

THE EATON PRISON CAMP  
by  
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## THE EATON PRISON CAMP

The first German labor that was used in Eaton was in the summer of 1944. There were approximately ten or twelve prisoners sent here from a prison camp which was located at Windfall, Indiana. The prisoners worked for Butterfield's Canning Co. that summer. During the next winter Butterfield's Canning Co. made arrangements with the United States Government to have a prison camp located in Eaton. These arrangements were made through the Indiana Cannery Association. Butterfields were to pay the Government a certain amount for each prisoner that worked for them and the government in turn paid the prisoners in script money (money that could only be spent in the camp) for each days work.<sup>1</sup> Butterfield's also donated the 17 acre field which is located northeast of the factory for the location of the camp. The only requirement was that the prisoners were to leave the ground in as good a condition as they found it.<sup>2</sup>

The camp was built by a small group of prisoners known as trustees. These were prisoners who could be trusted to work with tools without causing trouble or rebelling. Work on the

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<sup>1</sup> Mr. Forest Frederick

<sup>2</sup> Mr. Jerry Sills

According to international law, there are many rules concerning prisoners of war. Some of these rules are that the food rations supplied to the prisoners must be sufficient to keep them in good health, and comparable to the food served to the detaining troops. The living quarters are supposed to be at least as favorable as those provided for the troops of the detaining power and billeted in the same area. It is also specified that a country may use the labor of prisoners of war as long as the tasks are not excessive and do not have any connections with the operations of war. Also, officers are not required to work but may do so if they volunteer. Prisoners may be authorized to work for public persons or private persons, and they must be paid for this labor.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this term paper is to give a small history and some interesting facts about a prison camp that was located in Eaton. This camp was for German soldiers only and apparently met all the above stated requirements for the detainment of prisoners of war.

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The Encyclopedia Americana, "Prisoners of War"

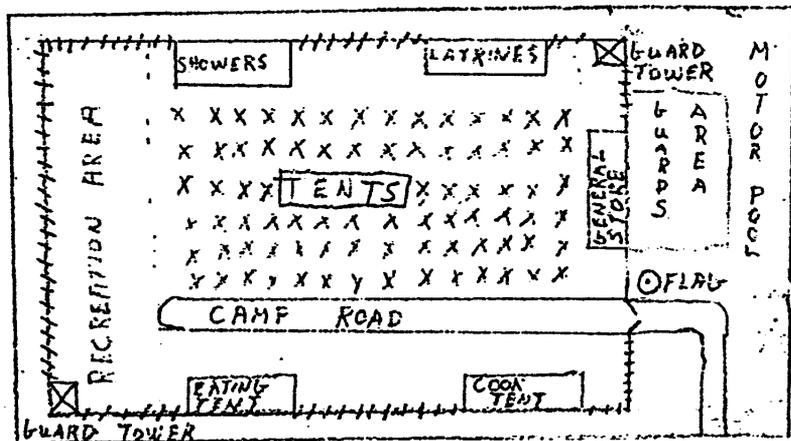
camp was begun in the early part of June of 1945 and was finished within a week and a half.<sup>1</sup> The first large group of prisoners was brought in around the 15 of August. The camp existed until about November 1, 1945 when it was evacuated due to cold weather and the fact that there was no longer work for the prisoners to do.<sup>2</sup>

The prisoners were required to raise the flag of the United States of America each morning. Although they did not like the idea, they had no choice but to obey. The living conditions of the prisoners were very satisfactory. Their food was shipped in daily from Fort Benjamin Harrison, and they were served three meals a day. They lived in five men tents and had the benefit of showers, latrines,<sup>3</sup> a recreation area where they mostly played soccer, a small store where they could buy articles with their script money, and their own library.<sup>4</sup>

The camp was surrounded by a fence that was ten feet high. At the top of this fence were four strands of barb wire which slanted inward.<sup>5</sup> At the northeast and southwest corners were located guard towers which were just large enough for one man and a machine gun capable of sweeping the entire field. The prisoners were not supposed to come within five feet of this fence, but it was a favorite sport among them to constantly keep walking up and down alongside the fence just to irritate the guards.<sup>6</sup> Below is a copy of a rough diagram of the camp which was first drawn by Mr. Sills. Accompanying it is a snapshot of the camp

