

PRISONERS, NOT CRIMINALS: HOW CAPTURED GERMAN SOLDIERS SURVIVED
WORLD WAR II IN CENTRAL TEXAS

James N. Dunning
The University of Texas at Arlington
April 2011

PRISONERS, NOT CRIMINALS: HOW CAPTURED GERMAN SOLDIERS SURVIVED WORLD WAR II IN CENTRAL TEXAS

On a warm Friday afternoon, under a bright Texas sun, the sound of 300 pairs of marching boots echoed through the rolling hills of Brown County. As the contingent of battle-worn, weary soldiers passed through the main gates of Camp Bowie, a U.S. Army base outside Brownwood, Texas, a chorus rang out like a clarion alarm:

Deutschland, Deutschland über alles,

Über alles in der Welt

Army and civilian personnel rushed from their work stations out to the dusty streets to watch as the first wave of German prisoners of war passed by, marching to their new homes, proudly singing their nation's anthem. Despite their soiled and tattered uniforms, they puffed out their chests and marched side-by-side with their fellow countrymen. For many, like former Camp Bowie librarian Wynelle Hewitt, the arrival of German soldiers in Central Texas on August 13, 1943, was a watershed moment during World War II. The enemy, they would recall, had finally reached their homes:

I was working in the Camp Bowie Library No. 1. ... And they [German POWs] walked right by the library. They had those steel boots on, you know? *Klompity, klompity, klomp.* And they were singing their national anthem. And that made the hair stand straight up on the back of your head! It was really, really nerve-racking in a way because you didn't know what they were going to do.¹

Hewitt watched as the German POWs marched past the post office and whites-only service club, past Theater No. 3 and Fire Station No. 3, down to the base hospital for medical examinations and then on to the base internment camp. Word spread quickly throughout Camp Bowie that the Germans had arrived, and within a few days many in the Brownwood community were aware of the new residents. As the weeks passed, local curiosity faded, and the prisoners

¹ Wynelle Hewitt, interviewed by James Dunning, Brownwood, Texas, 12 March 2012.

settled into their new lives in the U.S. “After the first two or three days... the fascination kind of wore off,” said Hewitt. “We got used to seeing them around.”²

More than 2,800 German POWs lived at Camp Bowie in Central Texas from 1943-1946. They worked in the fields of local farms and maintained base landscaping. They took classes at a local college and organized theatrical plays. Their legacy remains in the stories told by local residents, in the murals painted on the walls of a senior citizens center, and in the short story posted on a state historical marker located at the outskirts of Brownwood. These captured German soldiers (along with Italian and Japanese POWs held in the U.S.) were treated as prisoners, not criminals – and that distinction is the difference between an oft-forgotten period of World War II history and a potential national nightmare.

A War Problem

At the beginning of the U.S. entry into World War II, American troops faced a unique problem as they mounted successful campaigns in the European theatre: what to do with the increasingly large number of captured German and Italian soldiers? Facilities abroad were limited, and all manpower and supplies necessary to care for these prisoners of war were needed on the frontlines. Back home, communities across the U.S. faced similar challenges: how best to address a sudden shortage in labor and a downturn in the local economies? Army recruiting and better-paying jobs in war-related industries created challenges for many of the agricultural businesses across America. A simple solution – once free of federal and international “red tape” – eased the burden of those fighting overseas as well as those at home.³

² Hewitt interview.

³ Arnold P. Krammer, “When the ‘Afrika Korps’ Came to Texas,” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 80, no. 3 (1977): 247-282; Bob Moore, “Turning Liabilities into Assets: British Government Policy towards German and Italian Prisoners of War during the Second World War,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 32, no. 1 (1997): 117-

More than 400,000 German, Italian and Japanese prisoners of war were sent to live in 600 camps spread across the U.S. from 1942-1946. Enemy troops were captured by or surrendered to Allied forces, then shipped across the Atlantic and Pacific oceans to the U.S. for processing and detainment. For many of these soldiers, internment was a welcomed alternative to returning to the frontlines and further risk of death. POWs were sent to former military training bases or newly constructed camps, often several hundred miles from the coast and in isolated pockets of the country. While not required to work beyond basic camp duties, many of these POWs voluntarily participated in farming and ranching labor that indirectly supported the regional and national economy as well as the U.S. war effort.⁴

In accordance with the Geneva Convention of 1929, enemy prisoners of war were offered comfortable living conditions, fed well, and allowed a reasonable amount of freedom behind the barbed wire confines of detainment camps. POWs had access to individual beds, warm water for showers, three hot meals a day, and dedicated time for recreation and education – a far cry from the miserable conditions of the frontlines. Public concern arose when minority groups of local residents voiced their displeasure that the German POW facilities were “too nice” and possibly better than American POW camps in Germany. After all, U.S. government posters preaching conservation and frugality were a popular sight in town, and Americans across the nation were asked to “do their part for the war” by rationing and limiting their lifestyle. However, some POW camps became self-sufficient with prisoner-managed gardens and on-base workshops for maintenance and repair.⁵

136; Matthias Reiss, “Bronzed Bodies Behind Barbed Wire: Masculinity and the Treatment of German Prisoners of War in the United States during World War II,” *The Journal of Military History* 69, no. 2 (2005): 475-504.

⁴ Niall Ferguson, “Prisoner Taking and Prisoner Killing in the Age of Total War: Towards a Political Economy of Military Defeat,” *War in History* 11, no. 2 (2004): 148-192; Krammer, “Afrika Korps”; Robert H. Thonhoff, *Camp Kenedy, Texas* (Austin: Eakin Press, 2003).

⁵ Kathy Roe Coker, “World War II Prisoners of War in Georgia: German Memories of Camp Gordon, 1943-1945,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 76, no. 4 (1992): 837-861; Jake W. Spidle, “Axis Prisoners of War in the United

Americans were disappointed when German POWs began to arrive in the U.S. and preconceptions of “Aryan supermen” quickly faded. Instead of spying legions of soldiers with devil horns or swastikas tattooed on their foreheads, locals discovered POWs who kept themselves physically fit and mentally alert while detained. These captured soldiers were the first to offer a face of an enemy Americans had only read about, and many communities welcomed the positive impact detainment camps had on local economies. Despite reasonable fear among the American public and the U.S. federal government, German soldiers declined to organize mass escapes, choosing to wait out World War II in comfortable POW camps. What few escapes did occur – less than 3,000 POWs made such an attempt – were mostly a comedy of errors and landed the escapee back in camp in less than three days.⁶

