

# German POWs brought in the crops, worked in area factories after war

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The story of how Americans dealt with captured Prisoners of War (POWs) during World War II is worth looking at now. I first became interested in World War II German POWs when I first moved to Wisconsin in the 1970s and became friends with someone who is the son of a German POW imprisoned in Barron County. His experiences as a POW were so positive that after the war he ended up emigrating back to the U.S.A. and settling in the area where he had formerly been a prisoner. In a more general sense, with controversy over prisoner treatment in today's wars, we should look back to a different time and a different situation. The POW history is very relevant to this area because, for a while, Antigo was home to about 150 German POWs. When they were eventually repatriated to their homeland they left behind harvested fields and canned crops that most likely would have gone to waste, a few souvenirs and many pleasant memories.

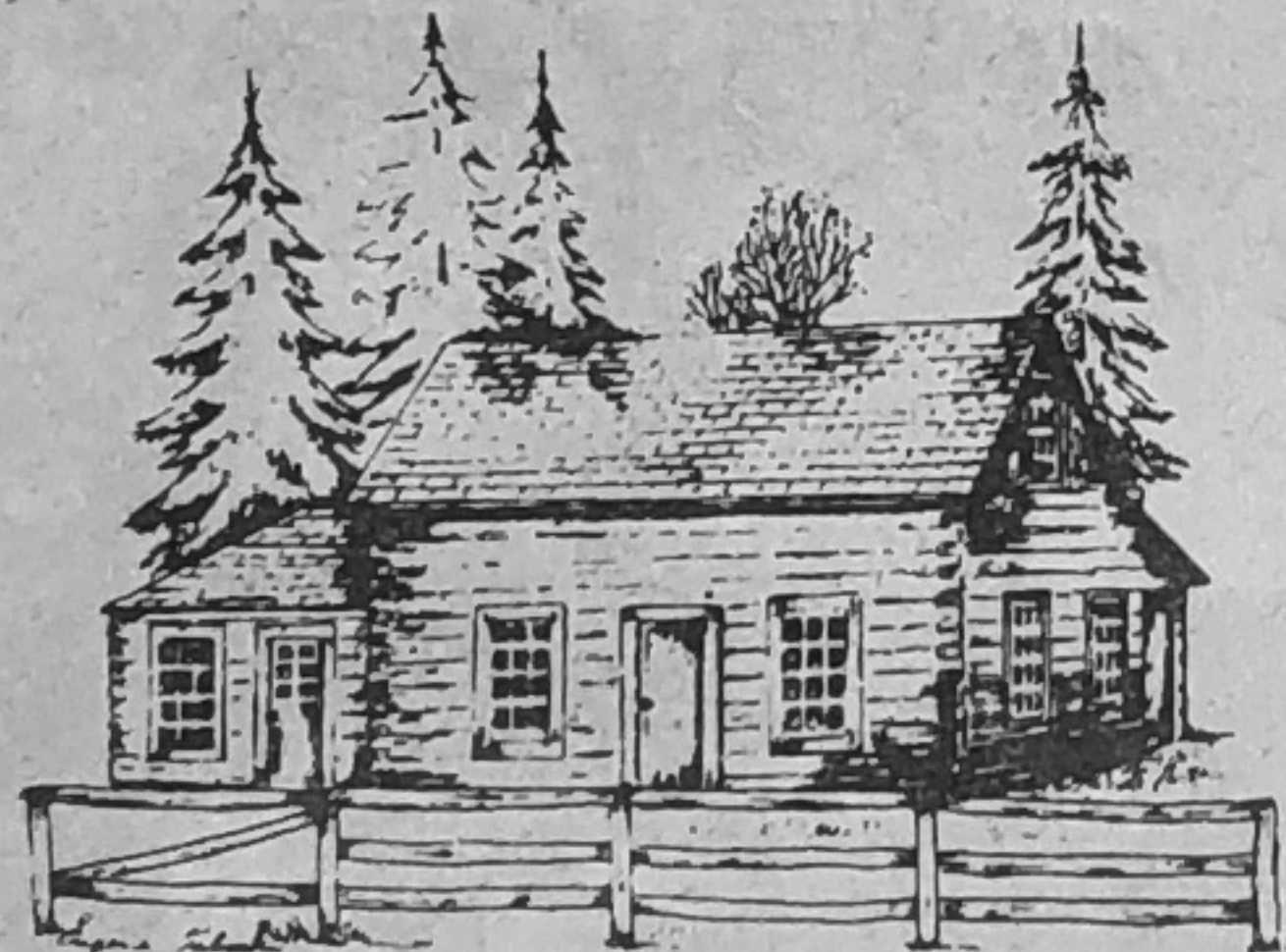
Keeping captured German soldiers in Europe was becoming a logistics problem by 1942 and it was decided to ship many stateside on returning empty Liberty Ships. Eventually Wisconsin housed about 20,000 POWs in close to 40 camps or sub-camps, mostly in smaller rural communities and in military bases such as Fort McCoy. Often returning American soldiers who had experienced the horrors of the war and families who had lost loved ones were understandably

cool or even harsh towards the German soldiers in their midst. In some cases sub-camps were relocated due to local hostility but most Wisconsinites accepted these men as being trapped in a war they did not choose.

