left the United States in 1946, headed for camps under Allied jurisdiction. Yet, the treatment they received while held in the United States stayed with them. Many POWs wrote back to their American friends and employers. Most gave an update on their lives, others begged for assistance due to the conditions in Germany. Through the letters of former POWs, information can be gathered concerning how life changed after returning home and how conditions, following the Allied occupation of Germany, had changed.

The Allied bombings of German cities, such as Berlin, Hamburg, and Cologne, caused much of the cities to be in ruins when the POWs returned home. Previously beautiful cities laid in piles of rubble. Prisoners returning home had no knowledge of the conditions experienced by family members during the war, or if their homes still stood following bombing raids. Coming home to a war-torn city, must have been a shock, as up to 1944, many POWs housed in the United States believed that Germany would win the war. It was only through reading American newspapers and seeing newsreels that their perception began to change. Misinformation was also common. One American soldier recalls a German POW asking to see the ruins of Chicago; as the German newspaper stated the city had been turned into ruins.<sup>1</sup> As previously stated, seeing the large expanse of land, industries, and food production, during their transfer to camps, many

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Tucker, "Here's more on POW camp at Tri-City," *Saginaw News* October 15, 1978. Obtained from the Castle Historical Museum, Saginaw, Michigan.

POWs had been shocked. The production ability of the United States also convinced POWs, Germany would be unable to win the war.

As the POWs returned home, some returned to Allied controlled West Berlin, while others found their homes controlled by the Soviet Union, in East Berlin. Surviving letters indicate conditions within East Berlin were worse than those in West Berlin. Ernst Floeter, the POW mentioned earlier who spent time in American POW camps, found himself returning to Soviet controlled, East Berlin. After marrying his wife, he applied to move to West Berlin to have a better life. Eventually, the petition was granted and he moved across the boundary line. He finally settled in the United States after obtaining sponsorship.<sup>2</sup> POWs returning to the United States as citizens testify to the humane treatment they received. Had the prisoners been ill-treated, they would not have been willing to emigrate to the country. It also shows how building relationships with the prisoners taught more about the American way of life, and democracy, than the Special Projects reeducation programs. The letters which survive from Michigan camps, tell their stories.

Willi Weiskirchen, a former prisoner from the Shelby, Michigan camp, wrote Mr. Royal, the head of the Oceana Canning Company on July 21, 1947. To jog Mr. Royal's memory, he describes himself as the POW who painted and decorated his office. He spent two years as a POW in America, and one year as a POW in Great Britain. His description of Germany is one where hunger was abundant. He wrote, "it is only bad in my homeland where there is hunger, hunger, and more hunger."<sup>3</sup> The circumstances were said to be catastrophic. He wished to travel

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<sup>2</sup> Miller, 1989, 15. Floeter interview.

<sup>3</sup> "Letter from Willi Weiskirchen to Mr. H.K. Royal," July 21, 1947. English translation *PW Letters*. Obtained from Oceana Historical Society. Shelby, Michigan.

to America, and visit with the Royal family again.<sup>4</sup> No other information is available. Whether the Royal family helped Weiskirchen is also unknown. The Royal family kept many letters from POWs. The willingness of POWs to write to the family indicates that the POWs must have been well treated by their employer in Shelby. It shows a mutually positive relationship between employer and employee, not one of enemies.

Josef Knorr wrote a letter in September of 1947. He says he returned back to Germany “all right, but I would gladly go back to America.”<sup>5</sup> He describes always being hungry, indicating the food supply had diminished. Knorr remembers himself as a POW who kept the factory very neat, while working there. Though it is impossible to verify, this letter appears to be a plea in order to ask for a “Liebespaket” (life packet). Today, this type of package sent from home or family is known as a care package. Specifically, Knorr asked for preserves, clothing, shoes and stockings. He claimed conditions were so bad, their livelihoods were unable to support them, though he confesses that he need not tell Mr. Royal of the conditions, as he believes the Americans are already aware of it.<sup>6</sup> This presumption indicates that German living conditions were reported to American civilians after the war.

