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Article Summary: During World War II, prisoners of war from Europe and Africa were transferred to the United States. Of the 425,000 held in the US, 12,000 were in 20 camps in Nebraska. Scottsbluff and Fort Robinson were two base camps in western Nebraska. This article addresses the formation, conditions and running of the camps for the mostly German and Italian prisoners.

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Photographs / Images: All-Faith Chapel, Sioux Ordnance Depot, Sidney; German POW Peter Kielman; Italian POWs at Sioux Ordnance Depot, Sidney; Italian soldiers including Emanuelle Campanella; chart of Nebraska Prisoner of War Camps with principal types of work performed there; listing of German Newspapers published in Nebraska camps

Prisoners of War In Cheyenne County, 1943-1946

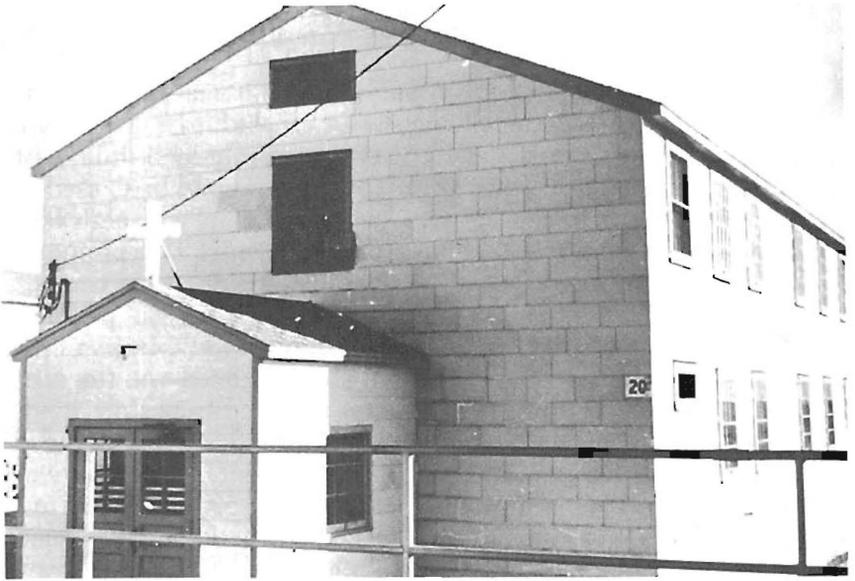
BY RALPH SPENCER*

Prisoners of war became the responsibility of the Army under the provost marshal general. Even before Pearl Harbor, plans were made for internment camps, as prisoners were expected should United States merchantmen encounter difficulties on the high seas. The first prisoner of World War II was captured, however, on December 7, 1941, at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. He was a Japanese crewman of a disabled submarine. Thousands of others soon joined him.

Over three million prisoners were captured by the Allies in World War II. Of those transferred from active theatres of operation to the United States, approximately 372,000 were German and 50,000 were Italian.¹ When the United States entered World War II, the hard-pressed Allied European powers were holding almost all of the prisoners they could handle. About 15,000 prisoners were soon transferred from Great Britain to the US, and most of those captured from the German Africa Corps were sent to the United States.²

The treaty drawn up by the Geneva Red Cross Convention in 1929 and signed by 47 nations defined the treatment of captured, sick, wounded, medical and sanitary personnel. The *Geneva Convention Relative to Treatment of Prisoners of War*, most generally referred to as the Geneva Convention, was directed to general treatment of prisoners, and concerned itself with work, recreation, food, health, and sanitary conditions. The Geneva Convention also stipulated that prisoners should be interned away from combat areas.

The remote areas of Nebraska were ideal locations, and of some 425,000 prisoners held in the United States, around 12,000 were in some 20 camps in Nebraska.³ Scottsbluff and Fort Robinson were two base camps in western Nebraska,



All-Faith Chapel, Sioux Ordnance Depot, Sidney, was torn down in the fall of 1980.



