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The German Prisoner of War
Camp at Lake Wabaunsee**

By Penny Clark

The Emporia State Research Studies

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EMPORIA, KANSAS

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Farm Work and Friendship: The German Prisoner of War Camp at Lake Wabaunsee

by
Penny Clark*

Transport of POWS to Kansas

He was an American soldier who had fought Nazi Germany in the blistering heat of North Africa, leaving behind many fallen comrades. Eventually he received a furlough and went to visit his sister in Eskridge, Kansas. During the visit he ambled to one of her windows, peered outside, and saw German soldiers working peacefully in the garden. At first he was stunned with disbelief that German prisoners of war were working in America. He later wondered, as did many other Americans, why German prisoners of war ended up spending World War II in comparative safety and luxury while American GIs were fighting and dying all over the globe.¹ There were a number of reasons why German POWs were interned in America and specifically why they were housed near Eskridge, Kansas.

One of the dilemmas that faced the Allies during World War II was what should be done with captured German soldiers. Originally they were shipped to Great Britain. It was a small country, however, and could not absorb all of the POWs. The Allies decided to send some of them to Canada and the United States.²

It was sensible to send the POWs across the Atlantic for the duration of the war. Canada and America had more space to intern large numbers of prisoners. The American government sent ships loaded with troops and supplies east to Europe. These ships were empty on the return trip west to the United States, and so it made

*The author is a doctoral candidate in History at the University of Kansas. This study derives from a thesis of the same title submitted toward completion of Ms. Clark's Master of Arts degree in History from Emporia State University in 1985. That thesis was directed by Dr. Patrick O'Brien, Professor of History, Division of Social Sciences.

¹Based on an incident discussed in an interview with Mr. and Mrs. J. O. Warren, Eskridge, Ks., 23 April 1984.

²Arnold Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America* (New York: Stein and Day, 1979), p. 2.

sense to fill them with POWs. POWs were less of a security risk in North America. Where would a POW go if he did escape? German POWs were at least 3000 miles from home, and few, if any Americans were sympathetic to the Nazi cause.³

Many German soldiers felt frustrated at their capture. Klaus Majer recalled that he and Georg Stanglmaier were nineteen-year-old German troops serving under Field Marshall Erwin Rommel in the "Hell on Wheels" Panzer Division when they were taken on May 9, 1943. The Americans rounded up Majer and Stanglmaier, along with many others, at Porto Farina in Tunisia, North Africa. Majer remembered that he knew it was the end because the Germans had run out of gas and ammunition, and that they could neither move nor shoot.⁴

POWs did not know what to expect from their American captors. Gustav Kölmel recalled that the Nazis had given the Germans a bad impression of Americans, which made him apprehensive about how he would be treated. Hermann Dorn, however, claimed that the Germans had never really considered Americans as the enemy. For the first three months after they were captured, Klaus Majer recalled, they had many doubts about whether the Americans were humane people.⁵

The prisoners were taken to Camp Chanzy on the Sahara Desert, where they had almost no food to eat or tents to protect them from the elements. Majer remembered that the POWs were transported in freight cars that were closed during the day when it was hot inside, but opened at night when it was cold. Gustav Kölmel recalled that he, too, was taken prisoner by the Americans on May 9, but in his case the Americans turned that group of prisoners over to the French, who transferred them to the British. By June, 1943, the Americans once again had control over Kölmel and his group of prisoners.⁶

One of the most memorable events in the captives' experience as POWs was their transport from their place of capture to Kansas. Klaus Majer recalled that he was shipped from Oran, Algeria, on the *Duchess of Bedford* to Liverpool, England. At Liverpool Majer and other POWs were put on another ship, the *Edmond R. Alex-*

³Krammer, p. 115.

⁴Hermann Dorn, correspondence to author, 24 October 1984; "Fort Riley POW's Return as Tourists," *Manhattan Mercury*, 1 June 1980; Klaus Majer, correspondence to author, 19 February 1985; "German POW's Visit Farmer 'Host' Families," *Wamego - Smoke Signal*, c. 1 June 1980.

⁵Werner Burow, correspondence to author, 26 November 1984; Gustav Kölmel, correspondence to author, 18 November 1984; Dorn correspondence; Majer correspondence; Heinrich Wolgast, correspondence to author, 13 March 1985.

⁶Majer correspondence; Kölmel correspondence.

ander, for the voyage to New York City. Ernst Künzel had a somewhat different experience. He, too, was shipped from Oran to Liverpool, but his group of POWs was put on a train to Birmingham. There they were put back on a train to Liverpool. This time he left Liverpool on either the *Queen Mary* or the *Queen Elizabeth* for America. At New York prisoners were put on trains headed for America's hinterlands. Willie Dresing remembered that three POWs were placed in a seat for two.⁷

Once the POWs reached American soil, Americans and Germans had to face their fears and prejudices about one another. For many POWs their first camp was Camp Concordia, Kansas. Security was a high priority at Concordia, and barbed wire, double fences, watch towers, guarded gates, and daily roll calls were used to discourage escapes. Franz Schieder recalled that the guards at Concordia feared the POWs because they thought all POWs were Nazis and "Kinderfresser mit doppeltem Gebiss" (childeaters with two sets of teeth).⁸

The POWs also had mixed emotions about their American captors and about being prisoners. Although they were loyal to the Fatherland, many were glad to be out of the war. According to the *Alma Enterprise*, "The brighter side for enemy soldiers is to be taken as war prisoners. The war and its horrors are over for them. They are not too unhappy of their plight. They have food, shelter, and comparative safety." One POW said that his father had told him to surrender to the Allies if he ever had the opportunity. Some POWs said that being a prisoner of war in America was certainly more pleasant than being shot at on the Russian Front.⁹

The POWs discovered that life as a prisoner in America could be a pleasurable experience, often because they had some control over their own lives. Ernst Künzel remembered that camp cooking was good because the Americans provided plenty of food and allowed POWs to cook for themselves. Klaus Majer commented that the cooks seemed to be able to get any kind of food they asked for. Housing at Concordia was good, even though POWs had only cots to sleep on. POWs made their dormitories more pleasant through their own initiative.¹⁰

⁷Majer correspondence; Ernst Künzel, correspondence to author, 19 December 1984; Rev. E. C. Zimmermann, correspondence to author, 14 February 1985.

⁸Burow correspondence; Franz Schieder, correspondence to author, 25 February 1985. For example, Josef Vesper recalled being interned at Fort Leonard Wood from July 16, 1943, to July 1, 1944, at branch camp "Independence" at Clarinda, Iowa, from July 1, 1944, to August 20, 1944, and at Fort Riley from August 20, 1944, to September 13, 1944.

⁹*Alma Enterprise*, 5 March 1943; George Edgerton, interview with author, Eskridge, Ks., 14 April 1984.

¹⁰Künzel correspondence, 19 December 1984; Majer correspondence; Kölmel correspondence.

The guards and prisoners became more friendly toward each other until an unfortunate incident occurred. According to the POWs, they had been allowed to play soccer at the camp, and could retrieve the ball when it was kicked outside the security perimeter. One day during a soccer game, however, a POW went to retrieve a ball outside the "security line" and an American guard shot him in the head and killed him. Relations between guards and POWs became more formal at Concordia after the incident.¹¹

POWs had warmer relations with Americans when they were transported from Concordia to smaller prison camps around the state. Lieut. Col. L. H. Shafer, commanding officer of the Fort Riley camp, said the official attitude was "Half way between 'kill 'em or kiss 'em.' We should do neither . . . but treat them justly, bearing in mind they are still our enemies." Security was looser at Fort Riley than Concordia. However, prisoners were highly guarded even at Fort Riley. Klaus Majer remembered that one American guard accompanied every three POWs when they left the camp to do farm work. Being guarded at Fort Riley was not too bad: according to Hermann Dorn, once the guards realized that the POWs were friendly and hard-working men, relationships between them became open and cordial.¹²

Another reason for improved relations between POWs and Americans at branch camps was that American officials had screened the POWs into different groups, depending on their degree of sympathy with National Socialism. Only those who were considered to be no threat to the safety and well-being of civilians were sent out to branch camps such as Lake Wabaunsee.¹³

Establishment of the Prisoner of War Camp at Lake Wabaunsee

A severe labor shortage in American industry and agriculture was among the consequences of World War II. Kansas farmers were especially desperate for labor. Many young men were in the military, others had gone to defense industries, and many agricultural tasks still demanded considerable manual labor.

More than 7000 Axis POWs were interned in Kansas during World War II. They were first confined largely in two camps near Concordia and Salina. As Kansans gradually realized the POWs posed little threat, and as labor became increasingly scarce, farmers came to regard POWs as a large and valuable source of

¹¹Majer, Schieder, Künzel, Gilg, and Dorn all discussed the Concordia incident in their correspondence.
¹²*Wichita Morning Eagle*, 24 September 1944 (Shafer quote); Majer correspondence; Dorn correspondence.
¹³*Eskridge Independent*, 23 March 1944.

labor. Farm communities proposed that POW camps be located close by to make labor readily available. This was true in Wabaunsee County. Many methods were used to alleviate the labor shortage.

First of all, the Wabaunsee County Extension Service organized a farm labor committee that consisted of four members and the county agent. The committee selected a farm labor chairman for each township. The farm labor committee and township leaders took a survey that revealed that there was indeed a severe shortage of farm labor. Second, the labor committee urged civilians who had not traditionally worked in agriculture to gravitate to the fields. The farm labor committee encouraged women and high school students to sign up on farm labor lists. Male students of St. Mary's College gave their time also. The committee insisted that if an individual had only an hour to two to spare, even that small segment of time could be beneficial to the war effort. Third, farmers worked cooperatively to harvest crops and fill silos.¹⁴

The establishment of a German prisoner of war camp promised relief to labor-starved Wabaunsee County. In 1943 a prisoner camp was established at Camp Fremont, the abandoned Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp east of Council Grove which housed 400 men. The prisoners at Camp Fremont were available to farmers in Wabaunsee, Morris, Chase, and Lyon counties.¹⁵

On August 26, 1943, a meeting was held in the Eskridge City Park to discuss and explain the use of war prisoners. By September 2, 1943, eight German prisoners of war from Camp Fremont, watched by two guards, helped to put up silage at the Clyde Penrice farm. The *Eskridge Independent* reported that: "Mr. Penrice was well satisfied with their first day's work. These young Germans . . . of the Afrika Corps were willing workers and quick to catch on to what was desired."¹⁶

Although the German prisoner laborers, with their qualities of hard work and intelligence, worked out well, relatively few farmers used prisoners from Camp Fremont. The 35 farmers who did use prisoner labor were large operators. Most farmers could not afford the drive to Council Grove to pick up and return laborers. Wabaunsee County farmers desired a closer prisoner of war camp, preferably in Wabaunsee County. A special meeting to discuss

¹⁴"Wabaunsee County Agent Annual Extension Report—1943," Umberger Hall, Kansas State University, from Microfilm Series T 861, National Archives and Records Service; *Independent*, 17 June 1943.