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- 1 Mr. Forest Frederick
  - 2 Mr. Jerry Sills
  - 3 Mr. Forest Frederick
  - 4 Mr. Robert Jury
  - 5 Mr. Jerry Sills
  - 6 Mr. Robert Jury

which was taken by a friend of Mr. Francis LaMar. An interesting thing about this snapshot is that it was illegal to take pictures of a prison camp during the war.



The first reaction of the townspeople when they learned that there was to be a prison camp located in Eaton was not favorable. But when they learned that the prisoners would be constantly under guard and would be kept in the camp when not working, they felt more willing to accept it. Due to the fact that the people were uneasy about the camp, they were not told about one incident that seems rather interesting. When the Windfall prison camp flooded that summer, the Windfall prisoners were moved to Eaton until their camp could be restored. At this time there were more prisoners living on the 17 acre field than there were citizens living in the town. <sup>1</sup> As a whole though, the townspeople accepted the idea of having the camp here, and there were no incidents.

The first group of prisoners, who were used here in 1944,

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<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Mildred Butterfield

were men who were captured during the early part of the war. They were members of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's famous tank corps, and they were pure hard boiled Nazis. They were described by Mrs. Mildred Butterfield as being "nasty and hard to control." <sup>1</sup>

The prisoners who actually lived in the Eaton prison camp were captured during the latter part of the war and were mostly drafted men. These soldiers were generally easy to get along with and control. They realized that they were being treated decently and, therefore, had very little reason to cause trouble.<sup>2</sup> Whenever they did, though, there were methods for punishing them that were very effective. There was a road that went down through the center of the camp that was made of stones approximately 1½ inches in diameter. For punishment the prisoners would have to get down on their hands and knees on this road and turn the stones over one at a time for a certain prescribed length of time.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes the punishment fitted the offense. In the packing department of the factory there was a machine that drove the staples which held the boxes together. One time a young prisoner decided he would be funny and just let this machine run. Consequently, he wound up with a box which was full of several hundred staples. When the foreman saw this box, he showed it to the guard who immediately asked who had been running the machine. The prisoner was pointed out to the guard and that night he was not allowed to go to bed until he had pulled every one of the staples out of the box with his teeth.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Mrs. Mildred Butterfield  
2 Mr. Forest Frederick  
3 Mr. Jerry Sills  
4 Mr. Forest Frederick

These prisoners came from all parts of Germany and they also represented a good cross section of the people. Mr. Frederick took a map of Germany down to the factory one day and had each man circle the town where he lived, and then had him write his name out to the side of the circle. When he was through the whole map of Germany was filled with small circles.<sup>1</sup>

There were also many different trades and ages represented in the camp. There were artists, engineers, tailors, barbers, and men who could do just about every other type of work that you could mention. The average age of the prisoners was between 17 and 25, although there were some in their sixties. There was one prisoner who was 17 and had been a paratrooper for five years. This means that he apparently entered the army when he was only 12! The older men often were in bad health and quite frequently had heart trouble.

The guards were not from any particular division of the army and most of them were just waiting to be discharged. The commanding officer was a Major in the medical corps who was also just passing the time until his discharge. The guards lived in 5-men tents just like the prisoners. When not on duty they were free to do just about anything they wanted to. Their favorite recreation was found at the local pool hall or else the tavern.<sup>2</sup>

Even when on duty they frequently did not take their job seriously. Often when a guard would have charge of a group of prisoners out in the field he would lie down in some shade, if any was available, and sleep while the prisoners went about their work, with only the field supervisor for Butterfields to watch them.<sup>3</sup>

