

# Stories of a prison camp



PHOTO PROVIDED

IN 1945 Eaton was home to this Prisoner of War camp for German prisoners. The camp was in use from June until December, and housed at least two waves of prisoners during the war.

By **ALYSON MADSEN**

For The Star Press

People who haven't lived long in Eaton might not be aware that a German Prisoner of War Camp existed there during World War II. It was at 1100 North Meridian St., across from the old Butterfield's Canning Company, now Midwest Auto Body Parts.

According to a term paper written by Eaton resident Dean Maitlin some years back, many of the citizens of Eaton had personal experiences with the prison camp, which they "probably will never forget." Maitlin now lives in Florida.

German prison camps in this country were not all that uncommon; in fact, during World War II, several were located throughout the country.

The Eaton 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," wrote Maitlin.

Work on the camp began around the first of June, 1945, and took a week and a half to complete. It existed until Nov. 1, 1945, and then was evacuated because of cold weather and scarcity of work.

The overall treatment of the prisoners was good, although some of the men refused to obey orders such as raising the American flag each morning. The camp received three meals a day, shipped in from Fort Benjamin Harrison.

"They [the prisoners] lived in five-man tents and had the benefit of showers, latrines, a recreation

area where they could buy articles with their script money, and their own library," wrote Maitlin. "The camp was surrounded by a fence that was 10 feet high ... and at the northeast and southwest corners of the camp were guard towers. The prisoners were not supposed to come within five feet of the fence, but it was a favorite sport among them to constantly keep walking up and down alongside the fence just to irritate the guards."

"At one time there were more prisoners living in the 17-acre camp than there were citizens living in town," related Mildred Butterfield, whose husband owned the factory.

The first group of prisoners were hard-core Nazis ... described as 'nasty and hard to control.'"

"The second group were captured during the second part of the war," according to Forest Frederick, "and were generally easy to get along with and control ... but there were methods to control them if necessary."

"There was a road that went down through the middle of the camp that was made of stones approximately one and one-half inches in diameter," added Jerry Sills. "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."

Frederick and Sills were both employees of Butterfield's.

Inmates of the camp came from all over Germany. Moreover, "there were different trades and ages represented," such as artists, engineers, tailors, barbers,

and mechanics. "The average age of the prisoners was between 17 and 25," recalled Frederick. "One 17-year-old had been a paratrooper for five years; that means that he apparently entered the army when he was only 12!"

Frederick related another story, which reflects the overall compliance of the prisoners.

"One prisoner escaped but returned of 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." It's not known what type of punishment this man received.

Another story told by Robert Jury, also employed by Butterfield's, concerned an alleged SS man in the camp, who was tattooed with a "black square on his chest to show that he belonged to this elite division of Hitler's troops. One night he tried to remove his tattoo with a razor blade but 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 was known of him."

More stories surfaced as current Eaton residents offered their perspectives.

Margaret Morris keeps the above photograph as a reminder of the camp; a duplicate sits on the mantle at the Eaton Public Library. Morris recounted how her husband took great interest in history, in particular the POW camp. She said someone gave her husband the Maitlin research.

Anita Wright, Eaton Public Library director, heard her husband's great aunt occasionally discuss the camp.

"She (the aunt) and her friends would go walking downtown on a Saturday night and then over to the camp and talk through the fence. Some of the prisoners were pretty friendly."

According to Janelle Reber, "The prisoners liked Americans better than the Germans. A few of them established strong bonds with their captors, and some may have eventually moved to America."

Janelle and husband Jack live in the old Butterfield residence.

Donna Tharp worked at Douglas Eaton Manufacturing (the site of the former Colony Printing), which made tubular chairs for kitchen dinettes. She was office manager of the plant for 50-plus years, staying even after the buy-out and move to Mississippi. She recalled that at least one guard worked at Douglas, although she couldn't recall in what capacity. When the camp closed, the guard sent cards to Tharp's boss as a token of his appreciation.

"Many prisoners realized that they were better off spending the rest of the war in Eaton, Indiana, than if they were in the front lines fighting," Maitlin wrote.

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