¹⁵*Independent*, 17 June 1943.

¹⁶*Independent*, 26 August 1943; *Independent*, 2 September 1943.

POW labor was held on Friday evening, September 24, at 8:30 PM at the courthouse in Alma. New conditions were established under which these men could be employed for agricultural purposes.¹⁷

Howard C. Myers, Wabaunsee County Extension Agent, took steps to establish a prisoner of war camp in the country in early 1944. He attended a labor meeting in Topeka on February 19. Myers conducted a survey to determine how many Wabaunsee County farmers would use POW labor. By March, 20 farmers had indicated their intention of using POW labor. Farmers planned to use POWs to fix fence and to cut hedge and brush. Myers encouraged other farmers who would want additional labor in the summer and fall to contact him, and he reassured farmers that an indication of a desire to use POW labor at that time would not compel them to use it later. Also the county commissioners had agreed to use prisoners to repair bridges. Myers hoped to have the camp established by May 1.¹⁸

By March, 1944, Myers announced the working conditions that had been drawn up for POW labor: "40¢ per hour for the time the man actually works on the farm. Farmers will be expected to furnish the noon meal and provide transportation. A credit of 21¢ for the noon meal will be allowed. Transportation costs will be credited with a refund of 5¢ per mile up to a maximum of 60 miles per load."¹⁹

Once a sufficient demand for POW labor had been established, the next question was where the camp should be located. The ideal location for a prisoner of war camp in Wabaunsee County was thought to be at Lake Wabaunsee, located approximately five miles west of Eskridge. The City of Eskridge owned Lake Wabaunsee. During the 1930s a National Youth Administration (NYA) camp was established at Lake Wabaunsee; it had barracks, a dormitory, and a mess hall. Although abandoned by the NYA, the camp was used in the early days of World War II as a place of rest and relaxation for the United States Army. Army officers inspected the former NYA camp at Lake Wabaunsee in April, 1944, for use as a POW camp. "They were very impressed with it and fell in love with the location," reported the *Eskridge Independent*. "They rated it the second most suitable location in the state."²⁰

¹⁷1943 County Agent Report; *Independent*, 23 March 1944; *Independent*, 23 September 1943.

¹⁸1944 County Agent Report; *Alta Vista Journal*, 2 March 1944.

¹⁹*Journal*, 2 March 1944.

²⁰Edgerton interview; *Independent*, 29 April 1944; *Independent*, 23 March 1944.

The Eskridge City Council proved to be a stumbling block to a prisoner of war camp at Lake Wabaunsee. A request had been made by March 23 to use the lake for a prisoner of war camp, but the Eskridge City Council declined to make a decision. A council meeting was held in March, 1944, to discuss whether a prisoner of war camp should be established. Both those for and those against the camp were invited to attend, but only Frank G. Blecha, State Labor Supervisor, and Howard C. Myers, Wabaunsee County Agent, were present. Blecha told the group that Wabaunsee County could have a camp for 100 German war prisoners established by the summer of 1944. Blecha assured councilmen that the POWs he would send to Wabaunsee County were good men. He said that men who worked on Kansas farms were carefully selected by the Army out of the 7000 German POWs in Kansas. POWs desired to work because it became tedious to sit inside a barbed wire fence day after day, Blecha told councilmen. A prisoner, Blecha emphasized, was used under strict rules: "He must not be abused or overworked. He is entitled to his rest period. He must be fed the same kind of meal as the rest of the family and other employed men are fed. He must not be pampered. Nor is it permissible to discuss the war or political topics with him. The prisoners are not to be used in competition with free labor, and if a man asks a farmer employing the prisoners for a job, he must be given one also." Myers and Blecha told city council members that a prisoner of war camp at Lake Wabaunsee would contribute to the war effort. Farmers filled a vital role in fighting the war by producing crops that fed and clothed both soldiers and civilians.²¹

The Eskridge City Council waited a week to vote on whether to allow a prisoner of war camp to be established at Lake Wabaunsee. A motion was made and seconded, at a city council meeting on April 3, that the City of Eskridge permit a camp at Lake Wabaunsee. On a roll call the vote was: Carl Harrold, "No"; E. A. Peterson, "Yes"; Stanley, "No"; C. C. Meeker, "No"; Lucky, "Yes"; and so the motion lost 3-2.²²

There were at least two reasons for the council's refusal. First, the City of Eskridge, which had always owned Lake Wabaunsee, wanted the lake to be self-supporting at least, or even to make a profit. If a prisoner of war camp were established, people might be unwilling or unable to use the camp for recreation. Then the

²¹*Independent*, 23 March 1944.

²²Eskridge City Council minutes, 3 April 1944, Eskridge City Clerk, Eskridge, Ks.

citizens of Eskridge would have to pay for the lake, because no revenue would be generated. Second, the prospect of a large number of the enemy living at Lake Wabaunsee evoked negative community reaction. Some people thought that the men would attempt to escape, especially in the wooded areas around Alma. The Eskridge City Council members may have been especially prone to veto the German prisoner of war camp because all but one member had fought against Germany in World War I.²³

The Eskridge City Council claimed that there was not enough demand for prisoner labor to justify restricting lake usage. The city council reassured farmers that a camp might be established along the Kaw Valley near Wamego. Alma had also been considered as a possible location for a prisoner of war camp. The problem with a camp at Wamego was that, like Camp Fremont at Council Grove, it was a long distance for a farmer to drive to get laborers.²⁴

On April 19 the council met with a group of farmers at the request of C. H. Houseworth and Win Stratton. Farmers who urged the councilmen to change their minds at this meeting were: Merle Converse, Jim McKnight, Win Stratton, Glen Schwarting, Jim Thompson, and Franklin Van Petten. Dr. G. M. Umberger of Kansas State College also was present. The farmers spoke in favor of establishing the camp because they believed that there was going to be an acute labor shortage, especially during the harvest season in July. The farmers pointed out that even their spring work had suffered because of labor shortages, and many farmers were unwilling to plant crops if they could not be harvested. The farmers insisted that producing crops was essential to victory. Myers suggested that 100 men would not be enough to meet the demand for labor, especially at silo filling time. He stated that 60 men would be put to work immediately in Wabaunsee County.²⁵

Three Eskridge City Council members, C. C. Meeker, E. A. Peterson, and Carl Harrold, made a written request to Ivan D. Conrad, Mayor of the City of Eskridge, to call a special meeting of the Eskridge City Council. The meeting, scheduled at 10:30 AM, April 21, 1944, was to be held "for the purpose of reconsidering the granting of permission of the farmers of Wabaunsee County to establish a camp for German Prisoners of War at Lake Wabaunsee during the summer and fall of 1944 to provide and make available

²³*Independent*, 23 March 1944; Esther McKnight, interview with author, Eskridge, Ks., 17 April 1984; Edgerton interview.

²⁴*Independent*, 6 April 1944.

²⁵*Independent*, 27 April 1944.

labor for their use." The council members wanted to make sure that the action taken at the April 21 meeting would be legal and binding, the same as if the action had been taken at a regular meeting.²⁶

On April 21, 1944, the council finally approved a camp to house 100 German prisoners of war at Lake Wabaunsee and agreed to lease the part of the grounds with the buildings. This special session was held at the Harrold Produce Company office in Eskridge. Mayor Conrad served as chairman of the meeting. Councilmen Peterson, Stanley, Harrold, Meeker, and Lucky were all present. The council members drafted a resolution permitting the establishment of the camp, and then voted by a show of hands to adopt the resolution.²⁷

Perhaps the reversal by the council was less from concern for the farmers' plight than from a guarantee that a prisoner of war camp at Lake Wabaunsee would not lose the City of Eskridge money. The farmers and councilmen agreed to charge farmers using the prisoners an additional rental fee of 2¢ per man hour. The council's opposition to spend taxpayers' money on the camp was spelled out in the official agreement:

WHEREAS: It is apparent that there will be an acute shortage of farm labor in Wabaunsee County during the coming crop season, and many farmers will not be justified in planning an extensive program nor able to execute such a program as they are capable unless a sufficient amount of extra labor is made available.

BE IT RESOLVED

That the City of Eskridge Governing Body consents to the establishment of, and the leasing of certain buildings of Lake Wabaunsee, owned by the City of Eskridge, to the Wabaunsee County Farm Labor Committee for the purpose of maintaining a seasonal camp for German Prisoners of War to alleviate the farm labor shortage in this section of the State of Kansas. That the camp be maintained and operated under the joint supervision of the Committee and the United States Army, without expense to the city for additional improvements, alterations, repairs or maintenance. That all boundaries and buildings used and alterations be subject to approval of the City Council of Eskridge in order that the rights of the public and property owners at Lake Wabaunsee be fully protected according to the obligation of the City of Eskridge.

The prisoners were to arrive around May 20th.²⁸

²⁶Eskridge City Council minutes, 21 April 1944.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸Eskridge City Council minutes, 21 April 1944; *Independent*, 11 May 1944.

