Stalag Sunflower:  
German Prisoners of War in Kansas

by Patrick G. O'Brien, Thomas D. Isern, and R. Daniel Lumley

AFTER the Allies defeated Hitler’s elite Afrika Korps in 1943, thousands of German prisoners of war (POWs) were shipped to the United States. This decision both avoided the logistics of feeding and housing large numbers of prisoners in a war zone and supplied labor desperately needed on American farms and ranches. Eventually, 450,000 German POWs from the North African and European theatres of war were interned on American soil. The POW experience in Kansas represented a cross section of the total American story. It changed the lives of the prisoners and of Kansans in ways that neither anticipated. Natural first feelings of suspicion and aloofness between enemies were eventually replaced by civility, mutual respect, and, in some cases, genuine and lasting friendships.

For the POWs, the traumatic experiences of imprisonment and relocation to Kansas began with capture, an event imprinted on their memories. Gerd Kruse, a former POW in Kansas who now farms near Deshler, Nebraska, recalled where and when he was taken prisoner: “I was captured in Africa, 1943, May 9, 12:30 at noon.” He then described feelings that were typical of many German soldiers:

Well, I think it was an awful feeling to just abandon your motherland and you go to a different country. You don’t know what could happen and what couldn’t, what’s up, you know. It’s a funny feeling.

Immediately after capture, prisoners were subjected to a thorough search for weapons and marched off to distribution centers. Conditions in these centers were often harsh, with little water and no sanitation facilities for as many as thirty thousand men. Souvenir-happy American GIs routinely relieved the German POWs of watches, pens, cameras, and medals. After a cursory interrogation, the prisoners went to embarkation points at Casablanca, Morocco, and Oran, Algeria, there boarding ships for the journey to America.

Although many of the POWs feared attacks by German submarines, no ship containing German POWs was sunk during the war. Life aboard ship in most cases was good. On some ships, in fact, the prisoners ate ice cream, slept in cabins, and played shuffleboard, leading some American newsmen to make accusations of coddling. The POWs landed at either Norfolk, Virginia, or Camp Shanks, New York. A few of the more zealous expected to see New York City in rubble from Luftwaffe raids.

After a hot shower with “good smelling soap,” shots, and delousing, the men were ready for the trip west. In Germany, soldiers often rode in boxcars. In America, they rode in upholstered coaches and were served sandwiches and coffee by black porters. “Many anti-American feelings disappeared on the trip to Kansas,” one prisoner remarked.

Riding the train was a startling and educational ex-

---

Patrick G. O'Brien, professor of history and director of the Center for Great Plains Studies at Emporia State University, received a Ph.D. in 1968 from Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan.

Thomas D. Isern, associate professor of history at Emporia State University, received a Ph.D. from Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, in 1977.

R. Daniel Lumley, director of secondary instruction for USD 233, Lyon County, received his master's degree in educational administration from Emporia State University in 1973.

The authors warmly acknowledge the grants they received from the Kansas Committee for the Humanities and the Emporia State University Research and Creativity Committee to fund the videotape production of “Stalag Sunflower”. This article is based on the video script, although it appears here in extensively revised and amplified form. Emphasizing the relationships between the former members of the Afrika Korps and Kansans, this study relies heavily on interviews with and correspondence and materials supplied by the participants and their families. The authors visited with several hundred persons and conducted seventeen intensive interviews between 1980 and 1984. Most are on audio and video tapes and are in the authors’ possession, as are letters cited in notes as written to one of the authors. Other letters cited without repository are in the possession of the recipients; copies in possession of authors. The authors appreciate the assistance given by the many Kansans and POWs who shared one of the most unusual encounters in World War II.
perience for the Germans, who were unfamiliar with the size and beauty of the United States. They were surprised by the numerous automobiles and the wood-frame houses they saw along the tracks. Security on the trains was tight — windows were locked and location signs were removed from depots. The guards were told, “Don’t be cruel, but hard-boiled.”

When finally the POWs arrived at their camps, whole towns turned out to see the Germans in their short campaign pants, khaki uniforms, long-billed caps, and goggles. Many POWs expected to see buffalo and Indians in Kansas. Some were unsure of their location and claimed that the trains had reversed directions at night or traveled in circles to confuse them about the distance from the coast. A three-day rail trip had added to their natural suspicion.

The POWs were in poor physical condition: most were underweight or in various states of malnutrition, and many had malaria. They found themselves at Camp Phillips near Salina and at Camp Concordia. These stark, new facilities were among the largest POW compounds in America.

Local sympathies evidently had little effect on the choice of these two sites. Frank Carlson, U.S. congressman and later governor of Kansas and a U.S. senator, explained the selection of the Concordia campsite:

“Someone in Washington had suggested, I assume, that Concordia ought to be checked, and they did come in here and check the area. And it was determined by the War Department itself that this would be a good location for a prisoner of war camp. The location was good, no problem with a good water supply, some good land that seemed to fit for the War Department, and it was for that reason that there was no problem getting it established here.”

Area residents generally approved of the decision. “We had many people,” observed Carlson, “that wanted this camp established because it was a remunerative

1. The standard reference on the subject is Arnold Kramer, Nazi Prisoners of War in America (New York: Stein and Day, 1979). Although Kramer included little explicit information on Kansas, his book has useful background information, and the correspondence of the POW experience in Kansas with that elsewhere in the country is instructive.
operation for a business. I didn’t get too much complaint from the general public, the city of Concordia for instance.”