The conflicts and invasions of World War II crippled many agricultural industries – like sugar, timber and cotton – as nations invested human capital into war-related businesses, creating a labor shortage. Responding to the desperate cries of ranchers and farmers, the U.S. War Department facilitated the use of POW labor to meet harvest demands. Throughout the war, POWs picked apples in the Pacific Northwest; harvested cotton fields in Mississippi, Arkansas and northern Louisiana; salvaged sugar cane harvests in Florida and Louisiana; and worked in southern pine sawmills in Arkansas and East Texas. POWs also provided labor to maintain thousands of U.S. national parks and other Civilian Conservation Corps projects throughout the country. Working prisoners were paid basic wages for their labor by the federal government and received checks upon their return to their homeland. Several historians point to the U.S.'s

States, 1942-1946: A Bibliographical Essay,” *Military Affairs* 39, no. 2 (1975): 61-66; Jason M. Ward, “‘Nazis Hoe Cotton’: Planters, POWS, and the Future of Farm Labor,” *Agricultural History* 81, no. 4 (2007): 471-492; Michael R. Waters, *Lone Star Stalag: German Prisoners of War at Camp Hearne* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), 3-21; Terrance H. Witkowski, “World War II Poster Campaigns: Preaching Frugality to American Consumers,” *Journal of Advertising* 32, no. 1 (2003): 69-82.

⁶ Tomas Jaehn, “Unlikely Harvesters: German Prisoners of War as Agricultural Workers in the Northwest,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 50, no. 3 (2000): 46-57; Arnold P. Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America* (New York: Stein & Day, 1979), 114-146; Reiss, “Bronzed”.

successful integration of POWs into the domestic labor force as one contributing factor in the Allied victory over Germany and Japan.⁷

In 1940, residents of Brownwood, Texas, were excited when news came from Washington, D.C., that a new U.S. military training facility would be built just outside town. For decades, Brown County – along with much of the Central Texas region – had seen a steady population decline as more and more Texans migrated from rural homesteads to larger metropolitan areas. Drought and pests decimated local crops, and businesses were struggling to survive. The \$13 million Camp Bowie project employed more than 6,000 workers from across the state and made a tremendous impact on the local economy. More than 125,000 U.S. troops trained on the grounds until the base closed in 1946, including celebrated Army outfits like the 36th Infantry Division and the 749th Tank Battalion. These units made significant contributions to the Allied defeat of Germany in Italy and France. Camp Bowie covered hundreds of thousands of acres and included a prison for American soldiers as well as a prison for German soldiers (members of German commander Erwin Rommel’s famed *Afrika Korps* tank division and sailors in the German navy), who provided much-needed labor for farmers and ranchers in Brown and Mills counties.⁸

While many Americans today may believe that the conflict of World War II only reached as close as Hawaii and the bombing of Pearl Harbor or the rumored Nazi U-boats off the Eastern

⁷ Joseph T. Butler, Jr., “Prisoner of War Labor in the Sugar Cane Fields of Lafourche Parish, Louisiana: 1943-1944,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 14, no. 3 (1973): 283-296; James E. Fickle and Donald W. Ellis, “POWs in the Piney Woods: German Prisoners of War in the Southern Lumber Industry, 1943-1945,” *The Journal of Southern History* 56, no. 4 (1990): 695-724; Stephen Kotkin, “World War Two and Labor: A Lost Cause?” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 53 (2000): 181-191; Janet A. McDonnell, “World War II: Defending Park Values and Resources,” *The Public Historian* 29, no. 4 (2007): 15-33; Moore, “Liabilities”; Jaehn, “Unlikely”; Thonhoff, *Camp Kenedy*; Ward, ““Nazis””; Waters, *Lone Star Stalag*.

⁸ Lorene Bishop, “Camp Bowie Story,” *In the Life and Lives of Brown County People* 13 (Brownwood: The Brown County Historical Society, 1996): 1-13; Martin Blumenson, “The 36th Infantry Division in World War II,” in *The Texas Military Experience: From the Texas Revolution through World War II*, ed. Joseph G. Dawson III (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1995), 128-136; B.P. Gallaway, “Population Trends in the Western Cross Timbers of Texas, 1890-1960: Growth and Distribution,” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (1962): 333-347; Fred Taeger, “Commands: 749th Tank Battalion,” *World War II* 12 (2005): 12.

seaboard, the truth is hundreds of thousands of German, Italian and Japanese soldiers lived for years in the heart of the United States as prisoners of war. Their experiences were recorded through prisoner memoirs, limited interviews, and stories told by the men who were tasked with keeping watch over these POWs. While individual stories were told and collected about the POW experience in the other parts of the U.S., this study offers a unique perspective on the lifestyle and impact of captured German soldiers living in Central Texas. A closer examination of media reports, personal letters and diaries, and local resident interviews reveals a clearer picture of how these POWs were treated as prisoners and not criminals, and how they settled in at Camp Bowie and waited out the war.

Camp Bowie, Texas

In 1934, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) opened Camp 3818, a small plot of land located a few miles southwest of downtown Brownwood – the future home of Camp Bowie. For two years, hundreds of CCC men based at the camp worked on soil conservation projects throughout Brown County and neighboring areas. In 1936, another camp opened at Lake Brownwood, and work there led to the creation of a dam, bridges, and the Lake Brownwood State Recreation Area. Camp 3818 was eventually repurposed by the U.S. government and used as the foundation for Camp Bowie in 1940; many of the roads and infrastructure created by the CCC were expanded and used by the Army during construction of the base.⁹

Initially, Camp Bowie stretched over a 2,000-acre area, southwest beyond the city limits.¹⁰ Railroad tracks were extended through the western section of town to make the base

⁹ John J. Leffler, *A History of Camp Bowie, Brown County, Texas*, The Center for Archaeological Research, The University of Texas at San Antonio, Brownwood, Texas, 2002; Camp Bowie brochure, Brown County Historical Society, Brownwood, Texas.