In late April and early May, definite plans were laid concerning farm labor in Wabaunsee and surrounding counties. At a meeting of the Wamego Lions Club, local farmers decided not to establish a subsidiary camp at Wamego. A May 3 meeting was held to organize the County Farm Labor Committee, and the following officers were elected: President, M. W. Converse; Vice President, A. W. Steuwe; and Secretary-Treasurer, Howard C. Myers. The other members of the committee were Albert Kaine, Wamego; Raymond Morton, Wamego; Dr. G. M. Umberger, Harveyville; and Leo Leonard, Alma. The committee voted to have a member of the Eskridge City Council on the labor committee. The council accepted this invitation, and Carl Harrold was voted as the member to represent the city council.²⁹

The committee paid the government around \$800 to guarantee that the prisoners of war would be worked and to cover the cost of preparing the camp for the POWs. The money was refunded to the committee when the amount was paid to the government in wages. As the committee was responsible for payment of wages to the government, it was decided to have the farmers pay for the work in advance. The wage rate for general farm work was set at 37¢ an hour. It had originally been decided to charge 35¢ an hour, but 2¢ an hour was added to pay for the rental at Lake Wabaunsee. Myers announced after the May 4 meeting that prisoner labor would be available by May 20.³⁰

The Wabaunsee County Farm Labor Committee faced other obstacles after the Eskridge City Council. Despite Myers's assurances that farmers would be able to obtain prisoner labor from Lake Wabaunsee by May 20, the establishment of a camp at all was seen as doubtful as late as June 15. The major problem that confronted the committee was that the Army was unwilling to invest the capital necessary to convert the old NYA camp into a POW camp. Another difficulty was dealing with all the rumors about the camp. One story was that all enlisted rank POWs were being shipped to Indiana and the whole project was off. The committee used several methods to combat the problems.³¹

First, meetings were held about the use of POW labor. On May 9 a meeting was held in Holton, Kansas, concerning the labor program. E. Stratton, Ralph John, Leo Leonard, Walter Hund, Norman Steuwe, and Howard C. Myers were among those who attended the

²⁹1944 County Agent Report; *Independent*, 11 May 1944.

³⁰*Independent*, 11 May 1944.

³¹*Independent*, 15 June 1944; *Independent*, 8 June 1944.

meeting. Later in May the county agent and two representatives of the labor committee drove to Concordia to further define plans for the camp.³²

Second, members of the committee helped to prepare the camp to meet the specifications of the Army. Some of the committee members, prospective employers of the POWs, advanced money to cover the costs of complying with Army specifications. Mrs. Howard C. Myers recalled that her husband, the county agent, "really hustled" to ready the camp for the POWs. Myers searched second-hand stores for hooks to hang their clothes. She was dismayed when he ransacked their home for mirrors to hang at the POW camp.³³

Third, the Wabaunsee County Farm Labor Committee perfected its organization. The committee was renamed the Wabaunsee County Grower's Association. The role of the association was to act as a go-between of the farmers wanting prisoner-of-war labor and the Army. Despite all obstacles, the association persevered and a prisoner of war camp was established in the summer of 1944. The association completed agreements with the Army in late June. An advance team of 20 POWs was sent out under the direction of an Army detail from Fort Riley. They worked for about two weeks to ready the camp for use. By July 6 the POWs were laboring outside of the camp. Eight of them were sent to help build Wabaunsee County bridges. POWs also began work on farms: eight were taken to the Koenig farms of Alma and four to the M. W. Converse farm.³⁴

Another 80 POWs had arrived at Lake Wabaunsee by July 13. The *Eskridge Independent* reported that 82 out of 100 POWs were being put to work. The newspaper thought that 82 would be the average number of POWs at work, and that at silo filling time demand would exceed supply. The *Independent* said that farmers who used POWs were accomplishing things that could not be done otherwise.³⁵

³²1944 County Agent Report.

³³*Independent*, 15 June 1944; Mrs. Howard C. Myers, interview with author, Alma, Ks., 4 January 1985.

³⁴1944 County Agent Report; *Independent*, 29 June 1944; *Independent*, 6 July 1944.

³⁵*Independent*, 13 July 1944.



Barracks and grounds of the German POW camp, Lake Wabaunsee.

Camp Life at Lake Wabaunsee

Most of the POWs were pleased with their experience at the Lake Wabaunsee camp. The location was appealing. Wabaunsee County is in a scenic area of Kansas, and POWs had a good view of the lake. The *Eskridge Independent* reported that: "Both the Army men and prisoners are delighted with the prospect of living at Lake Wabaunsee this summer."³⁶

The camp had an almost home-like atmosphere. POWs were allowed to plant flowers and engage in woodworking projects. They decorated their walls with pictures of German officers and pin-up girls. Ernst Künzel recalled that sleeping accommodations were much better at Lake Wabaunsee than they were in the German Army. The camp commander selected movies for the POWs' viewing. POWs had a piano in the mess hall. They enjoyed listening to the record player and the radio. Klaus Majer and Georg Stanglmaier 40 years later could still recite jingles and sing songs such as "You Are My Sunshine" that they learned from the radio at Lake Wabaunsee.³⁷

³⁶*Independent*, 29 June 1944.

³⁷*Kansas City Star*, 20 July 1944, Wabaunsee County Clippings, Volume II, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Ks.; *Wichita Morning Eagle*, Kansas Clipping File, Wichita Public Library, Wichita, Ks.; Künzel correspondence, 30 August 1984; Col. Ed Hood, telephone conversation with author, 27 November 1984.

POWs enjoyed playing soccer at the camp. George Diehl recalled that his family often drove over to Lake Wabaunsee to go fishing on Sunday afternoons. The Diehl family found it hilarious "to see 30 grown men chasing after one little ball." Diehl remembered that the only sports his family knew about were football and baseball, and it was years before the family figured out the POWs were playing soccer.³⁸

POWs had cultural, educational, and religious opportunities at Lake Wabaunsee. The Fort Riley base camp sent out 20 books for the POWs at Lake Wabaunsee to read. Many POWs also had their own books. POWs studied many different subjects at Lake Wabaunsee. The most popular course was English. Some individuals also studied Hebrew, mathematics, and chemistry. A parish priest from Eskridge conducted religious services for the prisoners.³⁹



German POWs and their pets at Lake Wabaunsee.

Pets made life more enjoyable for POWs. One had a pet rabbit. Many POWs had dogs whom they taught tricks such as to roll over, to play dead, and at the command, "mach schön" (make yourself pretty), to sit up and put their paws on each side of the head. After the war the POWs were compelled to leave their pets behind. One of the dogs was adopted by the George Diehl, Sr., family. George

³⁸George Diehl, Jr., interview with author, Alta Vista, Ks., 11 March 1985.

³⁹Red Cross records for 19 March 1945; the records are in the possession of the German Red Cross, Munich, Germany.

Diehl, Jr., who was a boy of about 10, was excited at the prospect of getting a dog who could do many tricks. However, George was initially disappointed because the dog only responded to commands in German.⁴⁰

Army guards were usually housed separately from the POWs. However, Ernst Künzel lived in the same building as the Americans, perhaps because he was a cook. The Army personnel stayed in the old NYA dormitory (which since the war has been converted into a restaurant and private club known as the Flint House). Most of the POWs stayed in the old barracks. (These were converted into the Rainbow Dining Hall and Tap Room after the war, but on April 5, 1947, the old mess hall burned. According to Otis Reed, a couple of barracks were also lost in the fire. These barracks allegedly became quite important to two POWs who returned to live in the United States after the war. They had settled in St. Louis, but they came back to the camp to recover money they had hidden in one of their barracks. They were quite dismayed to find the barracks had burned down, along with all of the money they had cached.)⁴¹

Ernst Künzel praised the camp commander, Thomas Mishou, who he believed aided the successful operation of the camp. Künzel recalled that Major Mishou told the POWs in an orientation address that he wanted them to be obedient and to behave as they had in the German Army. He reassured them that if they were obedient, he would give them no problems. Künzel reported that the POWs seldom gave Mishou any difficulties at the camp or on work details. Künzel described Mishou as a "wonderful soldier" because he always kept his promises and treated them as he would American soldiers. No POW interned at Lake Wabaunsee ever attempted to escape despite ample opportunity. Klaus Majer said they had no desire to escape because they "had it good" at Lake Wabaunsee.⁴²

Lax security measures contributed to the friendly atmosphere at Lake Wabaunsee. Hermann Dorn said that at Lake Wabaunsee you could almost forget that you were a prisoner. Even though the camp was enclosed by a barbed wire fence, the POWs considered the fence to be only "symbolic." By the time the camp was

⁴⁰McKnight interview; H. Dorn correspondence; Joseph Diehl, interview with author, Alma, Ks., 2 March 1985.

⁴¹Künzel correspondence, 19 December 1984; Curtis J. Waugh, interview with author, Emporia, Ks., 26 April 1984; *Lake Wabaunsee Sportsman Association History and Directory—1971* (no publication data given), p. 41. Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Ks.; Otis H. Reed, correspondence to author, 26 November 1984.

⁴²Künzel correspondence, 30 August 1984; *Smoke Signal*, c. 1 June 1980.

established at Lake Wabaunsee, authorities realized that it was unnecessary to guard POWs 24 hours a day. POWs were usually sent out on work details without any guards. However, J. O. Warren recalled that guards supervised the work of POWs at his home. This may have been because they were working in Eskridge. The Army may have believed that the POWs presented a greater security risk in the city, or appeared to be a security risk, and therefore assigned guards to them.⁴³



POWs enjoyed cigarettes and candy from the canteen at Lake Wabaunsee.

Relations Between POWs and Civilians

POWs and Wabaunsee County farmers often developed friendly relations, even though they had to overcome cultural and language barriers. The POWs' hard work and personal qualities won over many Americans. Most POWs were friendly, fun-loving, and kind. J. O. Warren commented that "the POWs were nicer men than the CCC boys; of course the CCC boys were the scum of the earth." Warren recalled that he became friendly with one POW who spoke good English and enjoyed visiting with Warren because they were both in their thirties. The POW often discussed his relatives who were political prisoners in Germany.⁴⁴

⁴³H. Dorn correspondence; Edgerton interview; Warren interview.

⁴⁴Warren interview.