*German POW Peter Kielman,
Sioux Ordnance Depot, Sidney.*

with branch or side camps, including those at Bridgeport, Bayard, Lyman, Mitchell, Morrill, and Sidney.⁴ The main prisoner of war camp was located approximately 5 miles east and 1½ miles south of Scottsbluff.⁵ The land had been used as the city airport in the early 1930s. The camp was activated May 4, 1943, as an "Internment Camp"⁶ under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Clyde B. Dempster, and at the time of the first official visit on December 16-19, 1943, the prisoner list consisted of 2,719 Italian enlisted men and 24 Italian officers.⁷ After the war camp buildings were moved and the area utilized as a city dump site but later reverted to pasture land.

Prisoners entering the main camp for the first time followed a set administrative procedure for internment. Each man was registered and given a physical examination; searched for unauthorized articles; assigned to a bed in the barracks, issued one pillow, two blankets, one bedsack or mattress and straw for the sack; and assigned a metal or canvas cot. Arrivals received at night were served sandwiches and coffee.⁸ New arrivals came directly by train from the seaports to Scottsbluff. They were sometimes dressed in ragged and dingy shorts or thin uniforms. Even after an issue of warmer clothing they found the climate in western Nebraska a new experience.

Emanuelle Campanella was among several hundred thousand soldiers captured in North Africa in May of 1943. He described the early conditions of the prisoners as primitive, for the American "war effort" was then the crucial issue and problems arising from housing and feeding large numbers of prisoners only secondary. Recalls Campanella:

When they first capture us, it was kinda on the rough side. They didn't have enough food and system because they were all concentrated in one big area — empty ground you might say. They didn't have no barracks. No place to sleep, or rest rooms, or anything like that. It was just like you might say 'cattle in a pasture.'⁹

Campanella had been captured in Tunis, shipped to Iran,¹⁰ then sailed with Italian prisoners to the United States where his destination was a large camp at Scottsbluff. Later he was sent to the side camp at Sidney, Nebraska, and remained there until he was returned home to Italy.¹¹

The internment camps sprang up in the Midwest because of its shortage of manpower in producing agricultural products necessary in the war effort. Demand for workers in the fields

of the North Platte Valley enabled many POWs to find useful labor in agriculture.¹² However, some were sent to the Sioux Ordnance Depot, located 10 miles northwest of Sidney.

The Sidney camp, known as Side Camp Number Nine, averaged around 300 prisoners, mostly Italian.¹³ In the spring of 1944, there were over 600 prisoners, 307 Italians and 306 Germans.¹⁴ Temporary barracks, the same type as those occupied by Americans, were built south of the main entrance to the Sioux Army Depot. A barbed wire stockade was built around the compound to facilitate guarding the prisoners.¹⁵

There were few complaints about the food.¹⁶ At the Sidney camp the prisoner barracks had their own Italian or German cooks. They thought American cheese and bread were of inferior quality, and prisoners who got out of line were said to have become more tractable if threatened with a diet of American food.¹⁷ During holiday seasons baskets of cookies and other foods were brought to the POWs by German and Italian people living in the area.

The Italians as workers were sometimes described as "fun-loving and somewhat lazy,"¹⁸ but also as "good-time Charlies."¹⁹ Italians frequently objected to field labor on the grounds that they were from the cities and not accustomed to such work. They were somewhat chagrined when it was pointed out to them that school students could do as well.²⁰ Prisoners by international agreement could refuse to work, but many found that time passed faster if they were working than if sitting idle in the compound.²¹

The Sioux Army Depot itself offered many opportunities for jobs. The prisoners aided in carrying out functions of the depot by serving as laborers, engineers, carpenters, automotive mechanics, typists, tractor operators, hospital attendants, and post exchange cooks. For a time there was concern among Nebraskans that the prisoners might replace civilian workers. However, no American citizen was ever discharged or laid off to be replaced by a prisoner.²² Whenever a train came in to be loaded or unloaded quickly, prisoners might be taken off regular jobs to assist those who ordinarily handled the job. "Whenever we were called to do another job, we were supposed to do it," Campanella recalled.²³ POWs when working were paid 80 cents per day. Part of this allotment was kept for the day when they would be repatriated. Farmers using POW

laborers paid the standard wage for agricultural workers directly to the camp, and POWs were paid out of this fund.