Ernst Kiefer followed with a letter in January 1948. He described similar conditions in Germany. Food was rationed and Kiefer states “no one can live off it.”<sup>7</sup> The daily intake, according to Kiefer, was only eight hundred calories. He also stated that after leaving the United States, he spent time in England as a POW, only leaving captivity in autumn of 1947. He wished to return to Shelby to work at the canning factory. Discussing his father’s wine farm, he

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<sup>4</sup> “Letter from Willi Weiskirchen to Mr. H.K. Royal,” July 21, 1947. English translation *PW Letters*. Obtained from Oceana Historical Society, Shelby, Michigan.

<sup>5</sup> “Letter Josef Knorr to Oceana Canning Company,” September 16, 1947, English translation, *PWs Letters*. Obtained from the Oceana Historical Society, Shelby, Michigan.

<sup>6</sup> “Letter Josef Knorr to Oceana Canning Company,” 1947.

<sup>7</sup> “Letter Ernst Kiefer to Mr. Royal,” January 23, 1948. *Royal Letters* Obtained from the Oceana Historical Society, Shelby, Michigan.



promised to send wine, once international packages were allowed to be sent.<sup>8</sup> Sending German goods to Americans demonstrated the friendly relationships between the POWs and American farmers.

Another POW who praised his treatment of the Shelby employer was Willy Buck. His letter described living the French zone of Germany, without enough food, clothing, and necessities. The tone of letter, though written in broken English, expressed a longing to return to the United States. He was suffering and the “best time of my life” had been spent in Michigan, working at this company.<sup>9</sup> When he left New York in 1946, after being transported from Michigan to New York, he wished to stay there, calling himself “lucky” that he had remained in the United States.<sup>10</sup>

The Kraft family from Sparta, Michigan received letters from POWs, following the war. This family continued to write throughout the years and it is believed the family sent care packages, and a much-appreciated dress suit to Karl Heinz K.<sup>11</sup> He asked about the family and requested information about Mr. Kraft’s son Merline, and whether he returned from the war. This simple question indicates a personal relationship that was prohibited by government regulations. He also asked for help, as they were living “from hand to mouth.”<sup>12</sup> The desperation of the former POWs can be seen within these letters as they are writing to the very people who held them in captivity. Yet, the prisoners received such kind treatment, and saw the wealth of the country, that they believed the Americans would be the only people who could help them.

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<sup>8</sup> “Letter Ernst Kiefer to Mr. Royal,” 1948.

<sup>9</sup> “Letter Willy Buck to Mr. Royal,” March 7, 1948. *Royal Letters* Obtained from the Oceana Historical Society, Shelby, Michigan.

<sup>10</sup> “Letter Willy Buck to Mr. Royal,” 1948.

<sup>11</sup> “Letter Karl Heinz K. to Mr. Kraft,” undated. *POW Camps* Obtained from the Sparta Historical Society, Sparta, Michigan.

<sup>12</sup> “Letter Karl Heinz K. to Mr. Kraft,”

Additional letters from Karl in 1948 show care packages were sent from the Kraft family to him.<sup>13</sup> By October, 1948, he asked about the harvest, stating he remembered working in their orchards fondly. He described conditions in Germany as improving; but, he maintained money is tight. The stores had items, but they costed too much for his family to buy them. This letter also discussed the political climate in Germany. He believed that the Soviet Union (“Russia”) was not good for the United States or his own country. He called the Soviet Union, “The enemy for all Christian people.”<sup>14</sup> Desperation is not evident within this letter, but the descriptions of conditions indicate an underlying cry for help, as well as ascertaining how the United States feels about the Soviet Union. Only three years after the end of the war, it was clear that those individuals living within the Soviet-controlled sections of Germany and Berlin, found the Soviet Union to be an enemy.

The Bishop family of Muskegon received letters from former POWs once they returned home to Germany. Walter Andreas sent a letter in 1946, describing his return to Germany and the conditions he saw, once there. Upon being released from captivity, he began work in a paper mill. The work was hard for him, as he did not get enough to eat. His city was in ruins, but by October, 1946, the family had bought a small home.<sup>15</sup>

Andreas spent time in many different Michigan camps. Upon leaving the camp at Muskegon, he spent time in Fremont, Camp Coloma, and Camp Croswell, before being transferred to Fort Custer. He remained at Fort Custer until March 1945, when preparations began for him to return home.<sup>16</sup> After leaving the United States, he believed he would be sent

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<sup>13</sup> “Letter Karl Heinz Kleff to Mr. Kraft,” 1948. Obtained from the Sparta Historical Society, Sparta, Michigan.