¹⁰ Map of Camp Bowie [image]. See Appendix A.

accessible by supply trains.¹¹ Construction crews from across Texas came to work on the first major defense project the state had seen in years. Through rolling hills, mesquite trees and dense sagebrush thickets, crews cut a wide path around the “desolate, desert-like” area, erecting simple, non-descript barracks and administrative offices for the Army’s 8th Corps.¹² Hundreds of men worked around the clock to create the hundreds of “hutments” – square, wood buildings with canvas tent roofs used as barracks – and buildings needed for the incoming military personnel.¹³ Construction carried on through the fall of 1940, despite wet weather and muddy conditions that earned the base its “Camp Gooley” nickname by soldiers in the 36th Infantry Division who arrived in December. Unpaved roads, a lack of sidewalks, dirt, sand, rocks, and the occasional rattlesnake during the base’s early days contributed to the “jungle training” conditions.¹⁴

Camp Bowie was laid out in a square format, with training and review fields in the middle and unit barracks and support buildings surrounding.¹⁵ At the northwest corner of the camp sat the main gates, the Post 8 Division Headquarters and general administrative and supply offices. To the east, past the railroad tracks and main shipping warehouses, stood barracks and offices for the 113th Cavalry and the 131st, 132nd, and 133rd Divisions. Along the southern half of the base were housing and facilities for the 141st, 142nd, 143rd, and 144th divisions. Further south, beyond the main grounds, stood firing ranges where select soldiers trained as snipers who could hit targets more than 500 yards away.¹⁶ In the southwest corner of the base, facilities for the 111th Medical Division and the station hospital were erected. Across the highway, on a hill

¹¹ Lumber supply train [image], Camp Bowie, Texas.

¹² View of Camp Bowie from Brady Hill [image]. See Appendix B; James M. Wahl, *It's My Story – I'll Tell It My Way* (USA: Xlibris Corp., 2010), 92-93.

¹³ Constructing hutments [image], Camp Bowie, Texas. See Appendix B; Foundation of several buildings [image], Camp Bowie, Texas.

¹⁴ Travis Monday, *W.F. Matthews: Lost Battalion Survivor* (Lulu Enterprises, Inc., 2004), 14-19; Wahl, *It's My Story*.

¹⁵ Troops marching in review formation [image], Camp Bowie, Texas.

¹⁶ Wahl, *It's My Story*.

at the southwestern edge, were buildings for the base commander and the 8th Corps Headquarters. From the hill, one needed only look east to get a full view of the expansive military reservation.¹⁷ Eventually, the base proper would expand to 5,000 acres with nearly 120,000 acres in Brown and Mills counties for training and maneuvers.¹⁸

Seemingly overnight, the population of Brown County ballooned from 23,000 to 33,000 as soldiers from across the nation came to Camp Bowie to train. In Brownwood, housing was scarce as more than 10,000 new residents arrived in less than 12 months.¹⁹ Nearly 125,000 troops trained at the Central Texas facility throughout the war, and many units were stationed on base for months at a time. In addition, hundreds of soldiers and local residents were employed for base operations, military patrol and internment camp guards. Initially, entertainment and recreational activities were scarce, but at the height of Camp Bowie's population, the base operated a handful of service clubs – dancehalls operated by the USO – and Brownwood boasted eight single-screen movie theaters.²⁰ On any given night, the short blocks of downtown Brownwood resembled Times Square in New York City.²¹ Since Brown County was dry, base service clubs trucked in alcohol and beer from neighboring counties, and bootleggers sold whiskey for as much as eight dollars a pint.²² Soldiers who quickly tired of the town's limited

¹⁷ Map of Camp Bowie.

¹⁸ Leffler, *A History*; Monday, *W.F. Matthews*, p. 12.

¹⁹ "Camp Bowie ushered in a boom," *Brownwood Bulletin*, 5 April 1984.

²⁰ William Jennings Arnett, interviewed by Elizabeth Johnson, Bridgeport, West Virginia, undated, Veterans History Project, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.00998/transcript?ID=sr0001>, retrieved 5 March 2012.

²¹ Downtown Brownwood [image]. See Appendix C.

²² Edward Bautz, interviewed by Shaun Illinworth and Michael Ojeda, Mount Vernon, Virginia, 15 October 1999, Oral History Project, Rutgers University, http://oralhistory.rutgers.edu/Interviews/bautz_edward.html, retrieved 5 March 2012; "Camp Bowie," *Brownwood Bulletin*.

supply of penny arcades and restaurants signed up for weekend furloughs and caught trains to Fort Worth and San Antonio for “big city” trips.²³

As war raged in Europe and the Pacific, the U.S. War Department scrambled to find suitable facilities for the thousands of German, Italian and Japanese prisoners of war headed to the States. Newly constructed camps and existing military installations – especially those like Camp Bowie that were located hundreds of miles from a coast line or strategic industrial complex – were tasked with housing the large volume of incoming prisoners. Camp Bowie and Camp Swift (a sister base located seven miles outside Bastrop, Texas) were ordered to have the construction of housing and facilities for POWs completed by October 1942.²⁴

Camp Bowie officials easily found space for captured enemy troops in its rehabilitation center. Before the POWs arrived, more than 600 U.S. soldiers were imprisoned in this stockade, serving time for offenses ranging from going AWOL to committing rape. Officials claimed a 60 percent success rate in returning these soldiers to active duty in a new unit, initiating rehabilitation through drills, marching, and standard Army field training. In a 1943 *Brownwood Bulletin* article, a formerly incarcerated soldier expressed his gratitude for rehabilitation: “No one appreciates freedom more than the one who is not free.”²⁵ Despite initial requests by base commanders that no POWs be sent to Camp Bowie, Pentagon officials ordered the rehabilitation center closed and told the Central Texas base to wait for captured enemy troops to arrive in July 1943.²⁶

²³ Cpl. Joe E. Lehman to Margie Krumpleman, 8 February 1944, The Letter Repository, http://letter.ie/0004/0029.html#.T3Ho-SP_0mF, retrieved 5 March 2012; Bulletin, 1984.

²⁴ Col. W.A. Wood Jr., Memorandum on Construction of Prisoner of War Camps, Eight Service Command, U.S. War Department.

²⁵ “Camp Bowie Rehabilitation Center Provides Transgressing Soldier With New Road to Redemption,” *Brownwood Bulletin* (Brownwood, Texas), 19 July 1943.

²⁶ Brigadier General B.M. Bryan, Memorandum on Internment Camp at Camp Bowie, Texas, U.S. War Department, 15 June 1943; Brigadier General L.F. Guerre, Memorandum, Army Service Forces, 22 June 1943.

Located in the southwest corner of the base, the Camp Bowie Internment Camp was large enough to hold 3,000 POWs. Because the Army needed to move quickly to make housing available, Pentagon officials gave instructions to de-classify work orders to “expedite” construction.²⁷ More than 200 hutments were built for three separate compounds, all surrounded by two rows of tall, hogwire fence topped with barbed wire. The entire internment camp measured 1,260 feet by 2,000 feet, and facilities included canteens, latrines, mess halls, a chapel, a recreation room for screening movies or staging theatrical plays, and a library. An adjacent area (630 feet by 940 feet) was dedicated for recreational sports and other physical activities. A guardhouse was constructed in the middle of the complex, and guard towers were located along the fence line.²⁸ Eventually, the internment camp’s “drab appearance” would gain a little more color once the POWs moved in.²⁹

Prisoners, Not Criminals

Before the first contingent of German prisoners of war arrived, Camp Bowie guards were given instructions on how best to safeguard their charges. Though these orders would be updated from time to time, essentially guards were expected to be vigilant, be respectful, and keep communication between prisoner and everyone else to a minimum. Guards were warned to be wary of saboteurs and any damage POWs might cause to civilian or government property. Routine inspections, regular patrols, and keeping POWs occupied with base beautification projects or daily labor were effective deterrents to escape attempts. In fact, Camp Bowie is one

²⁷ Wood memo.

