

German POW Camp Once in Neodesha

Neodesha Register

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By Viola Kauth

Feelings ran high in 1945 as word spread throughout Neodesha that W.J. Small was bringing German prisoners of war to town to work in his alfalfa mill (where MEC now stands).

Suddenly World War II took on a new dimension. Now the enemy was in one's own backyard. Some were resentful. Others fearful. People tended to overreact. Friends became less friendly, and the grocer the Smalls had patronized for years refused to sell them groceries.

Why were the POWs brought to Neodesha? It was a matter of economics. W.J. Small needed labor for his mills and, because of the war, there were not enough local men left to operate them.

Prisoners could be brought in to supplement the work force if Small would provide housing, feed them during their work shift, and pay the government for their labor.

So the prisoners came – these captured German soldiers. At first people were wary, but the POWs were not quite what Neodesha was expecting. These men were tired of war and homesick for their families back in Germany. Most of the men were content to work in order to eat.

There were no major problems and the ones that did occur could partially be attributed to the language barrier. Only two of the prisoners spoke English and they served as interpreters.

Kathleen Small, sister-in-law of W.J. Small, said: "Only one prisoner acted so mean" he had to be returned to camp.

The exact number of prisoners at the camp is unknown. The number varies from 20 to 300 depending upon whom one is talking to. Part of the prisoners worked at Neodesha, while others were transported to mills in Independence and Fredonia.

Prisoners worked around the clock in three eight-hour shifts, and Kathleen Small believes they prepared food for 150 daily in Neodesha.

"We had to feed them in the middle of the shift. Mrs. W.J. Small, Mollie Devlin, and I prepared the food in Mrs. Small's basement. We filled regular black lunch buckets with sandwiches and a thermos of coffee.

"When they saw the car coming, they would run to meet us. They called it the 'bucket car.' Some of the men wanted to help," said Mrs. Small, admitting they used a lot of hand signals to communicate.

"We weren't supposed to do anything special for them but sometimes on Sunday we would put a package of cigarettes or a little candy in their buckets.

"One Sunday, Mrs. Small took some watermelon. Some of the prisoners didn't know what it was," continued Kathleen. Mr. Small was very particular that they should be treated right and be well fed.

“There were people from all walks of life. Most were very well-mannered and spoke very little English.”

Jerry Howe and John Whitezell worked with some of the prisoners at the mill.

“One guy tipped hammers. He was a pretty good craftsman. Two others worked as welder helpers. The rest worked in the blender, the meal warehouse, and on the dehydrators,” said Howe.

“At first the guys were guarded all the time but at the last, the guards didn’t come down while they were working. I remember one guy had a full set of stainless steel teeth. He made ‘old John’ (Whitezell) a ring,” (which Whitezell still has).

Others also remember the Germans as good craftsmen. Lester Crawford, a former guard at the camp, said the prisoners could “take a knife and a piece of wood and carve anything.”

The prisoners were brought to Neodesha from Fort Riley, Kan., in April 1945. One commissioned officer and seven enlisted men came with them as guards. The prisoners stayed in Neodesha through the “working season” but no one remembers the exact date they returned to Fort Riley.

The Lester Crawfords believe it was probably the first of December as Evelyn remembers Lester bringing a cake home the German cook had baked for their son Kenny’s birthday, which was Nov. 27.

“It was a chocolate cake about eight inches around,” said Evelyn, making a circle with her fingers. “It had three or four thin layers, and the creamiest frosting.”

Although the prisoners were not allowed to mingle with the townspeople, the road was open if anyone wanted to satisfy their curiosity and drive by the camp. Or the prisoners could be seen riding in the back of a truck on their way to or from work.

“All these fellows were out of the African campaign. Some had been in the German army since the late ‘30s,” said Crawford, estimating the men’s ages ranged from 25 to 55.

“People were pretty leery when they were brought in but the feelings changed. A lot thought they would be sent with no guards,” added Crawford.

Another guard, Martin Bjornson, who now lives in Valley Center, N.D., expressed similar feelings.

“I thought there were some hard feelings toward the POWs and us too when we came, but after we got acquainted, we were treated real nice,” wrote Bjornson, saying he has pleasant memories of the prisoners and their stay in Neodesha.

Guards were responsible for the security of the civilians as well as the POWs and also saw to the medical needs and civil rights of the prisoners.