There was some discussion relative to establishing an additional camp at the Cheyenne County fairgrounds to house prisoners to work for the Union Pacific Railroad. Evidently the plan did not materialize and the county board was not approached.²⁴

On September 8, 1943, Italy surrendered. At that time Italian prisoners were free to decide if they would work for the American government under civilian authority and be given special privileges, provided they sign the Italian Service Unit parole agreement. Those who did so were issued American GI uniforms and were free to come and go almost as freely as American soldiers attached to the base. On May 1, 1944, the 70th Italian Quartermaster Service Company was formed. Those Italian prisoners who became members of the service unit could volunteer for any part of the war effort except actual combat.²⁵ Four Italian officers arrived to head the troops, thus releasing American soldiers for other duty. These officers were Captain Gino Rizzo, 1st Lieutenant Antonio Talamazzi, 1st Lieutenant Fernando Trasatti, and 2nd Lieutenant Walfrido Verdolini.²⁶

Even after the alignment of Italy as a co-belligerent, and Italian prisoners were allowed the freedom of reservation, they still were restricted from going into Sidney unless in groups accompanied by an officer. On July 14, 1944, the Italian choir sang at a public concert at Band Shell Park in Sidney. The songs included "Rosamunda" (Roll Out the Barrel), "Campagnola" (Farm Girl), "Piemoutesina" (Piedmont Lass), "Sciatore" (String Song), "La Pensiero" (Thought), and "Marinariello" (Neapolitan Fisherman Song).²⁷

German prisoners were allowed no such freedoms. Though considered excellent workers, they were more difficult to handle and had more restrictions on their daily lives. Some Germans had been in the Hitler Youth Group, and all prisoners were well-trained soldiers. They had their own officers and kept to themselves. As a rule, they were aloof and resented being so far inland.²⁸ "We're not here because we want to be," related one German soldier.²⁹ This, along with the German belief that Hitler could not be defeated, led to an incident in which a German soldier "deliberately drove a truck into the



Italian POWs in front of barracks, Sioux Ordnance Depot, Sidney. Emanuelle Campanella is thought to be among them.



Italian soldiers photographed in Italy. At center is Emanuelle Campanella.

fire wall, and broke out a lot of bricks.”³⁰ German soldier behavior was described differently at the Scottsbluff Camp by the *Star-Herald*. They were less intractable there.³¹

As in most camps, soccer was the favorite sport at the Sidney Side Camp. An athletic field was leveled off inside the stockade to the west of the barracks. Later the Sioux Ordnance School was built on this site. The prisoners played soccer for hours. According to an American observer not familiar with the game: “There was no such thing as rest. They’d get tangled up. . . . There would be four or five of them kicking at the ball.”³² The prisoners also enjoyed volleyball, handball, softball, and boxing.

In addition to sports, prisoners could go to the movie house, play cards, or in the case of the Italians enjoy singing. “Amapola” and “Beer Barrel Polka” were among their favorites. A common saying of the area was: “Italy lost the war because of too many second tenors.”³³ Many times their singing could be heard at Ordville, a housing unit nearly one mile away from the barracks. On certain holidays the prisoners were allowed wine with which to celebrate and the volume of their singing greatly increased.

An incident that created some excitement occurred when two Italians, Marzolla Ezio and Facincani Vittorio, escaped in a jeep only to be picked up shortly thereafter in Sterling, Colorado, about 30 miles southward. Authorities hinted that “a touch of romance might have been involved in the flight to Sterling.”³⁴ There is no indication the men were punished. There were reports of other escapes from branch camps, none of long duration.³⁵

Discipline in most POW camps took the form of fines and detentions. In the Scottsbluff Camp there were as high as 15 cases of discipline in one month, and prisoners were fined or detained in the guardhouse for up to 15 days. The average term of confinement was three days with two meals of bread and water, and one hot meal per day. In June, 1944, German prisoners at Camp Worland, Wyoming, refused to work because of a dispute over wages. Under the Geneva Convention workers were to receive 80 cents per day, but a new regulation to change the pay scale from day rates to piece-work pay was met with disapproval and they went on strike. Prisoners had prepared themselves against a bread and water diet, and con-

cealed food stolen from the kitchen and mess halls in their barracks.³⁶ Other camps in the United States dealt with more serious crimes. In three widely separated Nazi POW camps within the United States, the inmates discovered and executed three men of their number who had become informers. The 14 prisoners involved in the crimes were executed between July 10 and August 25, 1945.³⁷

A German camp newspaper, the *Scheinwerfer* (*Spotlight*) was published at the Scottsbluff camp, but it is not known if copies were sent to side camps such as Sidney. The paper carried the scores of various team sports, religious and entertainment activities, and some editorials.