²⁸ Report on visit to Prisoner of War Camp, Camp Bowie, Texas, visited by Emil Greuter, Legation of Switzerland, 22 February 1944; Cpt. D. L. Schwieger, Memorandum on Report of visit to Prisoner of War Base Camp, Camp Bowie, Texas, on 1-3 October 1944, Army Services Forces, 20 December 1944; Major Edward J. Sheridan, Memorandum on Construction Directive for Guardhouse at the Internment Camp, Camp Bowie, Texas, U.S. War Department, 8 June 1943.

²⁹ Schwieger memo.

of the few stateside internment camps that does not have an official escape or escape attempt on record (although rumor and folklore have several POWs leaving camp for a few days before eventually returning). Soldiers were directed to verbalize two warnings of “HALT” before enacting the force necessary to prevent sudden escape attempts. The camp’s geographical location – 340 miles from the Texas gulf coast, 240 miles from the Mexico border, and 130 miles from the nearest metropolitan area, Fort Worth – also helped to thwart any ideas of escape. Simply put, once free, these non-English-speaking POWs had nowhere to go.³⁰

Internment camp guards were ordered to treat the German POWs “fairly and humanely” and avoid any conduct that might lean toward brutality. Unlike the U.S. soldiers who had been incarcerated in these barracks only months prior, these captured enemy troops were wartime guests and guards were ordered to treat them as such. In a 1944 memo, Lt. John Egan reminds Camp Bowie guards “never to consider them [POWs] as criminals” and focus on safe containment instead of retribution. Here, the well being of the enemy was a top priority, and the U.S. military’s removal of foreign troops from the battlefields abroad helped to distance them from the emotions and horror of battle.³¹

Guards were also charged with limiting communication between prisoners and those on the base or in the community. On work details, guards made sure POWs completed their assigned tasks and avoided interaction with base employees. Even if they wanted to, the conversations between POWs and base personnel would have been short; few of the German soldiers actually spoke any English. Guards were also instructed to speak to the charges “only in

³⁰ 1st Lt. John D. Egan, Memorandum on Special Orders for Static Guard Posts, Army Services Forces, Camp Bowie, Texas, 11 July 1944.

³¹ Egan memo.

the line of duty,” but stories about that period reveal personal connections created through regular communication between captives and captors.³²

Another component to the successful creation of a German POW camp in Central Texas was the “gag order” installed by Camp Bowie commanders. Civilian employees were instructed to not talk about the prisoners; soldiers were also ordered to keep quiet. Though news of their arrival spread quickly from soldiers to the young women working in the base service clubs to the Brownwood community, the local newspaper failed to report on the matter in the month that followed, and there is little documentation to suggest Brown County residents were in any way concerned.³³ Curious? Yes, say those who were present. But enthusiasm soon waned.³⁴

Those living in Brownwood and working at Camp Bowie got their first glimpse of the heralded German war machine on 13 August 1943. In the middle of the day, a group of battle-worn, malnourished men – roughly 300 in total – disembarked from a transport train at the depot and marched three-and-a-half miles across the town to the base’s main gates. These German POWs walked across town virtually unnoticed since troop traffic from the base to the train depot was commonplace. These enemy soldiers – German infantry troops captured from battles in North Africa and Italy – also wore uniforms similar in color and style to those worn by American troops, and their brown and blonde hair and sun-weathered faces would have made them hard to pick out of a Texas crowd. As Wynelle Hewitt recalls, “they looked just like our boys.” Many were of average size, thin, but determined as they marched toward their new home.³⁵ Camp

³² 1st Lt. Harry H. Bunton, Memorandum on Special Orders for Guards of Prisoners of War, Army Service Forces, Camp Bowie, Texas, 28 September 1944; Harriette Graves, “German ex-POW returns,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* (Fort Worth, Texas), n.d.

³³ The first published mention of POWs comes from the base newspaper, *The Bowie Blade*, in 1946 as Camp Bowie was shutting down. The article details the creation and establishment of a POW camp and mentions how POWs were sent home to Germany. “POW Camp Held Thousands,” *The Bowie Blade* (Camp Bowie, Texas), 14 February 1946.

³⁴ Hewitt interview.

³⁵ Hewitt interview.

Bowie would house more than 2,800 German POWs before the war ended, many of them enlisted men and non-commissioned officers.³⁶

Perhaps the greatest insight into the attitude of the German soldiers at Camp Bowie comes from a letter Hans Lehner, a POW, wrote to then Executive Assistant Officer Lt. Alton Linne in July 1945. In the letter, Lehner comments on a German-language film that had been shown recently in the stockade, criticizing the movie for its propagandist roots. But he also offers a unique perspective on the war: “History teaches only too well that whenever Germany got strong, she also got aggressive.” Lehner goes on to explain that many of his fellow countrymen were only guilty of getting caught up in sweeping nationalism before being led to the frontlines and then to the POW camps: “For a German, the uniform is everything. He would sooner let himself be chased into a war or being killed for a cause, than go to the trouble of trying to think for himself.”³⁷ For those enlisted men who were factory workers, mechanics, carpenters, artisans, bakers and cooks before the war began, Camp Bowie presented a pleasant way in which to wait out the war.

Waiting Out the War

Though they were officially prisoners of war held by the United States, German soldiers at Camp Bowie enjoyed, by all accounts, a fairly comfortable lifestyle until the war ended. For many, the warm beds and three meals a day were a far cry from the harsh winter conditions and limited rations on the battlefield; for some, life in an American military prison – where guards

³⁶ Major Paul A. Neuland, Field Service Report on Visit to Prisoner of War Camp, Camp Bowie, Texas, 8-9 January 1945, by Captain Herman W. Graupner, Army Service Forces, 17 January 1945.

³⁷ Hans Lehner, Translation of letter by German Spokesman, Army Service Forces, 23 July 1945.

were later described as “mild and kindly” – was preferred over what awaited them upon their eventual return home.³⁸

A typical day for the POW began with roll call and breakfast at 6 a.m. Those willing and able to work were escorted to their assigned duty stations. POWs were required to labor for an eight-hour shift with a lunch and breaks.³⁹ They were then escorted back to their compound for dinner and evening recreation. Another roll call signaled the end of the day and “lights out” for the camp was at 10 p.m.