As the war continued labor shortages became more severe as more and more local American men were sent overseas. School children were expected to help on the farm but when they returned to classes just at fall harvest time, and women alone could not keep up with the workload, POWs were put to work in fields and food processing plants. Without their efforts many crops would have gone to waste.

This was definitely the situation in the Antigo area during the summer and fall of 1945 in what were the closing months of the war. From July to October, 1945 up to 150 POWs were housed in the Antigo area. The Antigo canning factory employed 35 and others

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## Our History

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Lorraine Fredin of Pickerel provided this photo from the 1945 harvest.



A German POW flanked by workers at the Jones farm.



POWs are shown working in the canning factory.



A POW at the Bill Jones farm in fall, 1945.

Continued

## Our History

worked in the potato fields. The first group of 35 arrived on July 6, 1945 and set up camp on the canning factory grounds with sleeping facilities in the warehouse and tents for a mess in an adjacent field. On Aug. 6, 1945 the Antigo Journal visited the facility and described the living conditions as comfortable but austere, both for prisoners and their guards. "A field is available near the enclosure where the prisoners play soccer, which consists of kicking but not carrying the ball... The prisoners also play chess, ping pong and other games." By September facilities at the canning factory were overcrowded and additional housing became necessary elsewhere. They used the NYA (National Youth Authority) buildings on the northwest side of town. These facilities were originally built at the beginning of the war for glider pilot training for the Normandy invasion.

Captain Claghorne who was in charge of the Antigo sub-camp spoke to the Rotary Club at the time: "Prisoners of war are treated according to the rules laid down at the Geneva conference. We strive to keep good relations with them, but they are not babied." He added that the men were not kept under constant guard because "They were not likely to run away." They were used when other, local, sources of labor were unavailable and were paid the same amount as

common labor would get for the same job. However most of the money went to the U.S. Government to pay for their housing and the POWs received vouchers of 80 cents to a dollar a day for purchases at the camp commissary. The impact of the work done is difficult to assess but by September 1945 the POWs had completed \$10,730 worth of work. Their efforts were vital to the community that had a labor shortage. The Antigo Daily Journal reported on Sept. 26, 1945 that "Hundreds of sacks of potatoes stood out in the fields during Sunday night's rain because there was not enough labor to get them out in time."

A very interesting aspect of this part of Antigo's history is the interaction between the local people and the German POWs. The community did not seem overly apprehensive about these men working at the canning factory or scattered about the 20 or so area farms that employed them. Even though prisoners were not kept under constant supervision by armed guards Eugene Lukas was confident that "the Army wasn't going to send us anyone dangerous." He remembered that he was very pleased with the work performed by the three German prisoners he hired with guards dropping the men off at 5 a.m... "then going to sit in the tavern in Neva all day." He went on: "They were burly young fellows, good looking kids and they knew how to work. . . Four or five high school kids wouldn't do half the work that two of those guys could do."

Margaret Wendt, a field boss for Guenther, also treated her prisoner workers with kindness. Concerned over the men's well-being she stated "there were a lot of times when it was cold that we would take chicken or something out to them. . . All my mother would say is 'I hope our boys are being treated as well by somebody.'"

Elda Schrader remembered the POWs at her father's farm on Highway 52. "If it hadn't been for them, dad would have had a real hard time getting his potatoes in." Her two brothers, Emil and Arthur, served in the military and when Arthur came home while the POWs were there he avoided them but the others continued to work with them. Miss Schrader also recalled that her mother made lunches for the POWs for which they were grateful "But they just looked at corn on the cob. They said it was swine food. They didn't eat corn on the cob in Germany."

With the end of the war many farmers in Wisconsin and throughout the midwest continued to worry about future harvests. There was extensive lobbying to allow POWs to stay longer but President Truman ordered them home by the end of 1946. Elda

Schrader said that the POWs working on her parents' farm stayed in touch for years and that the Schrader family even sent them clothing as Germany was recovering from the devastation of the war. I suspect it was this kind of generosity shown by Wisconsinites to their prisoners that convinced my friend's father to come back and settle here.

## December cribbage games are popular, here are the winners

Cribbage winners for December are as follows:

Dec. 3 — Audrey Ourada, first; Marge Mauk, second; Lorraine Tucker, third; Juletta Darr, booby; Ed Koszarek and Gene Kubiacyk, door prize.

Dec. 10 — Phyllis Hughes, first; Wayne Schroeder, second; Audrey Ahlers, third; Cliff Taggart, booby; Bob Mader, 24 hand; Tom Wallace and Lorraine Tucker, door prize.

Dec. 17 — Shirley Larson, first; Bob Mader, second; Al Werwie, third; Ed Matthews, booby; Aggie Mader and Grace Werwie, door prize.



The 1945 potato harvest was labor-intensive.



German POWs unloading freight.



German prisoners of war are pictured at the Schrader farm.



A German displays the 'P' and the 'W' that marked his uniform.