<sup>14</sup> “Letter Karl Heinz Kleff to Miss Kraft and family,” October 17, 1948. Obtained from the Sparta Historical Society, Sparta, Michigan.

<sup>15</sup> “Letter Walter Andreas to Bill Bishop,” October 25, 1946, 1. Reference Number 2007.027.094. Obtained from the Lakeshore Museum Center, Muskegon, Michigan.

<sup>16</sup> “Letter Walter Andreas to Bill Bishop,” 1946.

home. Instead, he spent twelve weeks at Camp Munster, a British prisoner of war camp. He credited his release from the camp early because he got sick. He asked about the family and if certain workers were still employed.<sup>17</sup> These intimate details indicate a personal relationship, as well as a promise to write. The men would have been unwilling to write had they received ill treatment by their employers.

A second letter from Andreas to the Bishop family, speaks of how pleased he is to receive a reply to letters he sent. Andreas was happy that an American farmer would think and write to his former prisoners/laborers. He predicted “if all the world were as friendly as we two are then there would be no war or hunger.”<sup>18</sup> He went on to thank the family for a care package, stating that the 1500-calorie rations they received did not fully starve off hunger. He mentioned his children’s’ desires to live in America, and his own desire to once again work for the Kraft family, but he says nothing further need come of it. This letter described a man content in his circumstances, though he wished they would improve.

Hans Schmid wrote the Bishop family in September 1947. He left the United States in January 1946, but instead of returning to Germany, he spent time in a French prison camp. He described working in the mining jobs for the camp. He looked forward to being discharged as he was in bad health, at the time of writing. He spoke of a food shortage and how many Americans were sending food packages to Germans. He mentioned that “each child is very found of his American-oncle (uncle).”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> “Letter Walter Andreas to Bill Bishop,” 1946.

<sup>18</sup> “Letter Walter Andreas to Bill Bishop,” 1947. Reference Number 2007.027.094. Obtained from the Lakeshore Museum Center, Muskegon, Michigan.

<sup>19</sup> “Letter Hans Schmid to John Bishop,” September 26, 1947 Reference Number 2007.027.094. Obtained from the Lakeshore Museum Center, Muskegon, Michigan.

The Otto Herzog family, from Frankenmuth, received numerous letters from various POWs who worked for them from 1947 to 1950. Otto sent numerous care packages.<sup>20</sup> One such care package included Beef Noodle Soup, Mushroom Soup, Chicken Soup, Chicken Gumbo, Beef Soup, Honey, Velveeta cheese, Bar Pates, Candy, Vita Salt, and Caramel.<sup>21</sup>

The Herzog family received letters from Juergen Kracht; Fritz Kaehne; August Weyand; Rudi Jirka; Gerolf von Schoenborn; and Karl Jung, all of whom returned to Germany. Each packet of letters indicated that Mr. Herzog had a personal relationship with each of these men. He treated them well, while they worked for him.

Juergen Kracht's letters speak of hardship and desperation. He worked on the sugar beet harvest and described his time in the United States as "a paradise on earth compared to the present."<sup>22</sup> At the time he wrote, he experienced hunger and cold. He also said that he was studying, as his previous profession as a pilot could no longer be used. He requested pictures taken of himself while on the farm be sent to him as pleasant reminders during the struggles he faced in Germany. He described the prices of certain items: a cigarette cost six to seven marks, no clothing was available, and the food was expensive. As such, he was very grateful for the packages sent by the family. Had the two individuals not become friends, the sending of care packages would not have occurred. Herzog treated the prisoners well and because of this, when asked to send packages to help the families through the hard times after the war, he obliged.

The Fritz Kaehne family wrote to the Herzog family thanking them for their kind treatment. They sent food packages and clothing after the Kaehne family fled East Prussia and

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<sup>20</sup> See Collections booklets at Frankenmuth Historical Commission. Reference Number 1995.40.158.160. Frankenmuth, Michigan.

<sup>21</sup> Collection book from Otto Herzog, Reference Number 1995.40.158.160. Feb. 24, 1947 Frankenmuth Historical Commission, Frankenmuth, Michigan.