POWs were mostly utilized for maintenance and beautification projects around the base as well as service roles for the internment camp. Many of the German soldiers held trade positions before the war, and they were assigned to various departments within Camp Bowie based on their skill set. POWs were often seen tending to the landscaping around base administrative buildings, repairing vehicles in the motor pool or working in the base’s massive laundry facility. In the internment camp, they were responsible for cooking and serving their meals (the same food rations as those issued to U.S. Army troops), general maintenance and custodial work in each compound, and keeping an inventory of supplies needed for their canteen. Across U.S. Highway 377, the POWs planted a 125-acre garden and harvested many of the fruits and vegetables they enjoyed at mealtime.⁴⁰

Outside of Camp Bowie, local residents would occasionally spot a small contingent of German POWs marching to or from a work assignment at a local farm or ranch.⁴¹ Area ranchers

³⁸ Heinrich Krahfrost, interviewed by Heike Haddenbrock, 11 August 2007, Brown County Historical Society, <http://browncountyhistory.org/pow-HeinrichKrahforst.html>, retrieved 6 March 2012; Karl to Homer Milton, 31 January 1948; Greuter memo.

³⁹ Cpt. D.L. Schwieger and Major E.C. Shannahan, Memorandum on Visit to Prisoner of War Camp, Camp Bowie, Texas, 10-13 March 1945, Army Service Forces, 13 March 1945; Major Dave Flowers, Prisoner of War Camp Labor Report, Camp Bowie, Texas, 2 October 1944.

⁴⁰ “POWs at Camp Bowie during WWII,” Brown County Historical Society, <http://browncountyhistory.org/pow-camp-bowie.html>, retrieved 6 March 2012; Grueter memo.

⁴¹ Hewitt interview.

and farmers would make a request with county agents for labor. Those agents, in turn, would make a formal request to Camp Bowie officials for the use of POW labor during harvest season. Hundreds of POWs were recruited during peak months for cotton, corn, tomato and peanut harvesting. Farmers were required to pay between \$3.50 and \$4 a day for general labor and \$1.25 to \$2 for pulling cotton. Because Camp Bowie purchased a majority of its local produce, meat, and other supplies from local sources, these farmers and ranchers saw a healthy profit from utilizing “a surplus of labor” available at the camp.⁴²

When not working, POWs spent the rest of their days and nights behind the tall fences, in their barracks or recreation buildings, or spending the money they earned working on and off the base. The stockade canteens sold cookies, chocolates and cigarettes, and the prisoners enjoyed a case of beer whenever someone in their hutment (barracks) celebrated his birthday. For Heinrich Krahfrost, a former POW, “it was like staying in a hotel.”⁴³ The men were encouraged to customize the landscaping in the compound and work on beautification projects within their barracks. Many photographs from that era depict lush, rose terraces standing tall outside the hutments; lace curtains and dark-stained wooden end tables inside; radios, bookshelves, magazine racks and drawing tables next to carefully made bunks.⁴⁴ Krahfrost, in a 2007 interview, claimed he even won an award for “most beautiful front yard” while living under guard at Camp Bowie.⁴⁵

The POW complex featured a customized theater where movies were shown nightly. Two new films were available in the camp each week, and each film had six showings because

⁴² Schwieger and Shannahan memo.

⁴³ Krahfrost interview.

⁴⁴ Heinrich Krahfrost, POW hutment, interior [image], Camp Bowie, Texas; Krahfrost, POW hutment, beds [image], Camp Bowie, Texas; Krahfrost, POW hutment, exterior [image], Camp Bowie, Texas; German POW soccer team [image], Camp Bowie, Texas. See Appendix D.

⁴⁵ Krahfrost interview.

space was limited to 200 seats. The theater was also used for weekly music concerts. The music program grew to a 14-piece band and 18-piece orchestra. The groups practiced nightly, performed weekly, and offered a monthly concert at the station hospital for wounded soldiers.⁴⁶ Reportedly, the group's repertoire included Beethoven's *Sonata No. 14 in C Sharp*, Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, Rossini's *William Tell Overture*, and Strauss' *Waltzes*. The entire POW camp would often attend the performances.⁴⁷

A stage production was held in the theatre every other month. POWs designed the sets, costumes, and the overall production themselves. Men played male and female parts and the prison band handled music accompaniment. One of the few documented plays that the POWs chose, "Minna von Barnheim," was written in 1767 at the beginning of Germany's nationalist period – a time when theatrical productions lauded patriotism and the country's growing military supremacy. The play followed a discharged and disabled army officer in debt to the government and his landlord. An effort to repay his debt leads to a reconnection with a former lover, a rich woman. He refuses to marry her in his dire economic state, so she pretends to be poor. When his fortunes are restored, she uses his same argument against him. The story ends with the two married.⁴⁸ The theatre group also staged original plays as well as classics like Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night."⁴⁹

The internment camp also had a dedicated library that held nearly 4,000 books (in German and English) and a classroom for educational courses. The library also held subscriptions to *New York Times*, *New York Herald Tribune*, *New Yorker*, *Saturday Evening*

⁴⁶ Neuland report; Sture Persson, Memorandum on Report of Visit to Prisoner of War Camp, Camp Bowie, Texas, 11 June 1945; German POW band [image], Camp Bowie, Texas.

⁴⁷ Georgia Rodgers, "Prisoners of War at Camp Bowie," Brown County Historical Commission, n.d.

⁴⁸ "POW Play, 'Minna von Barnhelm' by Gotthod Ephraim Lessing," Brown County Historical Society, <http://browncountyhistory.org/pow-play.html>, retrieved 5 March 2012; German POW stage performance cast [image], Camp Bowie, Texas.

⁴⁹ Neuland report.