Under the Geneva Convention the United States was obligated to provide for the spiritual needs of the prisoners. A small chapel at the Sioux Ordnance Depot was made available, and after the surrender of Italy, a Catholic priest occasionally came to the barracks. For the most part, however, Italians attended church services in Sidney. The Italian POWs were mostly Catholic and often the first few rows of St. Patrick's church were filled with POWs. On June 15, 1944, when 40 former prisoners attended services in a body, the Reverend Anton Link, pastor, announced that the newly formed Sioux Italian Choir would sing at the next service.³⁸

Even homesick prisoners were apprehensive about returning to their war-ravaged homelands for fear of what they might find there. These attitudes were expressed in some of the German camp newspapers in Nebraska. From the *Neuer Horizont* at Fort Robinson:

"During the last few weeks many of us have suffered severely from homesickness. It is not that we have lost our patience—this soldiers learn right away and prisoners of war have to learn it twice. From recent newspaper articles we learned that there is talk about us being shipped back home, but nothing is certain and no one can tell us. It makes us very impatient and homesick."³⁹

From the *Atlantic Echo*:

It has been only one-half year since the break-down of our beloved Fatherland and for all of us it meant a tremendous disappointment, and now we are faced with the task of finding a new reason for being. We are looking towards democracy and can see a bright light at the end of the darkness. However, looking at the reports that are coming from home, there are all kinds of domestic and political problems which have yet to be overcome and suddenly the light does not look so bright anymore. It will take time, but there is hope.⁴⁰

By January, 1946, the POW movement back to Europe was started. As the time of departure neared, many prisoners admitted their reluctance to leave. Approximately 5,000 prisoners attached to Scottsbluff camp were being repatriated at the rate of 750 each day. The prisoners were sent to the West Coast to return to Europe by way of the Panama Canal. Fewer rail or water delays would thus be caused for US servicemen returning from Europe.⁴¹

Some former POWs returned later to the United States. Such was the case of Emanuelle Campanella, who married a girl from Sterling, Colorado. For several years they owned the Cedar Creek Garage between Sterling and Sidney. Other former prisoners formed strong friendships with Americans: Peter Kielman corresponded with Carl Mueller; and Beno Mussio corresponded for several years with Mr. and Mrs. Roy Wells.

Operation of the POW camps in Cheyenne County—or any part of the United States—was circumscribed by the regulations of the Geneva Convention—security for the prisoners; adequate clothing, housing, and food; freedom of religious expression; recreation and education. There were instances in which the rules were bent in the hope that Nazis could be re-educated:

By bringing prisoners to the mainland, America was facing Nazism on its own shores. A reeducation program adopted at the urging of Eleanor Roosevelt, was undoubtedly a violation of the spirit of the Geneva Convention against denationalization. It was a massive multimedia effort to bring about a democratic trend among the prisoners which would not only change their views but could also provide a vanguard for redirecting post war Germany.⁴²

Not unlike other POW camps, Camp Fort Robinson faced the problem of resistance to the reorientation program through “passive resistance.” It was these prisoners’ contention that the prime mission of the camp was to maintain physical security, not to alter their views. It was concluded by the Americans that “the prisoners of war are hopelessly unchangeable.”⁴³

Perhaps more was accomplished in the reorientation program through the friends the POWs made with the people with whom they came in contact than in the formal reeducation program. “The supervision accorded the prisoners by the U. S. Army and Navy personnel was a definite factor in the

prisoners' attitude toward the democratic system. It was evident that the German and Italian men had been subjected to much propaganda by the Hitler and Mussolini regimes. No doubt democracy was a surprise to these men."⁴⁴