<sup>22</sup> "Letter Juergen Kracht to Otto Herzog," January 15, 1947 Translated by Rosemary Ott, Edited by Mary Nuechterlein, Reference Number 95.40.163. Frankenmuth Historical Commission, Frankenmuth, Michigan.

became refugees. From Fritz's wife, Hilda's, description, they fled in the winter.<sup>23</sup> She described constantly being hungry and having only dry bread, very little milk, and getting a week's worth of groceries that must last for an entire month. The letters from the month of December between the two families express much gratitude from the Kaehne family, as the Herzogs sent socks, food, and other items lacking in Germany at the time.<sup>24</sup>

The letters between August Weyand and Otto Herzog discuss their families more than the conditions of Germany. Both asked about how their children were growing and the types of plants they were harvesting. Herzog continued to send care packages, which the family greatly appreciated.<sup>25</sup>

The Jirka family letters indicate a very close relationship with the Herzog family. Rudi Jirka named one of his children, Otto, after Otto Herzog, the child's godfather.<sup>26</sup> Written in 1948, Jirka described the hardships facing the German people. Clothing was very expensive and the pay earned could not buy groceries. As the correspondence continued, Jirka gave updates concerning little Otto. The most prevalent theme throughout the letters is the lack of food available in Germany. Again, these POWs continued to ask for assistance from their former American employer.<sup>27</sup>

The letters from Gerolf von Schoenborn continue with complaints about the lack of food. He asked Otto Herzog to send food. His continued captivity by the French had not made his

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<sup>23</sup> "Letter Fritz Kaehne to Otto Herzog," January 19, 1949, May 5, 1949. Reference Number 95.40.187-188. Translated by Rosemary Ott, Edited by Mary Nuechterlein, Frankenmuth Historical Commission, Frankenmuth, Michigan.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. See reference numbers 95.40.189-192.

<sup>25</sup> "Letters August Weyand to Otto Herzog," February 24, April 12, May 24, August 11, November 10, 1948. Reference Number 95.40.196A; .196B; .197-.201, Translated by Rosemary Ott, Edited by Mary Nuechterlein, Frankenmuth Historical Commission, Frankenmuth, Michigan.

<sup>26</sup> "Letters Rudi Jirka to Otto Herzog," September 4, 1948 Reference Number 95.40.234. Translated by Rosemary Ott, Edited by Mary Nuechterlein, Frankenmuth Historical Commission, Frankenmuth, Michigan.

<sup>27</sup> "Letters Rudi Jirka to Otto Herzog," 1948. Reference Numbers 95.40.235-245.

situation better, as the French prisoner camp had a lack of food as well. He wished to emigrate to the United States, but doubts being able to do that, as the immigration regulations were very stiff. He thanked Herzog for his care, telling the family they were “gracious and treated us with generosity.”<sup>28</sup> The family’s generosity was shown through a description of a care package that arrived. The care package included homemade cookies, soup, cigarettes, chocolate, soap, and canned food. He was very grateful for this, as the French camps were struggling to provide enough food rations.<sup>29</sup>

The letters sent by Karl Jung continued to showcase the horrid food and living conditions that POWs returned to. He credited Otto Herzog with being the first farmer in Frankenmuth who served the POWs enough food to eat. He described talking with American women, while viewing the inside of an American farmhouse.<sup>30</sup> Given the government regulations against fraternization, this shows that farmers in Michigan, saw the POWs as men, rather than simply enemy prisoners.

He also spent time within a French prisoner camp. Upon returning to Germany, he took a job where he worked long hours, from 7:30am to 9:00pm. His wife described grocery rationing and expensive items, and being very poor. She was very grateful for the care package the family received containing meat, lard, honey, and beans.<sup>31</sup> Such small items, yet in the desperate times after the war, these made a great difference to the families receiving them. Further letters described additional care packages the family received and how grateful they were to be able to supplement their rations with American food.

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<sup>28</sup> “Letter Gerolf von Schoenborn to Otto Herzog,” June 24, 1946 Reference Number 95.40.246. Translated by Rosemary Ott, Edited by Mary Nuechterlein, Frankenmuth Historical Commission, Frankenmuth, Michigan.