Post, *Collier's*, *Liberty*, *Reader's Digest* and *Vogue*. All incoming books, magazines and newspapers were screened through base censors. Classes (mostly taught by qualified POWs) included German, English, mathematics, history, drawing, photography, and painting.⁵⁰ POWs were even allowed to take correspondence courses from Howard Payne College, a small Baptist liberal arts school in Brownwood, for college credit.⁵¹

When the POWs first arrived, a Camp Bowie Army chaplain conducted weekly services for Protestant Christians in a general-use building in the camp. As the number of prisoners grew, two German chaplains – one for Catholics, the other for Protestants – were assigned to hold weekly services in a dedicated chapel. These POW chaplains had access to religious materials and were overseen by the base chaplain.⁵² Former Camp Bowie chaplain A.J. Turner, who spent several decades as a professor at Howard Payne College, called the POWs who worked at the chapel “trustworthy.” “They took pride in their work and were very friendly toward us,” he said.⁵³

In addition to work, German POWs at Camp Bowie had plenty of opportunity for play. Army officials dedicated a 630-foot-by-940-foot field (roughly the size of six football fields) adjacent to the three compounds for recreation, and prisoners were often seen engaged in a variety of sports in the evenings and on weekends.⁵⁴ Soccer teams were organized by barracks – each POW hutment held between 14 and 18 prisoners – and games were played on Sundays.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Greuter report; Persson memo.

⁵¹ Enrollment records for German POWs were lost to fire when Howard Payne College's Old Main building burned to the ground in 1984. Persson's memo, however, confirms POWs were enrolled in the school.

⁵² Greuter report; Persson memo.

⁵³ Harriette Graves, “POWs left mark on Central Texas; and it, on them,” *Brownwood Bulletin* (Brownwood, Texas), n.d. [Provide location information.]

⁵⁴ Greuter report.

⁵⁵ Krahfrost interview.

Team uniforms were made from recycled material in the compound or from surplus material in the Camp Bowie laundry room.⁵⁶

Several POWs were professional and amateur artists before the war began and some of their work while at Camp Bowie has survived. POW Willi Wolbe handcrafted a wood jewelry box and gave it to a civilian employee in the base carpentry shop; two other POWs created a wood vase and a wooden Christmas. These items are rare examples of the craftsmanship of POWs and have been passed down through the civilian employee's family.⁵⁷ Those who worked on the base recalled decorative flower boxes and other landscaping features designed and built by POWs.⁵⁸ But the most impressive work that remains are the seven large murals discovered in a former service club in the mid-1970s.

In 1976, the City of Brownwood initiated a renovation project of one of its senior citizens center buildings – an old USO service club that had been purchased by the city when Camp Bowie shut down in 1946.⁵⁹ As he worked to remove the wood paneling on the walls, city carpenter Jess Williford discovered several color murals depicting soldiers at Camp Bowie. The murals were quickly confirmed as those painted by German POWs, but the original artist and designer was unknown. A former Camp Bowie soldier recalled a Lt. Richard Hepburn, brother of famed Hollywood actress Katherine Hepburn, was stationed at the base and once submitted an unusual request for paint for an unspecified project. The Brownwood veteran made several attempts to reach Miss Hepburn, and she eventually responded to his letters, confirming that her brother and Pvt. Sidney P. Knowlton of Jamestown, N.Y. designed the murals and had the German POWs paint them. Local Brownwood artists Gene and Winona Pierson volunteered

⁵⁶ POW soccer [image].

⁵⁷ Mary Dunham, Wooden jewelry box made by POW [image], 2012; Wood vase made by POW [image], 2012. See Appendix E.

⁵⁸ Hewitt interview.

⁵⁹ USO club, exterior [image], Camp Bowie, Texas; Service club [image], Camp Bowie, Texas.

their time to restore the “faded, nail-scarred paintings” to their original glory.⁶⁰ To date, the murals still reside in the now-closed senior citizens center with plans underway to move and donate them to the Brown County Historical Society.

A Community Reacts

The initial arrival of enemy troops to Brownwood in August 1943 went unnoticed by local residents. Camp librarian Wynelle Hewitt said it was common for residents to see platoons of troops moving back and forth between the base and the train depot in the middle of town. Almost daily, units arrived for training or were shipped off to another training base or deployment staging area. Another group of weary soldiers in unmarked uniforms did not draw a second glance from residents accustomed to the sight of men marching down city streets:

As far as I know, no one in town knew they were coming or knew they were stationed out there. I don't know if anyone saw them marching through town or if they did, they figured they were just some soldiers. We had all kinds of Dixie Divisions [an Army unit], all kinds of uniforms out here at Camp Bowie. So, coming through town, with army uniforms on, they wouldn't have thought anything about it.⁶¹

Eventually, reaction to German POWs grew into a mixture of fascination and apathy. Word of their arrival caused some stirring of curiosity within the local community, but interest soon faded once the soldiers settled into the internment camp and, save for the occasional glimpses, were kept from public view – a simple case of “out of sight, out of mind.”⁶² POW Krahfrost said he only saw Brownwood once in two years while running errands with a base manager.⁶³ Those who did see the Germans from time to time eventually “felt sorry” for the men

⁶⁰ Lash Lashbrook, “Old magazine yields secrets of mural,” *Brownwood Bulletin* (Brownwood, Texas), 12 March 1978, <http://browncountyhistory.org/pow-mural.html>, retrieved 5 March 2012.

⁶¹ Hewitt interview.

⁶² Hewitt interview.

⁶³ Krahfrost interview.

kept behind wire fences.⁶⁴ Even the soldiers guarding the foreign contingent saw their excitement wane: In a February 1944 letter to his cousin back east, Cpl. Joe Lehman makes a passing reference to German POWs, confirming their existence at Camp Bowie and expressing doubts that additional prisoners would be admitted.⁶⁵ Some soldiers viewed guarding POWs as an “unhappy, but inevitable” job, one that was necessary but removed them from the glory of battle.⁶⁶

Regular policy changes also kept Camp Bowie staff busy and likely deterred guards from taking any negative action against their charges. Initial confusion over assignments and guard protocols were the result of War Department changes and hastily drafted administrative policies.⁶⁷ Base officials were given orders as early as mid-1942 to create a POW camp, then directed to use the facility as a U.S. stockade.⁶⁸ Months later, Washington, D.C., sent orders to have that complex “vacated and made available for prisoners of war.”⁶⁹ Construction crews were hastily finishing additions to the internment camp only a few weeks before the first group of German troops arrived.

Camp Bowie itself was also in a state of transition throughout the war.⁷⁰ Army troop units would train in Brown County, spend several weeks training in another part of the U.S., return to Bowie, then ship out to the battlefield.⁷¹ It was not uncommon, Cpl. Lehman wrote in another letter to his cousin, to unexpectedly have men ship out and assigned to another unit: “One day you're working with them and next day they're gone. We had one leave over Sunday.

⁶⁴ Hewitt interview.

⁶⁵ Cpl. Joe E. Lehman to Margie Krumpleman, 22 February 1944, The Letter Repository, http://letter.ie/0004/0030.html#.T3HprCP_0mF, retrieved 5 March 2012.

⁶⁶ “Thousands,” *The Bowie Blade*.