Americans were impressed by the POWs' love of children. Joey Diehl recalled that once when one of the POWs was eating a sandwich, he stopped, pulled the meat out, and handed it to one of Diehl's children to eat. When Roger Schwalm visited Ernst Künzel in Germany after the war, Künzel joked that he should have a candy bar for Schwalm. Künzel had given Schwalm a candy bar every day that he worked on his father's farm. Despite the neighbors' warnings, Mr. and Mrs. Roland McKnight trusted their children with several of the POWs. For example, they sent Helmut Grahl on a pony to pick up their first-grade daughter at a rural school. Mrs. McKnight remembered that one POW, Johannes, from Austria had a low chuckle that terrified her six-year-old daughter, Virginia. She refused to have anything to do with Johannes. This "really upset him because he really wanted her to like him." Myrtle Thierer remembered that Alfred enjoyed showing snapshots of his family: "He was just crazy to see and hold my niece because he had a child that age." Helmut Grahl's affection for three-year-old Lois McKnight was poignant because he believed his own little boy in Germany was probably dead.⁴⁵

Ernst Künzel repeatedly asked John Schwalm to take him on a cattle-selling trip to Kansas City. Presumably Künzel was interested in drinking liquor unobtainable in Kansas, which allowed only 3.2 beer. Schwalm told Künzel not to worry about being detained by law enforcement officers. "After all," Schwalm joked, "you're already a prisoner. What more can they do?"⁴⁶

Künzel himself joked about his status. "I was originally from Czechoslovakia, where I was drafted into the German Army. The Army sent me to Italy and then to North Africa where I was captured. I was sent to Liverpool, England, before being shipped to New York. At New York I was put on a train and eventually ended up at the Lake Wabaunsee. It was a trip only a rich man or a prisoner could take!"⁴⁷

POWs often showed a sense of humor and a spirit of fun. When Helmut Grahl met Caroline Stratton, an attractive schoolteacher, he joked that he "wouldn't mind going back to school." George Diehl, Jr., remembered that the two POWs who worked for his father were playful and often engaged in water fights at the water

pump. Myrtle Thierer recalled another example of POW humor. POWs at her childhood home hauled gravel in the driveway. Mrs. Thierer playfully took a shovel and began to scoop gravel. The POWs noticed this and laughed: "Ah — Superwoman!"⁴⁸

The Roland McKnight family benefited greatly from the hard work and kindness of the POWs. Mr. McKnight had fallen off a silo in September, 1944, at the Beasterfield farm and had sustained major injuries that forced him to lie flat on his back for 99 days. The POWs were kind to McKnight. During his recovery they would help him to a chair so that he could see the activity on the farm. Later they would dress him in overshoes, coat, and gloves so that he could go outside and see his livestock. Mrs. McKnight felt that the POWs were "just like Kansas farm boys."⁴⁹

The quality and quantity of food served to POWs had a large effect on how hard POWs worked on the farms. Some people tried to save money by feeding POWs poorly. Fritz Ott told Edwin Ringel about an experience he had working on a Kansas farm. No one brought the POWs any food or even water to the fields. Ott was even more insulted that they were hauled to town to eat dinner in a restaurant rather than being fed in the farmer's house. He said that when they had been badly treated they would not work hard, but they would merely "piddle along." However, Ott said they would work diligently if they were treated well. Ernst Künzel recalled that he gave his "best" while working at the Schwalm farm because of their good treatment. According to George Diehl, Jr., POWs wanted to go places where they were fed well.⁵⁰

Many farm families fed the POWs more than they were required. Farmers served POWs food for humanitarian reasons as well as a reward for hard work. Künzel said that the camp commander was concerned that the POWs were not getting enough to eat, so he sent out a letter to the farmers that requested they feed the POWs extra food. Many of the farmers had already been serving extra snacks or even complete meals. George Diehl, Jr., recalled that the POWs had a poor breakfast of only oatmeal at the camp, so many farm wives, such as Cora Ringel, gave them a large breakfast of pancakes, bacon, eggs, and hash browns upon their arrival at the farm. Mrs. Clarence Gnadl fixed a meal for the POWs at 4:30 PM before they returned to camp. Myrtle Thierer's parents were

⁴⁵J. Diehl interview; Roger Schwalm, interview with author, Alma, Ks., 23 April 1984; McKnight interview; Myrtle Thierer, interview with author, Alma, Ks., 23 April 1984; McKnight interview.

⁴⁶Schwalm interview.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

⁴⁸McKnight interview; G. Diehl interview; M. Thierer interview.

⁴⁹McKnight interview.

⁵⁰Edwin Ringel, telephone conversation with author, 26 September 1984; Künzel correspondence, 30 August 1984; G. Diehl interview.

Swedes who shared their afternoon coffee with the POWs. Lothar Gilg recalled that farmers even gave POWs food to take back to the camp and share with their friends. Roger Schwalm's father used another method to curb POW hunger. Mr. Schwalm told Ernst Künzel to take a shotgun and go out into the pasture. Whenever he saw a clump of grass that had a little entrance that looked like an animal had rested there, he was to shoot into the clump. Künzel followed Schwalm's instructions and bagged ten rabbits. He took the rabbits back to the camp kitchen, where they were cooked and served to POWs.⁵¹

POWs expressed preferences in food. Many Americans remembered they scorned corn as "swine food" or something to fatten chickens or cattle for slaughter. Esther McKnight recollected that POWs also felt that pumpkins were unfit for human consumption. They preferred the dark breads common to Germany over the American white and refined bread. Many of the POWs felt that white bread was unhealthy. Some of the POWs called white bread "cake" and reserved it to the last of the meal to eat as a dessert. Clarence Gnadt recalled that the POWs were "meat and potatoes" men. The *Alta Vista Journal*, in an article entitled "Corn on the Cob Not Fit Food for the Superior Race," reported that they had a hearty appetite for mashed potatoes and gravy, peas, and tomatoes. Fried chicken was a favorite of POWs, according to Myrtle Thierer. Edwin Ringel remembered that a POW told him that water was never brought to field workers in Germany. Beer or wine was served instead, because water would spoil out in the field during the day.⁵²

Communication between the POWs and the American farmers was sometimes quite easy, but often difficult. Many people in Wabaunsee County were of German descent, and many of them still spoke German. Farmers who spoke German developed especially close relations with POWs. For example, Edwin Ringel spoke fluent German because his grandparents had immigrated from Germany and he had attended a Catholic parochial school where both German and English were taught. (Ringel still corresponds with a former POW, Fritz Ott, but interestingly enough, they write in English. Ringel's German has grown impaired by disuse.) Joyce Thierer recalled her mother's recollections of Joyce's grandfather

⁵¹Künzel correspondence, 30 August 1984; G. Diehl interview; Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Gnadt, interview with author, Alma, Ks., 15 July 1984; M. Thierer interview; Lothar Gilg, correspondence to author, 20 March 1985.

⁵²*Journal*, 17 August 1944; McKnight interview; Ralph Stratton, telephone conversation with author, 17 April 1984; Gnadt interview; Thierer interview; E. Ringel conversation.

laughing and laughing at a POW's stories in German, even though he was Swedish. Apparently there was enough similarity between the languages so that the two could understand each other. Most of these stories were considered bawdy and unfit for the children's ears, so they spoke German and not English.⁵³

Not all farmers of German descent were so lucky. Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Gnadt spoke some German, but the dialect was different from the prisoners'. Their conversation in German with the POWs was severely limited, but useful. A neighbor of the Roland McKnight family, a Mr. Figge, came every morning to the McKnight farm to get the POWs lined up for work. He would give them a short explanation in German, and although they didn't understand everything he said, they usually got the main ideas.⁵⁴

Even farmers who didn't speak German found ways to communicate with POWs. Some POWs spoke English, which helped. Myrtle Thierer commented that many of their POWs waited to see how they were going to be treated before revealing that they could speak and understand English. Many of them picked up a lot of English while in America. Farmers often commented on the speed with which POWs learned the language. Georg Stanglmaier was aided in his learning of English by Caroline Stratton who taught at a country school.⁵⁵

Even when the spoken language was of no help, communication wasn't impossible. Farmers would demonstrate and gesture to show what they wanted accomplished. This often proved adequate, because many times all they wanted done was simple labor. A POW at the Garland Gideon home used drawings to communicate with the Gideons. Mrs. Gideon recalled that many of the drawings were humorous cartoons that brought many chuckles to the Gideons.⁵⁶

POWs who could communicate with the farmers in German were at an advantage, not only because they could express gratitude and complaints, but also because the use of the same language emphasized a common bond between so-called enemies. Farmers who conversed readily in German had to realize that the POWs were human beings similar to themselves. The POWs were delighted at being interned in a German ethnic community, and

⁵³E. Ringel conversation; Joyce Thierer, interview with author, Emporia, Ks., 27 September 1984.

⁵⁴Gnadt interview; McKnight interview.

⁵⁵M. Thierer interview; Stratton conversation.

⁵⁶Charlotte Imthurn, telephone conversation with author, 5 September 1984; Viola Gideon, telephone conversation with author, 19 September 1984.

they especially enjoyed eating traditional German dishes at American homes.⁵⁷

One POW, Heinrich Wolgast, found out that he was related to an American family. Wolgast and Herman Fink were doing errands in Alma when they passed Wolgast Lumberyard. Heinrich Wolgast saw the sign and mentioned the coincidence that he and these Americans shared the same last name. Fink suggested that they go inside and visit with William Wolgast, the owner of lumberyard, and he introduced Heinrich Wolgast to William Wolgast. They discovered that Heinrich was William's cousin's child and that their ancestors came from the same town (in what was to become East Germany). The two Wolgasts became fast friends because William Wolgast spoke fluent German. Herman Fink brought Heinrich Wolgast in once a week to the lumberyard so the two Wolgast men, one a prisoner of war and the other a well-to-do American businessman, could have a nice long visit.⁵⁸

Americans often broke rules regarding POW use and treatment because of their kind feelings toward them. For example, the farmers were not supposed to buy or make clothes for the POWs. However, the McKnights bought the POWs straw hats. Because the POWs knew this violated the rules, they refused to take the hats back to camp, and hung them on hooks on the back porch. The Warrens of Eskridge also wanted to give the POWs small gifts, but as it was forbidden, they would merely lay apples and gloves around so the POWs could "discover them."⁵⁹

The Army authorities at Lake Wabaunsee were somewhat more lenient in enforcing the rules in the case of the McKnights because they were aware of their plight. For example, they allowed the POWs to drive automobiles and trucks for the McKnights. However, the authorities absolutely forbade any lone women to pick up or return POWs, so Mrs. McKnight had to depend on one of her neighbors, Mr. Figge.⁶⁰

Many Americans treated POWs more as friends or even members of the family than as prisoners. The *Wichita Morning Eagle* of September 24, 1944, said: "The old farmer-farm hand relationship, normally kindly, is difficult to down, however, even in the case of Germans." For a local example, John Schwalm introduced Ernst Künzel as "my German boy" instead of as "a German

⁵⁷Edward H. Fresen, correspondence to author, 14 February 1985.

⁵⁸Heinrich Wolgast correspondence; A. W. Wolgast, interview with author, Alta Vista, Ks., 4 April 1985.

⁵⁹McKnight interview; Warren interview.