<sup>29</sup> “Letter Gerolf von Schoenborn to Otto Herzog,” 1946, Reference 95.40.247

<sup>30</sup> “Letter Karl Jung to Otto Herzog,” July 21, 1947 Reference Number 95.40.252. Translated by Rosemary Ott, Edited by Mary Nuechterlein, Frankenmuth Historical Commission, Frankenmuth, Michigan.

<sup>31</sup> “Letter Karl Jung to Otto Herzog,” 1947, Reference Number 95.40.253.

Each letter from a German POW to an American farmer or employer indicated the living conditions they returned to. Germany's cities lay in ruins. Money no longer had value, and food was extremely limited. The rations distributed by the government did not fully support the people. Hunger raged throughout the country. Remembering their treatment from Michigan farmers, and promising to write, German POWs wrote to their American handlers describing life in Germany. They also asked for assistance, be it food or clothing. Many wanted to emigrate back to the United States and work for the American farmers again. Had the farmers not treated the POWs kindly, formed relationships, and built mutual trust, it is unlikely these men, and their families would have written letters. These letters attest to the favorable treatment the men received while working on Michigan farms. They also described the horrifying conditions the men returned home once the war ended.

## Conclusion

Once the United States entered into World War Two, it became obligated to house German POWs on its soil. The United States Government did this reluctantly, as they did not want to have German soldiers so near the civilian population. They feared violence on both sides, as well as Nazi influence growing in America. In all, the United States held roughly 378,000 prisoners of war on American soil. The camps were scattered across the United States, ranging from Florida, California, Massachusetts, Texas, Wisconsin and others. Despite numerous publications detailing the general information about the POWs and several case studies on certain camps or certain states, no book has been published concerning the POW camps in Michigan. Journal articles and dissertations have been written, but none have been published for readership by the general public.

A state heavily centered on agriculture, Michigan, faced a labor shortage once the United States began fighting in World War Two. Local men enlisted in the military or moved to be closer to war-industry jobs, which paid better. The state government attempted to rectify the situation by utilizing migrant workers and creating a work program using local high school boys and girls, and women. However, even these measures did not successfully meet the labor needs caused by the shortage of manpower. The use of POW labor began as an experiment in 1943. From its success, Fort Custer, Michigan became an area all POWs came through prior to being transferred to another camp, either in the Upper-or Lower Peninsula.

The men worked picking various crops, including apples, peaches, sugar beets, onions, and asparagus. They also worked in the pulpwood, logging, and food processing industries. Being housed in the United States, the POWs experienced better treatment than their contemporaries housed in Soviet prisoner of war camps. The men received the same treatment,



care, and food as American servicemen. They had the opportunity to participate in sports activities, art, watch movies, and education classes. Each activity allowed the prisoners to interact with American servicemen and learn about a different political ideology.

Life behind barbed wire pushed some men to attempt to escape. American servicemen and police captured all POW escapees, save one. Georg Gartner turned himself in, in 1985. Some attempted to escape to continue to fight for Germany; others escaped so they could talk to American women. Fraternization between POWs and civilians was forbidden due to War Department regulations. However, as the POWs worked on Michigan farms, the farmers and managers created rapport and developed mutual relationships. The farmers impressed by the German POWs' work ethic, offered additional food and other items to their workers. This gratitude could still be seen through the letters from POWs sent back to the American farmers and employers after the soldiers had returned home. American farmers sent care packages to former POWs, which further indicated the humanity experienced by the POWs.

The government program utilizing POW labor, turned a profit for the United States Treasury. After paying for the camp, the government received almost one million dollars in profit. The camps developed an aura of self-sufficiency, as the POW used their wages (0.80 cents a day) to build swimming facilities or construct other buildings. The POWs enjoyed freedom behind the wire, as they had opportunities for swimming, English classes, and even visitors, provided the Army personnel approved of the visitor.

The use of POW labor provided an economic benefit to Michigan. It allowed the farmers to gather in the harvest and process it in a timely manner. Had the farmers not used the POW labor, the farmers would have loss a good portion of their crop, leading to a food shortage within the United States. As impressed as the POWs were about the size and industries of the United

States, the labor of the POWs was necessary to help the United States continue in these industries.