⁶⁷ “Thousands,” *The Bowie Blade*.

⁶⁸ Wood memo; Egan memo.

⁶⁹ Guerre memo.

⁷⁰ Cpl. Joe E. Lehman to Margie Krumpleman, 20 November 1943, The Letter Repository, http://letter.ie/0004/0021.html#.T3II7CP_0mE, retrieved 5 March 2012.

⁷¹ Wahl, *It's My Story*; Monday, *W.F. Matthews*.

On Saturday, he had no idea that he was going to have to take off. ... Such is the life in the Army.”⁷² Camp Bowie was led by a half-dozen base commanders, saw 125,000 troops pass through its front gates, and had hundreds of buildings built and dismantled in five years of operation.⁷³

Tucked away, beyond the frenetic pace of a nation at war, the German soldiers counted their blessings and patiently waited for the eventual return to their homeland. Ernest Gies, a former POW who visited Brownwood nearly 50 years after his release, said he was thankful his naval artillery unit was taken prisoner by U.S. troops: “I had been having a hard time, and from the moment I was captured, I was happy. The Americans were always friendly to me.”⁷⁴ Other POWs echoed Gies’ statement: “I have some very good memories of that time,” Heinrich Krahfrost said in a 2007 interview, “although I stayed there as a POW.”⁷⁵

Even after the war, former POWs and guards kept in contact. Several kept regular letter correspondence over the years and a handful of the German soldiers returned to Texas or hosted former Camp Bowie guards at their homes in Europe decades later.⁷⁶ The warm memories of the camp clashed with the cold, bitter reality of a war-torn Germany upon their return. Karl, a former POW, wrote a letter to guard Homer Milton in 1948, describing the despair and economic hardships he and his family faced in his new home. He also expressed a fondness for the camp and the people in Brown County: “In Germany, the Life is not so good as in Texas. ... You can get nothing in the Shops in Germany. The People have no potatos [*sic*], nothing. ... Thank you very minche [*sic*] for everything vath [*sic*] you give me in Bowie.”⁷⁷

⁷² Lehman letter, 8 February 1944.

⁷³ Camp Bowie historical marker [image], Brownwood, Texas.

⁷⁴ Graves, “German ex-POW returns.”

⁷⁵ Krahfrost interview.

⁷⁶ Graves, “POWs left.”

⁷⁷ Karl letter.

Of course, not every POW enjoyed their time at Camp Bowie. Non-commissioned officers – corporals and sergeants who held authority over the enlisted troops – were not always required to work in the camp’s labor program and often created problems for camp guards and other prisoners. At times, the friction between German soldiers and Nazi-sympathizers forced guards to tighten restrictions and lowered morale within the prison body.⁷⁸ Some POWs were bullied for their willingness to follow camp procedures and serve as model prisoners.⁷⁹ Nearly 350 members of Germany’s famed elite unit, *Schutzstaffel*, or “SS,” and Stormtroopers, or *Sturmabteilung*, were briefly held at Camp Bowie.⁸⁰ Army officials soon learned to separate these trouble-making non-commissioned officers from the enlisted men. As the non-coms were transferred out of Camp Bowie to other internment camps, the number of guards was reduced and prison morale improved.⁸¹

Incoming letters and reading materials were heavily censored and prisoners were not allowed to bring money, weapons, maps, flashlights, compasses, cameras or pets into the compound. Also, no POW was allowed to leave the stockade without “PW” clearly stenciled in white paint on their shirts and pants.⁸² Despite the seemingly relaxed lifestyle – compared to actively fighting on the warfront – Camp Bowie was a prisoners of war camp and many freedoms were restricted.

When news broke 8 May 1945, that Germany had surrendered and the war in Europe was over, Brown County residents celebrated and Camp Bowie officials began the process of transferring the POWs home. The German soldiers waited several months until large-scale

⁷⁸ Greuter report.

⁷⁹ Graves, “POWs left.”

⁸⁰ Rodgers, “Prisoners.”

⁸¹ Visit Report on Prisoner of War Camp, Camp Bowie, Texas, visited by Dr. Rudolph Fischer, Legation of Switzerland, 20 October 1944.

⁸² Special Orders for Each Post, Camp Bowie, Texas; POW work shirt [image], Camp Bowie, Texas, 2012.

transfers began across the nation in the late summer and early fall. Eventually they were remanded to internment camps in Britain and France before being released to their home country, arriving in Germany six to nine months after leaving the U.S.⁸³

Five POWs never left Texas. They died from infection or suicide while in camp, and their bodies were interred in a small section of the nearby Jordan Springs Cemetery. In 1946, as the U.S. Army deactivated Camp Bowie and abandoned the buildings, the bodies were removed and re-buried at Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery in San Antonio, Texas.⁸⁴ Only the fading memories of the POW camp now remained.

Lasting Legacy

The U.S. government and military assigned to guarding foreign POWs went to great lengths during World War II to treat the captured soldiers as prisoners and not as criminals. Abiding by the policies of the Geneva Convention of 1929, the U.S. War Department went beyond providing basic necessities to create a positive experience for POWs in order to (1) ensure American POWs in Germany were not mistreated as retaliation to any perceived negative treatment of Germans in the U.S., and (2) show German soldiers the “spoils” of democracy and capitalism. These self-serving policies also created, for the most part, docile POWs who lacked the opportunity and desire to revolt, escape, and create chaos on U.S. soil.⁸⁵

At Camp Bowie, officials scrambled to take on the challenge of keeping safe enemy prisoners of war. Facilities were constructed and expanded; guards were trained and re-trained on ever-changing policies. The military reservation and surrounding community benefitted from

⁸³ “Thousands,” *The Bowie Blade*; Krahfrost interview.

⁸⁴ Rodgers, “Prisoners.”

⁸⁵ Fortunately, less than one percent of the 425,000 POWs held within the U.S. attempted to escape or cause disruption “behind enemy lines” as approved for captured enemy combatants in the Geneva Convention of 1929.

the influx of labor as soldiers and local residents grew accustomed to seeing German soldiers marching to and from their assignments.

For their part, POWs stayed busy and comfortable. They engaged in physical activity and weekly entertainment. They took educational courses and developed or strengthened vocational skills through labor assignments. They enjoyed simple luxuries like chocolate and coffee and radio broadcasts in the evenings. They were treated with respect and dignity and allowed to care for and govern themselves. In the middle of wartime, the U.S. response and action toward enemy POWs represents a significant level of civility and humanity.