⁶⁰McKnight interview.

prisoner of war working for me." The Schwalm also demonstrated their kindness toward the POW on his 21st birthday. He requested to be excused from farm work on June 1 because it was both his birthday and a Catholic holiday in Germany. Schwalm told him that he needed to work, and he deferred. The Schwalm gave him a surprise birthday party instead.⁶¹

Relations between German POWs interned at Lake Wabaunsee and American civilians were better than anyone had ever expected. Some Americans were alarmed by the close relationships that developed between them. George Edgerton said that farmers and POWs "got along almost too well." Howard C. Myers, Wabaunsee County Agent, believed that some of the farmers of German descent were too close to the POWs and were actually sympathetic to them.⁶²

Many people developed serious reservations about using POW labor or even having a camp in the area. Jim Busenbark led the opposition. He reminded local citizens that POWs were the enemy who had recently tried to kill American troops. Consequently, they would be poor labor. He believed that they might sabotage American production, or at least work half-heartedly. Busenbark also believed that to use the POWs as laborers would reduce them to slaves, which would be an immoral policy. Busenbark contended that the labor shortage was not severe enough to warrant using POW labor, and that 100 men could not make that much difference if the labor shortage was genuinely acute.⁶³

Ray Lovell wrote a letter to the editor condemning the POW camp at Lake Wabaunsee. His letter was published in the July 13, 1944, *Eskridge Independent*:

The next time you see Jim Busenbark on the street, step up and shake hands with a grand old man who has the guts to stand up and say what he thinks.

The prisoners in the other work camps have proven no great success and there have been some escapes and some of the citizens have been hurt. Just give this thing time and it may blow up and shatter our court house; go clear down and reach the county agent's office.

⁶¹*Wichita Morning Eagle*, 24 September 1944; Künzel correspondence, 20 August 1984.

⁶²Edgerton interview; Myers interview.

⁶³*Independent*, 27 April 1944. Jim Busenbark, an auctioneer and former county commissioner, was one of the most well-known individuals in Wabaunsee County, according to the *Alta Vista Journal*.

Shawnee County won't let the German killers in, but oh, no! We must have them to carry on! Railroads or any other industry won't have them, but the farmer is the dumping ground for everything.

With the equipment our larger operators have, could they not trade work with the smaller farmers? It is work they can't do or is it their greed? Why don't our county save the road money and give the road work after the war is over, to that list in the paper that is growing longer each month?

If there was any way to get this question on our county ballot, I would be sure of the result.

Judgement day is coming for everyone of us. It isn't what we have but how we got it. It isn't the total score but how we played the game.⁶⁴

A letter from a serviceman opposing the camp appeared in the September 14, 1944, *Eskridge Independent*:

Do you see Jim Busenbark? I saw a piece in the paper about him and what he thought of the prison camp at the Lake. I sure wish there were more men like him at home. He will stand up and say what he thinks. I sure hate to see those guys ruin our nice lake that way and I bet a lot of guys in the Army feel that same way. If you see Jim tell him thanks a lot from me.⁶⁵

Many people shared Ray Lovell's concern that POWs would escape from the camp and commit sabotage in the area. Some even suggested that the wooded areas around Alma would make excellent hiding places for POWs. Mrs. Howard C. Myers recalled that many times a misunderstanding in language caused POWs to wander off in a different direction than the farmer intended. Farmers often panicked because they thought POWs were trying to escape and called the county agent. Usually by the time Myers arrived, the affair had been long settled and a trip had been made for nothing.⁶⁶

Some Americans reported that POWs were unwilling or unable to work. One POW at the Roland McKnight home not only refused to work, but discouraged his fellow prisoners from working. The POW spent the whole day at the McKnight farm, but he was hauled back to Fort Riley in the evening. Sherman Mertz, who was 70 years old and the second largest sheep raiser in Kansas in 1944, was

⁶⁴*Independent*, 13 July 1944.

⁶⁵*Independent*, 14 September 1944.

⁶⁶"Germans Help Harvest But Some Kansans Are Critical," *Topeka Daily Capital*, 1 October 1944, Kansas Clipping File, Wichita Public Library; McKnight interview; Myers interview.

uncomplimentary toward the POWs. He said about their labor: "Well . . . they don't mind backing up a little." Mertz believed that prisoner labor was not as valuable as civilian labor because of "language and mechanical deficiencies." Mertz meant that the POWs' unfamiliarity with the English language and American farm methods limited their value as laborers. H. R. Richter recollected that when POWs worked on the road construction project, signs were posted that read: "Slow — Men Working." Richter joked that the signs were accurate because the POWs were men who worked slow.⁶⁷

Americans occasionally knew a POW whom they disliked. One of the three POWs who worked on the J. O. Warren home in Eskridge was hostile toward Americans. He complained that prisoners did not receive their noon meal at the Warren home but ate at a cafe in Eskridge. The Warrens disapproved of his conversations with the other prisoners in German because they believed that he was threatening them against being too friendly to Americans.⁶⁸

Myrtle Thierer reported that one POW gave her the "creeps." She said that he followed her around with his eyes. This was understandable, because Mrs. Thierer was an attractive blonde teenager at the time. Another POW repelled her because he had the habit of pulling a piece of shrapnel out of his pocket and showing it to people to prove that he had been wounded. The Imthurn family of Maple Hill also had a negative experience with one POW. Mrs. Imthurn called him "a little monkey."⁶⁹

Americans often feared POWs because of all the propaganda they had heard about German atrocities. Charlotte Imthurn recalled she was apprehensive when she learned that POWs were going to work on the Imthurn farm. However, she remembered that once she got to know the POWs she realized that they were simply human beings caught in a bad situation. Imthurn explained that most of the POWs were good German boys who hadn't volunteered for military service, but had been drafted just like many American youths. She commented that there had been atrocities, but "these boys" had not committed any.⁷⁰

⁶⁷McKnight interview; *Topeka Daily Capital*, 1 October 1944, Kansas Clipping File, Wichita Public Library; *Wichita Morning Eagle*, 24 September 1944; Kansas Clipping File, Wichita Public Library; H. R. Richter, interview with author, 7 January 1985, Alta Vista, Ks.

⁶⁸Warren interview.

⁶⁹M. Thierer interview; Imthurn interview.

⁷⁰Imthurn interview.

Farm Labor

Farmers who used POW labor had to follow the conditions set up by the Wabaunsee County Grower's Association. The cost for the use of POW labor was eventually set at 40¢ per hour; 5¢ was to reimburse the Association for any expenses it might incur because of the POW program. The farmer was required to furnish a noon meal, for which he was reimbursed at the rate of 25¢ per meal. The owner had to furnish his own transportation of POWs, but he was reimbursed 1¢ per man per mile up to 50 miles.⁷¹

The county agent urged farmers to cooperate to make the program a success. Farmers had to give advance notice of at least 12 hours before a job was to start, as well as notice of at least a half-day of the completion of a job. Farmers had to pay \$4.00 per day before the work could start. Mrs. Howard Myers remembered that farmers often called at four o'clock in the morning to cancel an order for prisoner labor. These early morning calls were especially annoying because Howard Myers, unlike many other county agents, was not being paid for his work with the prisoner of war camp. According to Mrs. Myers, he considered his work on the prisoner of war camp to be his contribution to the war effort.⁷²

The American Army operated POW camps in accordance with the Geneva Convention of 1929. It stipulated POWs could not be paid less than 80¢ per day. Maximum working hours were ten hours a day, including travel to and from a job. Employed POWs were to be allowed one 24-hour consecutive rest period each week. The convention required POWs, except for officers, to work for the benefit of their captors. However, the work could not be directly related to war operations, nor could it jeopardize the health and safety of prisoners. The prisoners were also supposedly required to have qualifications or aptitudes for the work they were assigned.⁷³

The Army also had many regulations in regard to POW use. As previously mentioned, farmers were not supposed to discuss the war or politics with them. POWs were not to be allowed to drive vehicles. Women were not permitted to drive POWs anywhere, even to camp. The Army strictly enforced its rule that POWs had to be returned at 5:00 PM. This rule created difficulties for several Americans. Esther McKnight recollected how she had worried

⁷¹1944 County Agent Report.

⁷²*Journal*, 27 July 1944; Myers interview.

⁷³ Lt. Col. George G. Lewis and Capt. John Mewha, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization by the United States Army—1776-1945* (Washington, D.C.: Superintendent of Documents, 1955), p. 66.

when Figge, a neighbor, rushed to return the POWs on time, even on slippery roads.⁷⁴

Joseph Diehl of Alma also struggled with the Army's regulation that POWs had to be back at Lake Wabaunsee by 5:00 PM. Diehl drove one of the county trucks that delivered and returned POWs from Lake Wabaunsee to the farms where they worked. A. L. Garanson was always late at bringing his POWs to the location where Diehl picked them up. Diehl waited on Garanson, and he inevitably reached the camp at Lake Wabaunsee late. Army officials complained about Diehl's habitual lateness, so he decided to leave without Garanson's POWs if they were not at the rendezvous point on time. Predictably, the next day Garanson didn't have his men there on time, and Diehl left without them. When he arrived at the camp, Diehl told officials that he would be short five men.

Diehl was certainly surprised when a camp official told him that his usual cargo of 40 men had unloaded out of the truck. He later found out that Garanson had arrived late, as usual, at the rendezvous point with his POWs. When Garanson found that Diehl had already left, he simply followed Diehl in his own vehicle, and Garanson had the POWs leap out of his vehicle and jump into the truck Diehl was driving when it stopped at a stop sign.⁷⁵

Some farmers were skillful at coping with the restrictions on POW use because they had prior experience using German war prisoners. According to the county agent reports, 35 farmers had obtained POWs from Camp Fremont near Council Grove, but all of these farmers were large operators and it made financial sense for them to drive up to 40 miles one way to get laborers. However, even the small operator could afford to drive five, ten, or twenty miles one way to Lake Wabaunsee to get laborers.⁷⁶

Many farmers decided against transporting POWs themselves and instead used various trucking services. Both the county and private individuals hauled POWs to the Alma community at the height of their use by farmers. Two of the trucks were privately owned and operated. These trucks were driven by Clarence "Buffalo" Frank and a man named Randall. Art Meseke filled in for the private truck drivers. Three of the trucks were owned by Wabaunsee County. Joseph Diehl recalled that Myers asked him to drive a truck for the county. He told Myers that he did not want to, but Myers coaxed him into driving the POWs by insisting that it

⁷⁴McKnight interview.

⁷⁵J. Diehl interview.