As these men worked alongside farmers to continue their businesses, the farmers began to see that the POWs were not the enemy. These men did not fit the picture presented to them of fanatical Nazis. As such, these men came to be seen as workers, not Nazis. They helped save Michigan's economy and agriculture. Though some POWs continued to support Nazism, it is clear from the letters, and humane treatment, the farmers lavished on the POWs, they did not feel like the enemy.

## Appendix

Interview Transcript

Interview- June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018

Location: Oceana Historical Society

Interviewees: Esther M. & Marge P.

Interviewee: Abigail Runk

**Marge:** The guards that came along with the POWs... when they had time off would come downtown and have coffee or a roll or sit in the Dairy Bar which was open til midnight.

**Abigail:** Oh, my goodness...

**Marge:** And... and... unless you went into one of the bars, this was the place to go sit. And you could stay for two or three hours and visit with people. So, the military men really spent a lot of time in where I was working. Then along with that... my... this one right here (shows photo of men from Oceana Canning Company), my stepfather was the plant manager; so all of these people worked under him, in the Oceana Canning, and we lived right across the street.

**Abigail:** Oh wow

**Marge:** So, my connection to the men that worked in the canning factory was also very close. Because they... I have to say... that they, I don't remember anyone every complaining about not working. They were so glad to be so well taken care of. And I think that's a very important part of what you're talking about. They considered... They were just amazed at how well they were treated; how well they were fed; and how well they were taken care of. And so... the...then also the canning factory owned an orchard. So, they picked fruit. They not only went out to the canning factory to work, but also went to the farm to pick the fruit. So, they were very... well Esther, you probably talked about that already...

**Esther:** Uh huh...

**Marge:** How active they were and what a difference it made for Oceana County to have workers. Now, the military men were pretty much lifetime soldiers that were too old to sent over to fight. They were at the end of their retirement. Does that make sense? What I am trying to say? The Guards?

**Abigail:** Yup. The draft. They were at the end of drafting age...

**Marge:** Well, yes. They had already been in the service. They had made it their life. And so the young men were off serving in active duty where this would be not... requires a young man to take care of them. And um. Esther already talked about the truckload of men that they would take to a farm, whatever they needed. And pick them up and take them to a work, And the football field in Shelby; and the football field is the size of any high school football field was

covered completely and a school it wasn't fenced ... what do I want to say? There wasn't a big deal about security; not that they weren't covered, they were watched and all the rest of the things, but there was a tremendous amount of freedom action of the fact that they had their own tents, their own places, their place they stay and they ate. What else Esther?

**Esther:** I guess the human-interest story is one that was told in the paper. No, it was a first-person account. They were good workers, except we had a big canning factory in Hart called Roaches. They owned fields of beans. And they sent a group of, a large group of prisoners out to take care of the bean fields. And it was the only time it was every reported that they went on a sit-down strike.

**Marge:** Well... Let me add to her thought on that. And if you have ever picked beans for 8 hours you can appreciate, dragged a basket with you as a picker. You were down, bent over, on your hands and knees, picking the beans. Because back then, the early times of picking beans in Oceana County, they pulled the whole plant, and women sat in the factory and pulled off. But this is when you picked the beans that were ready this week and next week you went back and picked it again and the next week you picked it over and over again. So that's the reason. And... and bending over and dragging it, picking beans is... And it probably would have been a world they probably weren't used to. So, the picking beans, that's a good point Esther.

**Esther:** Yeah. My cousin told a very interesting story, Karen Wheeler, told a story that she overheard a farmer in, I think it was Shelby area, Ocean area. It was customary if the processing plants got plugged up, full, of product and couldn't keep up, they would call the farmer and say, "don't pick today, until we get caught up. And, in fact, come in and help us until we get caught up". So, this farmer received a phone call, "don't pick today we're plugged up." So, they went out and tried to communicate to the prisoners 'don't pick today'. Well, they couldn't speak German, and the guard couldn't speak German. And they tried to...tried to... hand gestures, you know... 'don't pick' and it didn't compute. So, they took away their picking baskets and their lugs. And when they came back, the prisoners had taken off their shirts, laid them on the ground, and were picking into their shirts and pulling them up into bunches. They thought...