Perhaps most surprising is that when key components of World War II are mentioned – Pearl Harbor, Hitler, Nazis, Normandy beach, V-Day, Hiroshima – the 425,000 Axis troops living in the U.S. during that time is often forgotten. Maybe it was the government's diligence in keeping the POW presence in rural America out of the newspapers. Maybe it was the unexpected complacency of 99 percent of the captured soldiers and the lack of domestic threat. Or maybe it was just a facet of the war that most understood as fact yet rarely discussed. Whatever the case, the experiences of captured POWs in the U.S. may be one of the least researched in World War II history.

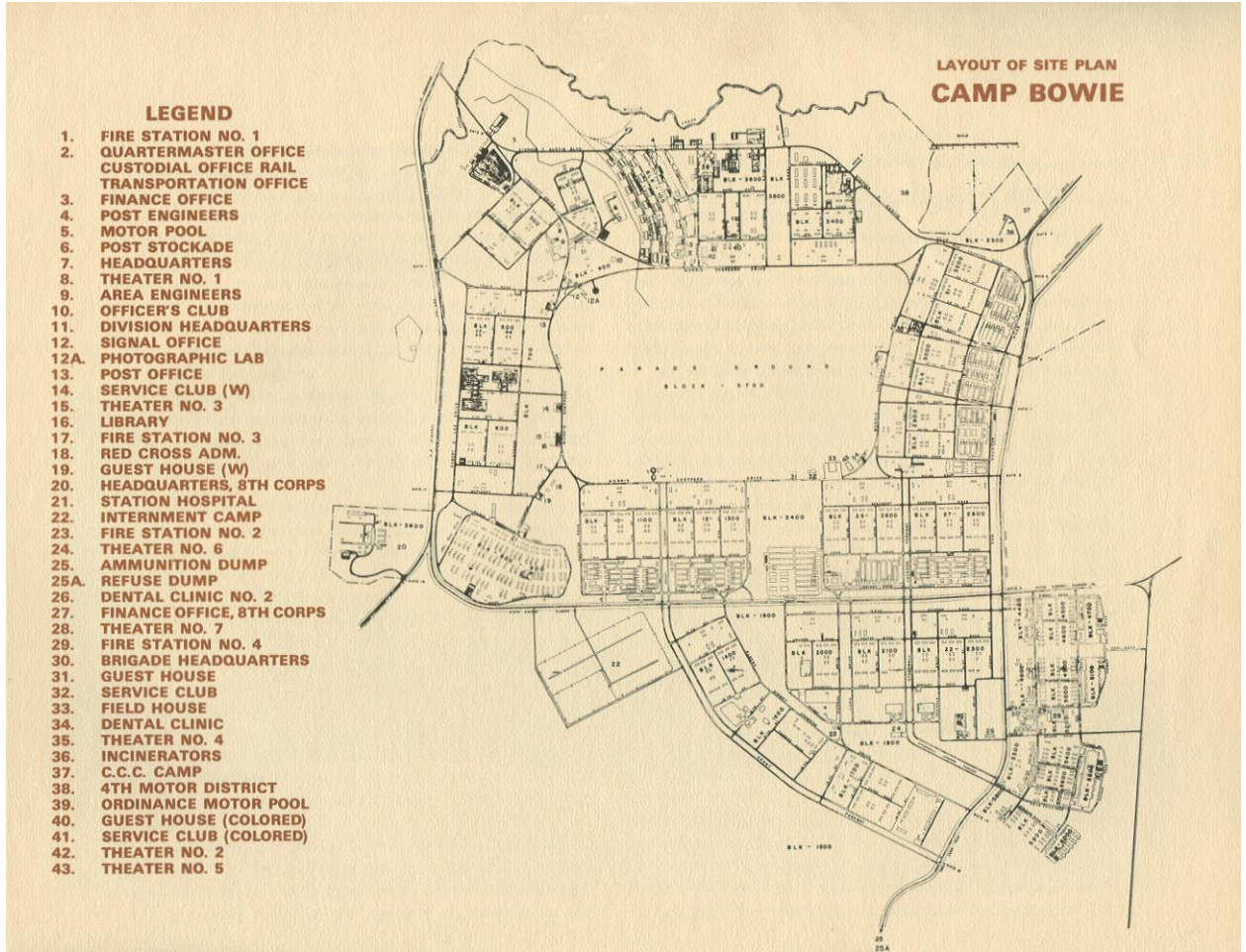
In light of the horrific stories retold by American POWs held in Japanese and German internment camps during World War II, the tales told of German soldiers living in the U.S. seem downright unbelievable. Yet interview after interview, memoir after memoir, reveals a rich experience that stands in sharp contrast to the more popular stories of that time. Were POWs in the U.S. spoiled to excess? Were the memories of German soldiers held here “rose-colored” as time passed and they reached the twilight of their years? Did Americans living through the ever-present threat of Axis invasion truly offer these enemy POWs the unexpected degree of

hospitality that is often described? Conclusions may be drawn, but additional research is needed to accurately establish the truth. Unfortunately, a lack of digitized archives and oral histories of events from 70 years ago presents significant challenges to fully answering these questions.

Today, little remains of the POW camp at Camp Bowie. While part of the former base still operates as a Texas National Guard facility, the internment camp's expansive compounds and recreation area have been turned into a golf course and an upscale residential neighborhood. The prisoners' carefully cultivated gardens have long been abandoned and returned to pasture lands. The color murals depicting Camp Bowie life still hang in the former service club, waiting for a new home in the local museum.

On Highway 45, just south of Brownwood, a Texas historical marker sits as a solemn reminder of the nearly 3,000 Germans who called Central Texas home during World War II. The marker, which took a group of local historians several years to win approval, summarizes the educational and labor experience of the POWs as well as their contact with local residents after the war. Fittingly, this newly unveiled marker – the dedication was held April 2012 – sits just *outside* the entrance to the T.R. Havins Unit of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, a minimum security correctional facility: a gentle reminder how, even in the history books, German POWs at Camp Bowie will be remembered as prisoners, not criminals.

Appendix A



Appendix B



Constructing hutments, Camp Bowie, Texas



View of Camp Bowie from Brady Hill.

Appendix C



Appendix D



Krahfrost, POW hutment, beds, Camp Bowie, Texas



Krahfrost, POW hutment, exterior, Camp Bowie, Texas

Appendix E

Mary Dunham, Wooden jewelry box made by POW, 2012



Wood vase made by POW, 2012

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to thank the following people for their insight and guidance in this research project: Ronnie Lappe, Clay Riley (Pecan Valley Genealogical Society), Steve Blake (Brown County Museum of History), Mary Dunham, Gene Deason (Brownwood Bulletin), and Wynelle Hewitt. Their continued work and commitment to preserving the past keeps history alive for future generations.