⁷⁶1943 County Agent Report.

would only be for a couple of weeks. Diehl reluctantly agreed to drive a POW truck, but he found that his duties did not end after several weeks. He decided that the only way to avoid transporting POWs was to transfer his duties to his brother, George Diehl, Sr. Even this did not work because Myers simply found Joseph Diehl another truck. Diehl arose at 5:00 AM and drove to Lake Wabaunsee where he picked up his load of POWs. He distributed them to farms in the communities of Alma, Wamego, and Belvue. Most farmers believed that the expense and effort of picking up and returning POWs was justified by their labor.⁷⁷

Although POWs were not coerced into working, many of them preferred to work instead of brooding inside a prison camp. They had a financial incentive to work because they were paid 90¢ a day if they worked and only 10¢ a day if they did not. POWs used the extra money to buy things they wanted such as cigarettes, candy, dental and shaving supplies, soap, and shoe polish. Americans resented that POWs could buy things at their canteen at Lake Wabaunsee that the general public could not purchase. Joseph Diehl remembered that POWs had good cigarettes, and Americans had to settle for "Wings" and "Dominoes." Americans were rationed only a small quantity of sugar, but POWs enjoyed candy bars.⁷⁸

POWs worked at many different agricultural tasks. Josef Vesper and four Americans raised and dressed 5000 turkeys one summer. A POW was sometimes responsible for feeding and counting cattle. The Federal Land Bank used German POWs to cut weeds on the Godwin place. POWs at the George Diehl, Sr., farm pumped and carried water to calves. Gustav Kölmel helped raise bulls on the Schwalm farm. Ernst Künzel recalled he butchered many cattle and hogs for farmers in the area. POWs were especially in demand to help fill silo, put up hay, and shock feed.⁷⁹

Farmers received POWs partially on the basis of immediate need. POWs only worked at building fences, hauling manure, building cattle and machine sheds, painting, and similar chores when they were not needed at more pressing jobs. The county agent reported in October, 1944, that even with 150 POWs, there was a shortage of 50 men to fill the daily requests for POW labor. Myers warned that violators of the notification rules would be

⁷⁷J. Diehl interview.

⁷⁸*Independent*, 23 March 1944; "German Prisoners Filling Need of Kansas Farmers for Additional Manpower," *Wichita Morning Eagle*, 24 September 1944, Kansas Clipping File, Wichita Public Library; J. Diehl interview.

⁷⁹Glottzbach interview; Gnadt interview; *Journal*, 7 September 1944; Diehl interview; Kölmel correspondence; Künzel correspondence; *Independent*, 21 September 1944.

fined. Once again non-pressing farm jobs such as carpentry and cutting wood had to wait.⁸⁰

POWs labored on Wabaunsee County farms even in winter. The winter wage rate was set at 35¢ an hour at a meeting of the Wabaunsee County Grower's Association at Alma. Winter work for POWs included painting, carpentering, stone mason work, cutting wood, repairing fences, feeding cattle, hauling manure, husking corn, threshing kafir, hauling feed to livestock, plastering, and sorting corn for seed.⁸¹

Horses had great appeal for many POWs. Myrtle Thierer recalled that they were quite interested in learning American ways of "doctoring horses." POWs had to go and tell the horses good-bye when they left the McKnight home for the last time. Charlotte Imthurn remembered that a POW jumped on a horse and attempted to ride it, even though it was obvious that he had no experience with horses.⁸²

POWs noticed many differences between American and German agriculture. Gustav Kölmel recalled that "many things seemed strange to us but we could see the advantage to them." POWs noted the technological advancement of American agriculture, which allowed larger acreages to be farmed with smaller amount of labor. Klaus Majer remembered that Americans used tractors, but ox teams and four-strip cultivation were still used in Germany. America was a large, open land compared to Europe.⁸³

Waste horrified the Germans. Accustomed to using every tiny bit of ground, the POWs were dismayed to see that the ends of crop rows were left standing. They explained that the ends of the rows were cut the first thing in Germany. Myrtle Thierer remembered that the POWs were appalled when a hog shed was deliberately burned down. They said that in Germany it would have been torn down and the lumber reused in another building. Many of the POWs thought that Americans were careless because they didn't keep things up properly. POWs hated to see brush taking over pastures and weeds growing in fencerows. What the POWs may not have understood fully was that unlike the Germans, who had a highly intensive system of agriculture, Americans farmed greater

⁸⁰*Journal*, 27 July 1944; *Independent*, 5 October 1944.

⁸¹*Independent*, 5 October 1944; *Independent*, 7 December 1944.

⁸²M. Thierer interview; McKnight interview; Imthurn conversation.

⁸³Kölmel correspondence; Majer correspondence.

acres of land and could not expend the concern over every bit of property.⁸⁴

Even after 40 years, many Wabaunsee County farmers remembered that POWs were "real industrious people." Steve Hund recalled that they were willing to work in blistering heat and blinding snowstorms. Vincent Glotzbach recollected that when he left the POWs without supervision, they did not take advantage of an opportunity to be idle, but instead "worked their heads off."⁸⁵

The willingness of POWs to work made them in great demand as laborers. By July 24, 1944, 30 more POWs were sent to Lake Wabaunsee to meet the demands for labor. A total of 50 additional men were brought to Lake Wabaunsee in the summer of 1944. The county agent reported that during the harvest of 1944 all of the POWs were used and 20 or more could have been used if they had been available.⁸⁶

POWs' compulsion to work sometimes endangered their health and even their lives. Myrtle Thierer retained the memory of her father ordering POWs to take it easy and not work so hard, because he felt that they were risking their health by their hard work. Some POWs in Eskridge worked so hard that they tore the skin off their hands. The most serious threat to the safety of POWs was unfamiliar farm work. Although some POWs at Lake Wabaunsee, including Heinrich Wolgast, Franz Scheider, and Werner Burow, had lived and worked on farms before the war, farm work was a new experience for many POWs. They boldly attempted any farm chores, even when they had no experience.⁸⁷

One POW, Wilfried Vögele, tragically lost his life in a farm accident at the Ed Tenbrink farm near Alma. Clarence Gnadl remembered that Vögele was killed while helping to put up silage. According to Gnadl, Vögele was getting on a wagon when the mules were startled by a train whistle and started to run. He attempted to grab the reins, but the front end of the wagon broke off and he was run over by the wagon. Gnadl believed the POW was killed instantly. When Army officials learned of the accident, they sent out an ambulance to pick up Vögele. The ambulance took the body back to Fort Riley for burial. Gnadl felt that the matter was

⁸⁴McKnight interview; Ernie Hodgson, telephone conversation with author, 30 August 1984; M. Thierer interview; Cora Ringel, interview with author, 13 July 1984.

⁸⁵Stratton conversation; Steve Hund, telephone conversation with author, 6 September 1984; Mr. and Mrs. Vincent Glotzbach, interview with author, Paxico, Ks., 30 July 1984.

⁸⁶*Independent*, 27 July 1944; *Independent*, 14 September 1944; 1944 County Agent Report.

⁸⁷M. Thierer interview; Warren interview; Wolgast correspondence; Schieder correspondence; Burow correspondence; Imthurn conversation.

"hushed up." No article about the accident appeared in any local newspaper.⁸⁸

Vögele was buried at Fort Riley alongside other Axis POWs who died in American internment camps. Of these 77 men, 62 were Germans. (Even today the U.S. Army is reluctant to release information about POWs' deaths in Kansas; according to the *Wichita Eagle-Beacon* the deaths were due to "natural causes." Obviously this is untrue. For example, Vögele did not die of natural causes. His death appears to have no scandal attached to it, but it still cannot be classified as a death of "natural causes.")⁸⁹

The memory of the POWs buried at Fort Riley has been observed in several ways. Every POW's final resting place has a white grave marker. Ceremonies have been held in honor of the dead POWs. Many relatives of dead POWs attended an especially memorable observance in November, 1976. The ceremony began with a benediction from an American chaplain. It continued with a gun salute by a seven-man color guard and the playing of "Taps." German, Japanese, and Italian officers, who were dressed in World War II uniforms, saluted and laid wreaths on their countrymen's graves at the end of the ceremony. Klaus Majer and Georg Stanglmaier visited the cemetery at Fort Riley when they came back to Kansas in 1980 and took photographs of Wilfried Vögele's tombstone for his family back in Germany.⁹⁰

Non-Agricultural Work of the POWs

POWs demonstrated remarkable skills outside of agriculture. No matter what task needed to be done, people in the community assumed that a POW could be found at the camp who was trained in that field. George Edgerton said that the POWs were skilled perfectionists. Ralph Stratton credited the Germans' skills to their training. Few Germans attended college, and the majority learned a trade as an apprentice under a master. An apprenticeship lasted at

⁸⁸Clarence Gnadl gave this recollection of a POW's death in a personal interview. Klaus Majer said that a POW had died while at Lake Wabaunsee, that his name was Wilfried Vögele, and that he was born at Pforzheim near Stuttgart. However, according to Majer, the POW was killed when two trucks hauling POWs collided, one of the two trucks driven by Joseph Diehl. Diehl said that two trucks had collided, but that he had driven neither truck. He also substantiated Gnadl's recollection of the event and added the location of the accident. Ernst Künzel said in a letter to the author dated 19 December 1984 that a POW had been killed *building* a silo. Künzel said that a representative of the silo company had talked to the POWs about the dangers involved in erecting a silo. He said that POWs were not compelled to work at silo building and many chose not to because of fear of heights.

⁸⁹According to Klaus Majer, Vögele's last name is misspelled Voegel on the tombstone at Fort Riley. "Axis POWs Honored By Prayer, Wreaths." *Wichita Eagle*, 15 November 1976.

⁹⁰*Wichita Eagle*, 15 November 1976.

least four years, but the novice was not released from service until he knew his craft, which meant an apprenticeship could last longer than four years. One POW worked with LeRoy Noller repairing the county trucks that hauled the POWs. Joey Diehl recalled the POW as a "Nazi who had no use for Americans," but who proved so useful as a mechanic that nobody cared.⁹¹

Much of the work of POWs lasted a long time. A POW installed wiring in a barn for the Stratton family of Eskridge that was being used 40 years later. POWs proficient at masonry also built the local light plant in Eskridge that was being used in 1984. A POW constructed a shed at the Imthurn home that was a different style than those in America, but it proved durable. POWs helped remodel the J. O. Warren home. POWs put in a cement floor and steps underneath the house and ran a drain. American guards supervised their work and ordered the POWs around. American plans failed because the drain was off a foot or two. The POWs took over, made measurements, and got it right.⁹²

Artistic POWs used their talents in behalf of Americans. A POW named Ernie painted murals on the farmhouse walls of Howard Lietz's parents' home. The murals covered two or three walls in the living room. Ernie used the palms of his hands to make designs at the bottom of the wall that looked like wallpaper. Then he put a border above that, and finally added the mountain scenes to the work of art. Another POW who worked near Paxico sold some of his paintings to Americans. Steve Hund recalled that at least some of the paintings had religious themes and were sold to churches.⁹³

POWs may have been less thrilled to do some of the manual labor jobs they were called upon to do. Eight to ten POWs worked at a rock quarry south of Eskridge. Work at rock quarries was used as a punishment at some POW camps and it may have been so at Lake Wabaunsee. POWs also repaired Wabaunsee County roads and bridges.⁹⁴

The military used POWs in mechanical work at the Army Ordnance Shops in Topeka. Nyle Miller remembered that POWs worked one block south of the Kansas State Historical Society. Two

⁹¹Edgerton interview; Stratton conversation; J. Diehl interview.