NEBRASKA PRISONER OF WAR CAMPS
(Location and Principal Types of Work as of July 1, 1945)

Name of Camp	County	Base Camp	No.	Work
Alma	Harlan	Atlanta	106	Agri. Food
Atlanta	Phelps	.....	946	Agri. Other
Bayard	Morrill	Scottsbluff	182	Agri. Other
Bertrand	Phelps	Atlanta	87	Agri.
Bridgeport	Morrill	Scottsbluff	180	Agri.
Fort Crook	Sarpy	.....	747	Mil. Other
Franklin	Franklin	Atlanta	84	Agri.
Grand Island	Hall	Atlanta	98	Agri.
Hastings	Adams	Atlanta	90	Other
Hebron	Thayer	Atlanta	76	Agri.
Indianola	Redwillow	.....	482	Mil. Agric.
Kearney	Buffalo	Atlanta	300	Agri.
Lexington	Dawson	Atlanta	73	Agri.
Lyman	Scottsbluff	Scottsbluff	302	Agri.
Mitchell	Scottsbluff	Scottsbluff	213	Agri.
Ogallala	Keith	Indianola	230	Other
Palisade	Hitchcock	Indianola	111	Agri.
Fort Robinson	Dawes	.....	1,247	Mil.
Scottsbluff	Scottsbluff	.....	3,294	Mil. Agric.
Weeping Water	Cass	Atlanta	153	Agri. Other

Army Service Forces, Office of the Commanding General (From Dr. Karl Arndt, professor of German, Clarke University, Worcester, Mass.)

"These reports did not specifically list a camp for the Sioux Army Depot, but three reports did list a camp at Sidney. The report for April 1, 1944, listed a total of 307 Italian prisoners, all of whom were enlisted men; the report for April 15, 1944 listed 306 German prisoners, all of whom were enlisted; and the report for May 1, 1944 listed 304 Italian prisoners, all enlisted. We did not see Sidney listed for other dates. The Sidney camp was listed as a branch camp to Scottsbluff." Letter from the GSA, National Archives and Records Service, Washington, DC 20408, April 8, 1980.

GERMAN NEWSPAPERS PUBLISHED IN NEBRASKA

Camp Atlanta: *Atlanta Echo*

Camp Fort Crook: *Springbrunnen* (Artesian Well)

Camp Fort Robinson: *Lagerzeitung* (Camp Newspaper) and *Neuer Horizont* (New Horizon)

Camp Indianola: *Michael*, *Wasserturm*, (Watertower), *Lager-Echo* (Camp Echo)

Camp Scottsbluff: *Scheinwerfer* (Searchlight).

NOTES

1. Judith M. Gansberg, *Stalag: USA The Remarkable Story of German POW's in America* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1977), introduction.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Approximately 9,500 of the 12,000 prisoners of war were allocated to the Seventh Service Command for use under labor contracts, Brigadier General Paul B. Clemens estimated. Requests for POW laborers ran six and seven times the number available. *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, June 15, 1944.

4. The prisoners were divided into seven detachments quartered in the following manner: One detachment in a former CCC camp, three in dormitories in the sugar refinery where they worked, and three in buildings on fairgrounds. Record Group 389: *Records of the Office of the Provost Marshal General*; Inspection Reports, Labor Statistics, and Related Documents of POW Camps at Fort Robinson, Scottsbluff, Bayard, and Bridgeport, Nebraska. Hereafter cited as *Records, RG 389*.

5. The camp was built along standard lines. There were four companies per sector, each having the following buildings: 6 housing buildings; 1 building for showers, basins, toilets; building for kitchen and mess hall; 1 building used as a workshop; 1 building for the company officers. Each sector had a canteen, infirmary, and recreation hall. *Ibid.*

6. The name Internment Camp was used until May, 1944, when German POWs were brought in. The name was then changed to POW Camp.

7. *Records, RG 389*.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Interview with Emanuelle Campanella, April 10, 1980.

10. Campanella recalled that when leaving the ship in Iran Italian prisoners were met by Allied soldiers carrying rifles. He considered this amusing, since the prisoners were tired and hungry and had no desire to fight.