Bjornson said the POWs were entitled to the church of their faith and one prisoner wrote back later saying if it had not been for Mr. Temme coming and preaching to them, he would never have been able to live through it.

Where was the camp? Take the road north past the water plant, cross a small bridge, then look to the west. The four or five acres bordering the road were known officially as “German POW side camp, Neodesha, Kan.”

A barbed wire fence surrounded the rectangular area and in each corner stood a “crow’s nest” (guard tower). On the west side of the camp was a wooded area and another tower.

Crawford said there were no problems with the prisoners and after a few weeks the west tower was no longer used. Guards manned the other towers 24 hours a day.

Earl Gibson owned the land and Small was responsible for erecting barracks and tents.

Bjornson only mentioned two barracks in his letter. One housed the latrine and shower, and the other was used as a kitchen and dining area. POWs lived in tents and the guards lived in a house closeby.

A remnant of the camp is still there but unrecognizable. To passers-by it is simply the brown house Monroe Wasson and his son Floyd own and are remodeling for Floyd and his family to live in. But old-timers know the truth. The Wassons will soon live in the old guard house.

Letter to the Editor

Neodesha Register

Jan. 21, 1982

Dear Editor,

Last week, Jan. 8, I stopped in Neodesha, my old hometown, to visit some friends. While visiting with Mrs. Katie Petrich, she showed me the article "German POW Camp Once in Neodesha," ran in the Dec. 10, 1981, Neodesha Register. I found Viola Kauth's article very interesting and I would like to add another story to piece in Neodesha's history, one that I tell every Christmas and one, strange to say, that very few people in Neodesha know.

Just in case you don't know, I was born and raised in Neodesha and went to school there until I went into the seminary, which was at the semester of my senior year. If the date of 1945 is correct, I was 13 at the time and so I remember the POW camp and the fact that there were German prisoners in town. However, the story I want to tell does not really concern me, at least at that time.

Fr. George Reinschmidt served the Catholics of Neodesha for 33 years, dying on Sept. 21, 1949. There were Catholics among those German prisoners, and so arrangements were made for Fr. Reinschmidt to go out to the camp and offer Mass for them, as well as administering the Sacraments. How many times Fr. Reinschmidt went out to the camp is something I don't know, but I do know that I went with him a couple of times as an "altar boy."

The thing I can remember about going to the camp is the fear I had of being there (the war propaganda was very effective, as I was sure that one of them was going to grab me and slit my throat, or something like that) and the joy and sincerity of those attending Mass. Fr. Reinschmidt could speak German and while I never understood a word he said in those sermons, it was evident that these prisoners had a great respect and love for him.

The proof of that love and appreciation of those men for Fr. Reinschmidt can be seen in the gift they presented to him when they left Neodesha. Viola, in her article, quotes one of the guards as saying "the prisoners could take a knife and a piece of wood and carve anything." This is exactly what they did for him. They gave Father a carved Nativity set made from an old wooden orange crate and some other scraps of wood.

According to what Father told me, all they had to work with was a pin knife and the paints, and yet they produced something that would put to shame many of the Nativity sets that are produced today. Besides having the setting of the town of Bethlehem, they carved the figures of Mary, Joseph, the Child Jesus in a manger, a shepherd, a donkey and two sheep. One of the sheep and the donkey are standing, and they are completely free standing, that is, there is nothing between the legs nor between the animal's body and the ground.

And for those who can remember how hard the orange crate wood was, you can have some idea of the workmanship of those carvers.

To say the least, Fr. Reinschmidt treasured this gift until he died in 1949. The two priests following Fr. Reinschmidt kept the set although there were several times that I tried to talk them out of it.

Finally, one of the priests let me have it and I still have it and use it every Christmas, and have to tell the story to all who come to the rectory and see it. The only thing I have done to the set is to replace the ground.

The prisoners had put dried grass on the floor of the set to look like straw or grass and over the years this has all fallen off. So, a year or so ago, I put on the floor some mosaic gravel to give it a sand effect. Other than that, the set remains exactly as the prisoners made it and presented it to Fr. Reinschmidt.

I don't know if anyone would be interested in seeing this Nativity set, but I would be willing to loan it to the library or some other place for an exhibit. The only thing I would ask is that it would be handled carefully and that I would have it back in time for next Christmas.

Now that I have written this letter, I can't help wondering if there would be anyone else who would have a story that would equal that of Fr. Reinschmidt's dealing with those men brought to Neodesha as POWs.

Sincerely,
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