⁹²Stratton conversation; Edgerton interview; Imthurn conversation; Warren interview.

⁹³Norma Lietz Steuwe, telephone conversation with author, 5 September 1984; Hund conversation. The murals on the Lietz farm house decayed and were painted over. A POW also did some paintings for Charlotte Imthurn. It is unknown whether or not this is the same POW mentioned by Hund.

⁹⁴Edgerton interview; *Wichita Morning Eagle*, 24 September 1944; *Independent*, 23 March 1944.

busloads of POWs went into Topeka every day. Some citizens of Eskridge were angered that Shawnee County Commissioners refused to house them in Shawnee County, but were quite willing to have them brought to Topeka to work. According to George Edgerton, Shawnee County Commissioners felt that Topeka, because it was the state capital, was a sensitive area, and that housing POWs in Shawnee County was a potentially dangerous act.⁹⁵

After the War

The end of World War II signaled the end for the camp at Lake Wabaunsee, but the beginning of a new life for the POWs. On May 8, 1945, VE Day (Victory in Europe) was announced and all prisoners and guards were kept in camp. When VJ Day (Victory over Japan) was announced on August 14, 1945, the prisoners were once again kept at the camp. The POWs felt they were treated worse after Germany lost the war. During the war POWs found the food to be delicious and plentiful, but after Germany lost the war, the meals were poorer in quality and quantity. However, Gustav Kölmel recalled that, after the first horrible week, the food gradually improved week by week until the POWs departed for Europe in December, 1945. Heinrich Wolgast remembered that the POWs were put on a 1000-calories-a-day diet after the war in Europe. Hermann Dorn complained that the food after the war consisted of "dry vegetables and dog food." Ernst Künzel recalled that the POWs were fed salt herring every morning for breakfast.⁹⁶

The camp was officially closed on December 1, 1945. The POWs were disappointed that they could not take their woodworking projects home with them. POWs also had to leave behind cameras, field glasses, binoculars, and suitcases. Prisoners were restricted from taking any American currency with them. Canteen coupons were redeemed, canteen profits were distributed, and prisoner trust accounts were liquidated. Prisoners were issued government checks. The men were usually left with about \$50. POWs from Lake Wabaunsee were shipped back to Fort Riley before their departure to Europe. Luggage was limited to 30 pounds for enlisted men and 175 pounds for officers. POWs were issued a barracks bag, several woolen blankets, a first aid kit, and eating utensils. The POWs wished to express their appreciation for their

⁹⁵*Topeka Daily Capital*, 4 October 1944, Kansas Clipping File, Wichita Public Library; Nyle Miller, correspondence to author, 13 October 1984; Edgerton interview; *Independent*, 13 July 1944.

⁹⁶*Lake Wabaunsee Sportsman Association History and Directory*, p. 41; Dorn correspondence; Kölmel correspondence; Wolgast correspondence; H. Dorn correspondence; Künzel correspondence, 30 August 1984.

good treatment in America and especially at Lake Wabaunsee, so they volunteered to paint the barracks at the lake for the City of Eskridge in appreciation for their treatment.⁹⁷

Most POWs had mixed feelings about returning to Europe. Although they wanted to see their families in Germany, they regretted leaving the friends they had made in America. Many POWs would also have liked to have stayed because of the economic opportunities in the United States. Helmut Grahl dreaded to return to his home in Dresden because he feared that all of his family had been killed in Allied bombing raids.⁹⁸

The Allies wanted to delay the return of committed Nazi POWs to Germany. Heinrich Wolgast remembered that POWs were shipped in 1946 from Fort Riley to Fort Eustis, Virginia. Americans spent six weeks at Fort Eustis indoctrinating the POWs in democracy. Hermann Dorn recalled Fort Eustis as the place where POWs were classified as either "Nazis" or "Democrats." "Democrats" were sent home immediately, but "Nazis" had to work in Great Britain or France before returning home.⁹⁹

Wolgast was evidently considered a "Democrat." In March, 1946, he was sent to a release camp in New York for 14 days. There he was put on a troop transport ship for LeHavre, France, that took 11 days to cross the Atlantic. When the POWs arrived in Europe, they were put in the notorious Bolbec camp under French guards. Wolgast said that he received the worst treatment of his captivity there. GIs moved prisoners to Bad Aibling, Bavaria, in April and May. When they reached Munich, Wolgast was put into an American release camp for approximately six weeks. Then the Americans put him on a train for Munster in northern Germany. There Wolgast and other POWs were turned **over** to the British. After six weeks in the British camp, Wolgast was released as a free man in September, 1946.¹⁰⁰

Interestingly enough, many of the POWs who had been trusted farmhands in Kansas were classified as "Nazis" and had to spend time in England or France before their return to Germany. Lothar Gilg recalled that Commander Shafer at Fort Riley promised that they would be sent directly home to Germany, and they were emotionally crushed when they were not.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷*Lake Wabaunsee Sportsman Association History and Directory*, p. 41; McKnight interview; Krammer, pp. 243, 255, 244; Edgerton interview.

⁹⁸*Journal*, 17 August 1944; McKnight interview.

⁹⁹Wolgast correspondence; H. Dorn correspondence.

¹⁰⁰Wolgast correspondence.

¹⁰¹H. Dorn correspondence; Lothar Gilg correspondence.

Many POWs had bad experiences at French hands. Hans Greiner claimed that when the ship he was on reached LeHarve, France, the Americans sold the German POWs to the French for a few dollars. Greiner spent two years in a French prison camp before he was released in 1948. Greiner believed that he got a "dirty deal," and he still has "absolutely no sympathy toward the American government." However, Greiner said that his bad feeling toward the American government did not change his good opinion of the American people. Gustav Kölmel remembered that the French took away all the nice things that the Americans had given to the POWs, including new clothes, which the French replaced with old, worn-out clothes. Lothar Gilg recalled that they reached Europe at Rotterdam and were put in a camp at Waterloo. Treatment was so bad at the camp that Gilg asked to be spared "the pain of telling you how we fared there."¹⁰²

Several POWs were interned in Great Britain before they were returned to Germany. Hermann Dorn recalled that he spent a year in Helensburg, Scotland. Werner Burow labored for farmers in England as he had in the United States. However, he reported that he was not treated as well in Britain as he had been in America. One difference that he noted was that in England POWs ate sack lunches instead of eating dinner at the home of a family.¹⁰³

POWs faced a wide range of experiences on their eventual return to Germany. Some found it quite easy to return to their way of life before the war. Kölmel was able to get his prewar job back at an automobile manufacturing plant, even though the factory had been destroyed during the war. Dorn returned to his job as a salesman for a blanket factory.¹⁰⁴

Other POWs found that their professional prospects were greater after the war than before as the consequence of skills they had acquired. Ernst Künzel worked as a chauffeur to the American Army because of the English he had learned as a POW. Later he opened an air conditioning and refrigeration shop. Although he had some knowledge in the field because of his prewar work in a butcher shop, Künzel gained a great deal of practical knowledge about refrigeration during his internment in the United States. He recalled that the American refrigeration technology was ten years ahead

¹⁰²Hans Greiner, correspondence to author, c. 20 March 1985; Kölmel correspondence; Gilg correspondence.

¹⁰³H. Dorn correspondence; C. Ringel interview.

¹⁰⁴Kölmel correspondence; Gnadt interview.

of the German. Georg Stanglmaier's knowledge of English and his ambition were helpful to him in becoming a beer truck driver after the war and eventually a wholesale liquor distributor and retailer specializing in German wines.¹⁰⁵

However, not all POWs returned to such happy circumstances. For example, when Lothar Gilg returned to Germany, he found that he could not return to his prewar home in the Sudetenland. Werner Burow returned to a part of Germany controlled by the Russians. His family had been well-to-do, with a prosperous farm, before the war. However, after the war everything had changed. Burow's father had disappeared during the war, and the family believed that the Nazis were responsible. The Communists forced the Burows to take many strangers into their farm home. They experienced great shortages of food and clothing.¹⁰⁶

Werner Burow turned to the families he had worked for in the United States for help. The Arnold Ringel family of Alma sent a package to Burow immediately after the war that contained razor blades, tobacco, and cigarette papers. Burow's letter to the Ringels expressed his and his mother's appreciation for the package, but indicated a particular need for food, especially difficult-to-obtain spices, and toiletries such as soap and toothpaste. Responsive to Burow's plea, the Ringels sent him many packages with needed items. Whenever he got a package, Burow sent a letter to the Ringels that listed every item received, to ascertain whether the package had been tampered with enroute. One of the packages contained the following items: three packages of tobacco, one pocket knife, one razor, three packages of shaving blades, two tubes of shaving cream, two tubes of dental cream, five bars of wash and five bars of toilet soap, one and one-half pounds of cocoa, and some cigarette papers.¹⁰⁷

When Werner Burow married, the requests to the Ringels increased. He asked for proper clothes in which to be married, and the Ringels sent him a complete set of clothes, including shoes and underwear. The Burow's bride wrote the Ringels that she had no appropriate clothes in which to wed. The Ringels came to the rescue with an outfit of clothes. Soon after the marriage, Mrs. Burow became pregnant and the Burow called upon the Ringels for help. They had no clothes or utensils for the baby, and once again

¹⁰⁵Schwalm interview; Stratton conversation.

¹⁰⁶Gilg correspondence; C. Ringel interview.