- 1 Mr. Forest Frederick
- 2 Mr. Robert Jury
- 3 Mr. Jerry Sills

Another instance of how the guards trusted the prisoners was related by Mrs. Elliott. Mr. Elliott had cleared part of his woods by cutting down several trees. He then offered the tree tops to be used at the camp by the prisoners for cooking fuel. The first few days Mrs. Elliott noticed that when the prisoners arrived, the guards would come first with their guns over their shoulders and then immediately behind them would come the prisoners with axes over their shoulders. One day she asked one of the guards if they didn't think it was dangerous to have the prisoners behind them while they were carrying axes. The guard replied rather shamefacedly that he had never even thought about it. After that though there was always one guard in front and one <sup>behind</sup> in back of the group of prisoners.<sup>1</sup>

The camp furnished prisoners for canneries within a 50 mile radius. The prisoners were required to work an eight hour day at least. If they worked in the fields picking tomatoes, they were to pick 40 hampers a day regardless of how long it took them. If any prisoner picked more than the required 40 hampers, he was paid 1¢ for every extra hamper. Very seldom did any of the prisoners pick more than the required number of hampers, though, for they did not like the work.<sup>2</sup> If they worked in the factory, they were only required to work eight hours and then they could quit.

The prisoners who worked in the factory often came in quite handy. Many were experienced mechanics and they often invented devices to improve Butterfield's production. One example of this

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1 Mrs. Lafayette Elliott  
2 Mr. Jerry Sills

was a man who invented a device to keep peeling knives (if they were accidentally dropped) from floating away with the peelings and fouling up the pumps that force the peelings out into the tomato pond.<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes the prisoners were allowed to work for private citizens. Mr. Francis LaMar needed a ditch that would run across one of his fields for draining off excess water in case of a hard storm. Since he lived within the city limits, he went to the town board to see if they could have it put in. They replied that they would be happy to, but it would be impossible because of the shortage of tile. He happened to have a friend that was in the ditch digging business who agreed to sell him the tile. He also wrote to Camp Atterbury to get permission to use the German prisoners to dig the ditch. They replied that they wanted to <sup>do</sup> something for the town since they had let them erect a prison camp here, and they supposed that this would be just the thing. Thus, with the help of about 20 prisoners Mr. LaMar acquired a new ditch for practically nothing because the town reimbursed him for the cost of the tile.<sup>2</sup>

In my interviews with various people who were connected with the camp, I was told several unusual stories about several of the different prisoners and some of these persons' experiences with them. I have tried to record some of these stories below as near-like they were told to me as possible.

Among the prisoners there were several different fellows who were very adept at fixing radios. One of these worked in what is known as the cook room in the canning factory. One day

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1 Mr. Forest Frederick  
2 Mr. Francis LaMar

he stepped outside to get away from the heat and catch a breath of fresh air while he smoked a cigarette. Mr. Frederick's car happened to be parked near-by so the fellow decided to sit down in the car and listen to the radio while he rested. As it happened, the radio did not work, and so he asked Mr. Frederick if he would be allowed to fix it for him. Mr. Frederick said that he did not care. Consequently, the radio was fixed the next day. Later Mr. Frederick learned that this fellow had been a radio officer on a submarine which had given itself up in New York Harbor. When the camp was evacuated, this fellow gave Mr. Frederick the insignia of his fighting division. It was a circle with a streak of lightning through it.<sup>1</sup> There were also several other cases where prisoners fixed the guard's radios.<sup>2</sup> One prisoner even fixed a radio that Mr. Sills had decided to throw away due to the fact that no one could fix it.<sup>3</sup> When a person stops to think about this, it is really remarkable that they were able to fix these radios without parts available.

There was another man whom Mr. Frederick got to know quite well. His name was Kurt. When Mr. Frederick first met him, he was very surly and sullen, but when Mr. Frederick spoke to him in German (Mr. Frederick is of German ~~descent~~<sup>descent</sup> and speaks the language fluently) he became more friendly. After they came to know each other quite well, Kurt asked him if he would be willing to exchange addresses and write to each other after the war was over. Mr. Frederick agreed to this and for many years after the war they corresponded faithfully. Since Kurt was having a hard

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1 Mr. Forest Frederick  
2 Mr. Robery Jury  
3 Mr. Jerry Sills

time getting established in his war stricken country, Mr. Frederick sent him CARE packages regularly until he was more prosperous.

