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# POW Camp: Yankton

## Alyce Welby Remembers Life During Wartime In Yankton, And She Also Recalls Seeing Some New Faces: German Prisoners Of War

BY DAVE HOSMER

Nearly every morning Sandy Heier served me a cup of coffee and, eventually, our conversations turned to World War II. To be fair, that is true with many people I know. She mentioned that her Mother, Alyce Welby, lived in Yankton during the War and had worked at the Yankton Airport. Hmm. That got me thinking. German prisoners had been housed at that airport. It has been a great mystery to me. I have heard about them, but I have never seen pictures.

Off I went to meet Alyce. After I told her of my curiosity she still seemed a little shy. I wondered why, but she eventually told me. Alyce was originally from Lester, Iowa. Her father (Adolph Schacht) worked for the Great Northern Railroad as a section hand. Growing up during the Depression Years “was just great. We didn’t know any” different. Everyone was in the same boat.

Her home, which was located on the edge of town, had no running water or electricity (until the REA came through in 1936). She laughed as she joked that their outhouse was tipped over every Halloween. Her parents were kind of part-time farmers. They raised one milk cow and the runt pigs from others farmers. They enjoyed plums, pears, apples and grapes from their orchard/vineyard. Her job was to gather eggs and to bring in cobs for the cook stove. As I asked her about her mother’s cooking, her eyes lit up. “She could make a meal out of nothing!” She loved her vegetable soup and dumplings.

They had a few “luxuries,” such as a radio purchased by her older sister. They didn’t listen to it often because they loved playing outside. She didn’t own a bicycle, which was OK. They played hopscotch and roll the barrel. She was also active in basketball. Her father, however, loved to listen to the prize fights and baseball on the radio. He also loved detective magazines. Her parents did not own a car because her father was afraid of motors. As a result, they walked everywhere. They didn’t have a telephone until 1943. As for trains, she recalls taking a passenger train to Chicago, which was a real treat.

On the morning of Dec. 8, 1941, as she was preparing for school, she heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor. She didn’t give it much thought at that time. Her parents hadn’t talked politics in the home, although she knew that her father, a union man, supported President Roosevelt. She recalls that her father purchased



These pilings located along the south side of the Missouri River west of Yankton are remnants of the bank fortification work done by German prisoners of war who were assigned here late in World War II.

PHOTO: DAVE HOSMER

a \$25 war bond for \$18.75.

Jim Smith, a foreman with the railroad and also a friend of her father, lived in Yankton. Alyce’s mother suggested that she move to Yankton and live with the Smiths. After she graduated from high school in 1942, she moved in with the Smiths; they lived in the roundhouse located to the north of Frick’s on Highway 50.

She has very fond memories of Yankton at that time. She visited WNAX to watch live entertainment. She dined at the Presto and College cafes. Her first job was at the Bowling Alley, which was located to the south of the Dakota Theater, but she left there to work at the Yankton Municipal Airport. (It wasn’t named the Chan Gurney Airport until later.) Her boss was Mr. Bierman. Marina Payne also worked there. Every day she entered data into the logbooks

(an instructor would detail the facts of each training flight) and answered letters for Mrs. Bierman. Her pay was \$23.40 per week. Because she was living with her, Mrs. Smith took all of her ration stamps for shoes, gas, sugar, coffee and other canned goods.

In June of 1943, the City of Yankton entered into an agreement with the Civilian Aeronautics Association to train young naval cadets to be pilots while they attended Yankton College. The Navy had an office upstairs from her office. She remembers several of the pilots and their nice uniforms. The pilot classes began in the fall of 1943 and then ended in the spring of 1944 (which coincided with Yankton College semesters). A lot of citizens also took pilot lessons, including Mayor Danforth and attorney George Kunkel. The *P&D*

printed a weekly column to introduce the airport employees and the other trainees. She clipped those stories.

In early April of 1945 she recalls going to work and seeing a lot of new faces. In fact, those men were captured German soldiers. Those 50-plus men kept to themselves. “I never spoke to them.” They were housed in one of the hangars at the airport with a fence around them. One of the guards was a former member of the 147th National Guard — Alois Brosz from Tyndall. According to a letter he wrote to the *Press & Dakotan*, the guards slept in the hangar with the prisoners, who cooked their own food. Father Link spoke German and he would drop into the camp to help civilians who tended to the prisoners. Many of the prisoners spoke English, however. Alyce didn’t have any pictures of them. Darn.



Welby

There were approximately 450,000 German POW’s in the States at that time. About 10,000 of them were housed in Algona, Iowa, and many of them were very experienced soldiers who had fought in Rommel’s Afrika Corps. The Camp in Yankton was referred to as Branch Camp No. 22. America needed a place to keep the prisoners and it also needed labor because most of its young men were away in the War.

The Corps of Engineers determined that the Missouri River was eroding the bank upstream from the Meridian Bridge and endangering the piers. It developed a bank stabilization plan to install riprap on the Nebraska side of the River. The German prisoners came to Yankton to complete that job. They were paid for their labor (most of their pay was saved to give to them at repatriation) and were well fed. According to the *Press & Dakotan*, there was one sit-down strike by a few prisoners, who were then given a bread-and-water diet. The prisoners left on July 5, on their way to another river project in Iowa.

“One day they were there and then they evaporated — the fence was gone!” Note that V-E Day was in May of 1945.

Alyce met a special someone at the bowling alley that summer — Don Welby. She left her employment with the Airport after Aug. 28, 1945, to marry Don, who was from the Mission Hill area. A cow had kicked him, which kept him from being drafted into the military. But he and Alyce were always very patriotic and the military runs through their family. Her son-in-law, Gary Heier, served in the military during the Vietnam Era, and her grandson, Jeffrey Heier, a member in Charlie Battery, served a tour in Iraq.

And then it dawned on me why she was a little shy. I asked her about her German heritage. She shared with me that her second cousin — Hjalmar Schacht — was a banker in Germany. Hjalmar had been a supporter of Adolf Hitler and became the Minister of Economics. He was ultimately kicked out of government because he opposed rearming Germany. After the attempt to assassinate Hitler, he was arrested and ultimately imprisoned at Dachau. He was tried at Nuremberg for “crimes against peace” (planning a war of aggression), but he was acquitted. And, as they say, now you know the rest of the story.

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