¹⁰⁷Correspondence from Werner Burow to Arnold Ringel.

the Ringels came to their aid. The Ringels' only child, Clark, was grown and they had no need for the left-over baby things, so they boxed up everything they had used in the nursery, such as a rubber sheet, baby clothes, diapers, and bottles, and sent them.¹⁰⁸

The Ringels helped not only Werner Burow, his wife and children, and his mother but also another woman in Burow's village. The Burows used the baby items for their own children, then gave some of the things to a widow woman, Amanda Neumann, in the local village. This woman wrote to the Ringels and said that she had five small children and her husband had disappeared at the Russian Front. She asked the Ringels to send her anything they had left over. She said that normally she would have been assisted by her family, but that times were so tough that they needed everything they had for themselves. Burow's mother also wrote letters requesting items.¹⁰⁹

The Ringels made the Burows' 1947 Christmas happier by sending them several packages. Among the contents of the packages were: two overcoats, five pounds sugar, five pounds flour, one can baking powder, one can pepper, one box nutmeg, one box cinnamon, one box cloves, three pairs of children's shoes, one pair adult's brown shoes, one suit with trousers, vest, and jacket, one pair of work trousers, one pair stockings, one pair socks, two pairs gloves, one hat, two dresses, buttons, snaps, and needles.¹¹⁰

Eventually the packages received by the Burow family were so numerous and heavy that it was a great inconvenience for Burow to transport them from the post office 20 miles to his home. He still had his bicycle from before the war, but the tires were worn out, and he wrote to the Ringels for new ones. The Ringels wanted to help but didn't know the size tires he would need, so they sent him a page from the Montgomery Ward catalogue and asked him to circle the ones he wanted. Burow circled those that would work best and the Ringels saw that he got them. They didn't fit exactly, but Burow hammered them on and away he went.¹¹¹

Werner Burow was not the only POW to receive aid from Americans after the war. Gustav Kölmel and Hermann Dorn received packages from former employers after the war. Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence Mertz offered Lothar Gilg a job on their farm and even offered to pay his way back. Gilg declined their offer because,

¹⁰⁸C. Ringel interviews.

¹⁰⁹C. Ringel interview; Burow correspondence to Ringel.

¹¹⁰Burow correspondence to Ringel.

¹¹¹C. Ringel interview; Burow correspondence to Ringel.

after a long search, he finally had located his parents and he had to help support them. Viola Gideon said they helped one POW, perhaps Werner Burow, by sending him packages of food and clothing, but that he became a "beggar" constantly demanding packages, and they discontinued contact with him.¹¹²

Many POWs have corresponded with American farm families for many years. Fritz Ott and Josef Vesper are just two of the POWs who have kept in contact with Americans for 40 years. The John Schwalm family and Ernst Künzel have also corresponded for years. Künzel always wanted the Schwalm family to come to his home in Germany so that he could show them the kind of hospitality they had shown him as a POW. He finally got his wish when Roger Schwalm visited Europe in the early 1980s and stayed at the Künzel home. Schwalm reported the Künzels treated him royally and tempted him with fine foods and liquors.¹¹³

The Vincent Glotzbach family maintained contact with Josef Vesper for over 40 years. The Glotzbach's daughter, a Roman Catholic nun, visited with Vesper in Augsburg, Germany. Mr. and Mrs. Glotzbach saw Vesper on their golden wedding anniversary trip to Europe in 1973. They were on a group tour and did not feel that they could leave it to visit his home. In fact, Vesper had to drive three hours to see them, and he brought his daughter and grandfather along. He was disappointed that the Glotzbachs could not enjoy the hospitality of his home.¹¹⁴

Unusual circumstances sometimes brought POWs or their family members into contact with Americans they had met as POWs. One brother of a POW was in the American Army and stationed at Fort Riley during the 1950s. He visited the camp at which his brother had been interned and some of the families he had worked for. The brother had worked for the Fige family of Eskridge.¹¹⁵

An American Army officer was on Reforger in Göppingen, West Germany, with the 1st Brigade when he met two former POWs who had been interned at Lake Wabaunsee. The officer, Colonel Ed Hood, was in a wine shop in Germany when he made the initial contact. Hood and the German employees at the store had difficulty communicating. The employees decided to bring the

¹¹²Kölmel correspondence; Dorn correspondence; Gilg correspondence; Viola Gideon, telephone conversation with author, 19 September 1984.

¹¹³E. Ringel conversation; Glotzbach interview; Schwalm interview.

¹¹⁴Glotzbach interview; Vesper correspondence.

¹¹⁵McKnight interview.

owner, Georg Stanglmaier, from the back of the shop to help them. The owner spoke such fluent English that Hood asked Stanglmaier how he had learned to speak English so well. Stanglmaier replied that he had been a prisoner of war in America during World War II. When Hood inquired into Stanglmaier's statement, he was amazed to discover that Stanglmaier had been a POW at Fort Riley. Hood was stationed at Fort Riley, and consequently his chat with Stanglmaier soon blossomed into friendship. Stanglmaier introduced Hood to one of his friends, Klaus Majer. As Stanglmaier was well-to-do, Hood suggested that he return to America to tour the country and visit his old camp. Stanglmaier took him up on the offer and along with Majer, sales manager for a souvenir-selling firm, came to the United States in May of 1980.¹¹⁶

Majer and Stanglmaier, along with their wives, Margaret and Frieda, flew to Chicago, rented a car and drove to Kansas. Majer said of Kansas: "We love this state and the people. It has a wonderful landscape. Kansas is the best state we've seen yet." They had seen Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri. The POWs had several places they wanted to visit in Kansas. First, they desired to see the farms and visit the families they had worked for during the war. Majer went to visit the Lawrence Mertz family at their farm near Wamego. Majer remembered that Richard Mertz was a small child who sat on Majer's lap when he worked at the Mertz farm during the war. Georg Stanglmaier was saddened to find that Ralph Stratton, a 67-year-old bachelor, was living alone on the farm. Stanglmaier was so upset by this revelation that he broke into tears as soon as they left Stratton's farm. He believed that they had brightened one day of Stratton's life: "Yesterday he was very happy. It was like old times, family times."¹¹⁷

Stanglmaier and Majer also visited the camps where they had been interned in Kansas. They visited the camp buildings at the entrance to Lake Wabaunsee. They also visited Fort Riley during Big Red One Week, and were able to see the annual division review. They enjoyed seeing Fort Riley again and often pointed out places they had worked. They visited the cemetery at Fort Riley to take pictures for the relatives of the deceased. A Fort Riley general insisted on meeting the former POWs, according to Hood. The POWs were reluctant to meet the general, whom they feared would make

¹¹⁶Ed Hood telephone conversation to author, 27 November 1984; "Vier Reporter und zwei Filstaler." *Nwz Goppinger Kreisnachrichten*, c. June 1980.

¹¹⁷"'Good Memories' Bring 2 Germans Back to Their WWII Prison Camp," *Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, 26 May 1980; "German POWs visit former 'host families.'" *Smoke Signal*, c. 1 June 1980; Hood conversation.

boring and banal remarks. However, Hood gave in to the general's pressure and introduced the ex-POWs to the general. Hood reported that the general was impressed by the ex-POWs, but they weren't at all impressed with the general.¹¹⁸

One former POW's son, Uli Dorn, visited the families his father had worked for. Uli was working at a German restaurant in New York City. He was interested in his father's experiences as a POW, so he hitchhiked to Alma in 1979, carrying a letter his father had written in 1947 listing people he had worked for. When he arrived at the gas station, he met a woman who was the widow of Clarence "Buffalo" Frank, who had hauled POWs from Lake Wabaunsee to surrounding communities every day. He was given a ride to Clarence Gnadts' farm. The Gnadts were surprised to see Dorn, because they had not heard from his father in about 30 years, and Uli had sent no notice that he might be coming. They welcomed Dorn into their home and took him to visit the families his father had worked for many years ago.¹¹⁹

The German prisoner of war camp at Lake Wabaunsee was, overall, a great success. It helped farmers and the United States government and provided the POWs a safe and constructive confinement. The *Eskridge Independent* discussed the success of the camp:

The problem of using POWs to get work done has been solved far better than expected. The latitude of their use and the time they have been used has exceeded expectation. The number of farmers using them now is amazing. Very likely they will be continued in employment daily throughout the entire year.

While no farmer really likes to use them, many are thankful for their help, and find them an interesting experience. They are treated with a degree of tolerance and since our boys have been able to capture them, the task of caring for them and providing them with a useful occupation is a task, we should not particularly shy away from or find abhorrent.¹²⁰

Wabaunsee County farmers had the labor they needed. An average of 60 to 75 farmers used the POWs at Lake Wabaunsee and more used them during harvest time. POWs worked 2,507 days in agriculture in November, 1944. The county agent reported that POWs worked 9,715 days in 1945. The POW camp was helpful to the war effort. The POWs at Lake Wabaunsee helped farmers sus-

¹¹⁸"Fort Riley POWs return as tourists," *Manhattan Mercury*, 1 June 1980; Hood conversation.

¹¹⁹Gnadts interview; Uli Dorn, correspondence to author, 22 October 1984.

¹²⁰*Independent*, 22 February 1945.

tain or increase production of vital crops, and their use freed American men for military service. The POW camp was a financial success: in return for the POWs' labor, the government received \$58,693.31 to help pay food, housing, clothing, and transportation costs.¹²¹

The Lake Wabaunsee camp provided the POWs adequate food, clothing, shelter, and recreational activities. POWs were treated humanely, which influenced many of their perceptions of the United States. Gustav Kölmel said his attitudes toward Americans improved after his experiences in Kansas. Although Ernst Künzel worked for the American Army for three years in Germany, it was the earlier "good and fair treatment" from the Schwalms that made him think well of the United States.¹²²

Unlike the Russians and French, whose cruelty to POWs engendered hatred from Germans, the Americans treated the Germans with decency and kindness. There were only a couple of recorded incidents of disciplinary action taken at the camp. Most of the POWs repaid their good treatment by model behavior and by providing hard work to local farmers. Former POWs have opened their homes and hearts to Americans they worked for. The POW camp at Lake Wabaunsee illustrated that gratitude is the usual response to decent and humane treatment.¹²³

¹²¹1945 County Agent Report; Prisoner of War Camp Labor Report, Record Group 389, Records of the Office of the Provost Marshal General, National Archives.

¹²²Kölmel correspondence; Künzel correspondence, 19 December 1984.

¹²³In July 1945 Thomas F. Mishow, Jr., reported that disciplinary action was meted out to three prisoners out of a total of 239. In August 1945 disciplinary action was taken on one prisoner. This information was taken from the Prisoner of War Camp Labor Reports in the National Archives.