One incident that shows how much the German people were often deceived is brought out by another story which was told to me by Mr. Frederick. One day there were several prisoners loading a truck. One of the prisoners asked Mr. Frederick where the truck was going and he replied that it was destined for Chicago. The prisoner looked at him rather strangely and said that that couldn't be because Chicago had been destroyed by German bombing. Hard as Mr. Frederick tried to convince him that Chicago hadn't been bombed, he was unsuccessful.<sup>1</sup>

There was only one escape from the camp and the prisoner returned on his own accord after about three or four days. When the guards found him sitting across the road early in the morning, he told them that he had been living with a woman in Matthews. What punishment, if any, was given to this fellow I do not know.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most interesting stories was told to me by Mr. Jury. The regard of these prisoners for Hitler's SS men was not very high; in fact, it was hatred. Every SS man was tattooed with a black square on his chest to show that he belonged to this elite division of Hitler's troops. It just so happened that there was one of these men in the Eaton prison camp. One night he tried to remove his tattoo with a razor blade, but he was discovered by some of his tent mates. The rest of the prisoners practically killed him before the guards could get him out of the camp. He was shipped to Indianapolis and that is all that is known of him.<sup>3</sup>

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- 1 Mr. Forest Frederick
  - 2 Mr. Jerry Sills
  - 3 Mr. Robert Jury

The final story was told to me by Mr. Sills. As previously stated the prisoners were supposed to leave the land in the same condition as they found it. They complied to this rule with only one exception. Instead of filling one of the latrines, which were 11 feet deep, full of dirt as they were supposed to do, they put boards across it about 3 feet from the top. Then they filled this upper part full of dirt to make it look natural. The land passed Mr. Sills inspection and it was not until the next summer that he discovered that he had been tricked. While plowing the field, his tractor went nose first into this hole, and he spent several hours getting it out! <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mr. Jerry Sills

The location of a German prison camp in Eaton was not an unusual happening. During World War II the United States had prison camps located throughout the country. The fact that one was located here in Eaton, though, makes this fact more real, and it takes on a deeper meaning.

The treatment of the prisoners in this particular prison camp was quite fair, and most of them realized that they were better off spending the rest of the war as a prisoner than if they were still in the front lines fighting.

Many of the citizens of Eaton had personal experiences with different prisoners which they will probably never forget. I believe that the prison camp was probably a good source of education for all those involved.

I feel that I have been richly rewarded by writing this term paper about the camp. The experience of interviewing the people who were in direct contact with the camp has been very valuable, and their cooperation was very much appreciated.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. "Prisoners of War" , The Encyclopedia Americana, copyright 1961
2. Mrs. Mildred Butterfield  
400 S. Roomey St.  
Eaton, Indiana  
EX 6-3616  

Mrs. Butterfield is the widow of Ralph Butterfield. Mr. Butterfield was the owner of Butterfield's Canning Co.
3. Mrs. Lafayette Elliott  
112 East Harris St.  

The Elliotts used to live on a farm located east of Eaton
4. Forest Frederick  
420 East Harris St.  
Eaton, Indiana  
EX 6 3532  

Mr. Frederick was the Office Manager for Butterfield's Canning Co. at the time the prison camp was located here.
5. Mr. Robert Jury  
109 North Hartford St.  
Eaton, Indiana  
EX 6-3535  

Mr. Jury was stationed at the prison camp as a guard while he was in the army.
6. Mr. Francis LaMar  
North Meridian St.  
Eaton, Indiana  
Ex 6-3422  

Mr. Lamar lives directly across from where the prison camp was located.
7. Mr. Jerry Sills  
412 North Meridian  
Eaton, Indiana  
EX 6-3128  

Mr. Sills is the Field supervisor for Butterfield's Canning Co. The prison camp was located practically at his back door.