**Marge:** They wanted to work so bad.

**Esther:** Well, they thought they had to keep up, and keep on going. They didn't understand what was going on but they thought they had to keep on going.

**Marge:** And, and, actually that a really good point for you to make. In the fact of their willingness to work here.

**Esther:** yeah

**Marge:** It was a tremendous.... and the part that I appreciate is the fact that the factory being across the street and a part of my life. And a matter of fact, we never had, uh, the POWs eat, but we had some of the military men that were in the factory and they came to our home and ate supper with us.

**Esther:** Yeah. We had the guard for Sunday dinner once, at least once. And then he went to church with us.

**Marge:** See, and that would be. ...And they, and they, just couldn't...not get over the... I want to say reception. But, uh, the warmth which with they were received as workers. The people were...

**Esther:** They were not the enemy. They didn't feel like the enemy.

**Marge:** No, and the guards ... they just... Well, they knew how important it was for the farmer to be able to have that crop and taken care of. Whether in the factory taken care of, and/or picked and brought to the factory. So that was a... And, I don't remember them saying... Oh, I should too, I'm sorry. Shelby played their football games in Hart. So, they were here into the fall enough that it interrupted the football season. So, the kids... they took the Shelby students and then you probably, already she told you... that they brought the prisoners up to Hart, to their gymnasium to use the showers for their baths.

**Abigail:** I think I found that in one of the books, so...

**Marge:** Okay. Cause that's... that's another interesting thing they did. Now, you've got some questions?

**Abigail:** I, I don't. I just getting all this information. But, I will say they stayed over in the football season? Oh no. That had to have caused some problems. We love our football in this county...

**Marge:** Well, and that was the...

**Esther:** They stayed longer., in the, the bad weather and that was. Then they went across the state to the sugar beet fields.

**Marge:** Yeah, But ...And, and that was. But that still interfered with football season. Football season starts in August. and so it interfered with the football field.

**Esther:** Oh, I think one of the things that everybody, who was within listening distance that they talked about was their singing. They sang a lot.

**Marge:** Yes, and I'm glad you remembered. But, they rode in an open truck. That's important to say, when you're talking about people hearing them. A farmer would pick them up, with an open truck and in the back and so they would ride back to the farm or over to the factory and ...Esther, I don't remember it. So that's interesting. But she said they sang. And singing in German would be ...it would be so .... listen to. I mean aware, aware of it. Aware's probably a better word. When you heard them go by, you were very aware of a group that was singing out load in German going down the road.

**Abigail:** Cause it sounds very different than English

**Marge:** And, uh, I don't know if you talked about their clothes or not.

**Abigail:** I did see a notation that said that they, uh, had. What is a P... a PW insignias on all of their uniforms?

**Marge:** Yeah. But you've got that.

**Esther:** We're getting this down to a science. We've given it to school groups, we given it to Rotary; we given it here and there, and I guess I told you about the German student here. That we are going to give the program over at ...on Aging in July, cause the German intern is over there, and he'll be leaving in August and we got to get over there in July ....

(unable to decipher the recording)

**Esther:** so that he can hear his... the story. I'll bet he's never heard.

**Marge:** Oh no, and that's the part about it. That people and children know either. But if you can imagine words to put in a story, like your reading, to imagine that you're living is what's been planted and your aware of, and the harvest of it; is what paid for the planting it, spraying it, and taking care of it, and picking it. And if it hadn't happened, the loss for the year would be so tremendous. So, it was so important.

**Esther:** And our government was in bad shape because our government was selling war bonds. So that they could keep going to buy uniforms, and tanks, and guns and airplanes and take care of the soldiers. And so, our citizens were carrying war bonds to keep that going. And here, they couldn't afford to lose a crop.

**Marge:** No, no. That's, that's what you can't afford to use.

**Esther:** And some went to the Upper Peninsula. I think they did logging, or reforestation

**Marge:** You probably know this story better than I do, Esther, cause I just, uh...

**Esther:** They were all over. The whole United States. There were thousands of them

**Abigail:** One figure I saw was 378,000.

**Esther:** Yeah. It boggles your mind

**Abigail:** and it's not talked about... which I am finding very shocking but...

**Marge:** Well, we have a story somewhere.....

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