

Yankton's Prisoners Of War

During The Last Months Of WWII, About 100 German POWs Were Brought To Yankton

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As World War II neared its end, hundreds of thousands of German POWs were dispersed across the United States to work on various projects during their imprisonment.

For more than 100 of those soldiers, Yankton — at least for a time — would become home.

One of the main POW camps was at Algona, Iowa, where approximately 10,000 Germans were assigned to provide labor for farms, industries and construction projects. Many prisoners were relocated to branch camps in Minnesota, Iowa and the Dakotas, including Branch Camp No. 22, which was located at the east hangar at the Yankton municipal airport.

POW Rutra Rendnab, in a letter preserved by the organization TRACES, wrote about his journey to Yankton:

"The events speak for themselves: as every German loves to travel, we looked forward to the nearly 250-mile trip to the west. The landscape barely changed: the cities and towns everywhere here in America resemble each other like peas in a pod. Shortly before reaching our destination, we had to cross a range of small hills — most likely the border between Iowa and South Dakota. The sharp wind very quickly left us wishing for a warm room.

"After a seven-hour journey we arrived at our destination: a cold hangar serves as our accommodations. A lover of old things would have been delighted with this paradise of clutter, junk of all kinds, airplane parts, motors and such stuff. An old truck and car 'crowned' this chaos. Nothing like getting to it! With chattering teeth the hangar was cleaned up while the kitchen in the corner went into service. (We had lights — but that's all — in the first days.) Pleasant smells spread out from the kitchen corner while we set up the bunk beds, three high; the upper bed served as a locker.



P&D ARCHIVE PHOTO

About 100 German prisoners of war were housed in Yankton in early 1945 as World War II entered its final year. The prisoners did erosion-mitigation work along the Missouri River, the results of which are still visible today. (This photo was published in "Yankton: The Way It Was!" by Bob Karolevitz.)

"Happily, into this confusion came the sounds of music from a radio. We couldn't understand much — it being more a noise than anything else. A ping-pong table, supported by two crates, was our banquet table. At 10:30 that night we celebrated our first feast. Satisfied and tired, we awaited the next day."

Most members of the Yankton community first learned of the POWs' arrival on April 3, 1945, when the *Press & Dakotan* reported that the men had arrived the previous night.

The Germans were soon put to work on a rip-rapping project developed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to address the continuing erosion on the Nebraska side of the river west of the Meridian Bridge. The prisoners supplemented the local labor force, which was still facing shortages because of the war.

Bob Steinbach, who grew up in Yankton but was often away at the time for school, said the POWs garnered interest from people in Yankton, as they were "something new in town."

"They would take them down to the river, and the locals would go down and visit with them," he said.

"A lot of the women were regular visitors, from what I understand."

Accompanying the Germans were numerous U.S. Army guards, including Alois A. Broz of Tyndall. Broz had served in the South Pacific with Yankton's Battery E of the 147th Field Artillery before being reassigned.

In a letter to the *Press & Dakotan*, Broz wrote:

"When the branch camp opened up in Yankton, I was sent as one of the guards. I felt lucky as I was only about 25 miles from home ... The five or six guards who were assigned to the camp slept in rooms above the other hangar, and we ate with the German prisoners as they also cooked our meals.

"Probably our main problem as guards was to keep some of the civilians out of the prisoners' quarters. There had to be at least one guard on duty at all times, not that they were needed, but you couldn't have over 100 prisoners of war around and not have someone there pretending to be in charge."

The prisoners were paid 10 cents an hour for their labor, but were only given a few cents a day to spend. The rest of the money was kept in accounts by the U.S.

Army to be awarded during repatriation.

Rendnab's account seemed to indicate that the POWs were content with how they were treated, and they found many ways to entertain themselves.

"Camaraderie is good, and the airport has good facilities for soccer, handball and fistball," he wrote. "In addition, chess and Skat are enthusiastically played — as well as 'Man, Don't Get Angry' with old campaign buttons. Musical instruments and books should be on their way. The kitchen under Private Braun is good, and Sgt. Homburger serves as the long-standing leader of the camp."

While Branch No. 22 saw few troubles, there was one incident that the *Press & Dakotan* reported on June 18, 1945:

"A trip to base headquarters at Algona, Iowa, and recommendation of a bread-and-water diet for four men were the result of a minor 'sit down' staged by [several] German prisoners of war engaged in work on the Missouri River bank control project here this weekend.

"The work-strike, unconfirmed by local Army officials, is rumored to have taken place last week ... The

men are reported to have refused to continue their assigned duties on the river ... It is believed some of the local offenders may be put on bread and water for 30 days, while others will probably receive lighter punishment in accordance with their attitudes."

Despite the incident, work continued, and on July 5, the *Press & Dakotan* reported the prisoners were being transferred to Onawa, Iowa, for another project.

According to most accounts, the prisoners came and went with little impact on members of the community, aside from the occasional conversation or illicit gift of alcohol or food.

For the most part, the POWs were treated with respect while in Yankton, but largely forgotten once they were gone — a sentiment echoed by Steinbach.

"I don't remember any troubles," he said. "I think most people just felt sorry for them."

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