11. Most of the camps, including the main camp at Scottsbluff, were hastily built facilities. The Sioux Ordnance Depot near Sidney was completed in 1942 and the first prisoners brought in during 1943. Most of the buildings remain and house the Western Nebraska Technical College.

12. At Belle Fourche, South Dakota, the POWs encamped in former CCC barracks and raised cucumbers and sugar beets. Such branch camps for the most part were established for short periods and poorly equipped to handle prisoners. *Records, RG 389*, July 5, 1945.

13. The side camp at Sterling, Colorado, was closed February 11, 1944, and 106 prisoners returned to Scottsbluff. One side camp was maintained at Provo, South Dakota; another at Sidney, where 306 workers were guarded by 54 military police. *Ibid.*, February 11, 1944.

14. Letter, General Services Administration, National Archives and Records Service, Washington, DC, to Ralph Spencer, Sidney, Nebraska, April 8, 1980.

15. A typical or regulation stockade was constructed of 8-foot high "hog wire" or barbed wire, with an overhang of barbed wire.

16. A typical day's menu at Camp Veteran, Wyoming: breakfast—coffee, bread, butter, cake; lunch—chicken, potatoes, salad, pudding, pears, bread, coffee; supper—cold meats, frankfurters, fruit juice, bread, tea, lemons. *Records, RG 389*, September 28, 1945.

17. Interview with E. W. Augenstein, March 18, 1980.

18. Interview with Louis Griego, February 25, 1980.

19. Interview with Mrs. Myrtle Frahm, April 2, 1980.

20. In the Scottsbluff Camp, Colonel Dempster felt the Italian officers

"real primadonnas." It was agreed they brought "a discordant note into what had been formerly recognized as an efficiently administered and smoothly running camp, far beyond the average." *Records, RG 389*, February 18, 1944.

21. Interview with John Underdown, March 19, 1980.
22. *Sidney Telegraph*, March 16, 1944.
23. Interview with Emanuelle Campanella, April 10, 1980.
24. *Sidney Telegraph*, November 4, 1943.
25. *Ibid.*, May 11, 1944.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. Letter, Mrs. Lenora Schweitzberg to Ralph Spencer, Sidney, March 17, 1980.
29. Interview with Ted Schaefer, March 18, 1980.
30. Interview with Mrs. Lois Stewart, March 27, 1980.
31. While the Germans displayed a great deal of cockiness, they were "good soldiers and good prisoners; they kept their barracks in trim and military order, their mess halls spick and span. When they were offered a chance to work, they took it gladly and were surprised to find they would be paid." *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, February 13, 1945.
32. Interview with E. W. Augenstein, March 18, 1980.
33. Interview with Mrs. Frances McElfresh, March 17, 1980.
34. *Sidney Telegraph*, December 11, 1944.
35. Two German prisoners of war, Theodore Rogge, 21, and Otto Koch, 23, escaped the Bridgeport Branch Prisoner of War Camp in early July, 1945, but were apprehended several days later near Fort Morgan, Colorado. Inasmuch as neither POW could speak English, the local assumption was that they rode a freight train to Colorado. *Bridgeport Blade*, July 12, 1945.
36. The cache discovered on a search of the barracks included four dozen jars of marmalade, four dozen eggs, 400 pounds of flour, 400 pounds of sugar, and 250 pounds of coffee. *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, June 21, 1944.
37. *Kansas City Times*, December 22, 1980. Joe Fairfield, Bridgeport, provided much information regarding the Scottsbluff POW camp, and moral support in the project.
38. *Sidney Telegraph*, June 22, 1944.
39. German camp newsletter, *Neuer Horizont*, at Fort Robinson POW Camp. (Files in possession of Dr. Karl Arndt, professor of German, Clarke University, Worcester, Massachusetts.)
40. German camp newsletter, *Atlantic Echo*, Atlantic, Nebraska.
41. *Sidney Telegraph*, January 22, 1946.
42. Gansburg, *Stalag: USA*, introduction.
43. *Official Report*, February 27, 1945.
44. *Utah Historical Quarterly*, 39 (Winter, 1971), 71.