Not all persons liked the idea, however, and Beryl Ward, a civilian employed by the Corps of Engineers during camp construction, explained the reasons:

I think it was probably just fear of the unknown. They were afraid there would be escapes and there would be problems arise for the townspeople. And, of course, some of them had sons in service, and I think they were ones who didn’t look too kindly on having prisoners around here.6

Complaints about the camps disappeared almost completely when their benefits to the various locales became obvious and public fears proved baseless.

A prison compound at Camp Phillips, an extant military post, and the new facility at Concordia were rapidly constructed, and they began to receive prisoners in 1943. With a capacity of three thousand POWs, Phillips was smaller and its life shorter than Concordia. The latter was a small and largely self-sufficient city for the four thousand POWs and American military guard garrison housed there. Many civilians from the nearby area also worked at Camp Concordia.

Located north and east of Concordia, the camp was on a square-mile tract of land with a slight grade and encircled by a high barbed-wire fence and guard towers. A few physical signs still remain to mark the campsites, including a restored guard tower, storage sheds, masonry walls that stood at the entrance road, the American officers’ club, a few stone and cement walks, and a water tower that dominates the country scene.

The camp was laid out with the military affinity for square corners. Street names such as Grant and Lee commemorated American war heroes. Although a street was designated MacArthur, a name readily associated with the Pacific theatre, Eisenhower was a name conspicuously and discreetly absent. Within the camp complex were mess halls, workshops, libraries, clubs for officers and enlisted men, athletic facilities, a hospital, a post office, a post exchange, and scores of barracks.7

Although Camp Phillips had a placid history, Camp Concordia was in disorder until late 1943. Recalled to active duty from retirement, the first post commander had personal frailties and lacked an experienced and efficient staff. The camp was soon out of control. The American military was often lax and negligent, and Nazis were allowed to exercise authority in the prisoner compound. A shooting at the American officers’ club resulted in the appointment of a new commander, who infused discipline in the U.S. Army unit and ended Nazi control of the POWs. The military administration of the camp was competent and the base ran without disruption from late 1943 until its close.

POWs were often received at Concordia shortly after capture and without intensive interrogation. As a consequence, prisoners were not segregated politically, and this factor enabled a small Nazi core to intimidate the mass of POWs, who were patriotic but unsympathetic to fascism, and to force a few of them to “suicide.” The American military was fairly certain about

the Nazis responsible for the outrages, but it had little concrete evidence on which to act. Although anti-Nazi prisoners contributed some intelligence information to Americans whom they trusted, fear of violent reprisal made them of little help in identifying Nazis.

Individual Nazis or small groups were intermittently removed from the camp, and Nazi authority was curtailed, but their organization was largely intact until 1945. Highly proficient, well-informed Allied interrogation teams then twice visited Concordia and conducted thorough and professional investigations. Using information obtained from various sources, including POW informers, the army military police pulled Nazis from the ranks, detained them overnight in the base theater, sent an MP “goon squad” through the compound to search for evidence, and the next day shipped the problem prisoners to an Oklahoma camp for incorrigible Nazis. This ended much of the tension in the camp, and the bulk of POWs expressed relief at the Nazis’ departure. POWs thereupon became freer in their criticism of Nazism, but they remained circumspect on other political subjects.6

Popular movie portrayals of POWs obsessed with escape and persistently tunneling and organizing breakouts had little correspondence to the situation at Camps Phillips and Concordia. No massive escape organization or preparations were detected at Concordia, although there may have been a few perfunctory tries at tunneling the three hundred feet from the barracks nearest the fence. Escape attempts were few, never endangered persons, always ended in failure, and usually had a humorous side. When a tornado hit Concordia, three POWs took advantage of the confusion to enjoy four days of freedom. The only escape that reflected planning was when a POW officer hid in a depression, concealed himself with dirt (an accomplice probably covered him), and got out of the camp unnoticed. In uniform, he made his way a few miles to Belleville, casually bought a railroad ticket at the depot, and had breakfast at a restaurant. He was arrested only when the waitress became suspicious because he seemed unfamiliar with the money.7


Escape had little appeal to the POWs, who were generally satisfied to spend the duration of the war in the relative comfort of the camps. Distance was also a factor. Virgil Lundberg, commander of Phillips, described the only escape attempt there. During roll call on a wet and freezing winter morning, two POWs were missing. Several days later, persons notified the camp that two "funny looking fellows," whom they "couldn't understand," had been found in a barn and "it looked like... a P or something on the back of their jackets." Local authorities picked them up. When the POWs indicated that Mexico was their destination, they were shown on the map that they had not been out of Saline County. The map was returned with them to the compound, and no other escape was attempted.10

A tragedy, by both American and POW accounts, occurred at Camp Concordia when a guard shot and killed a prisoner along the fence as he tried to retrieve a soccer ball during a game. The guard insisted that the prisoner did not have permission to enter the zone and had feinted toward the fence. The POWs thought the shooting was murder, and the rumor spread among them that the guard had bragged earlier that he would kill a Nazi. Where the German private had fallen, they erected a cross with the legend, "This cross marks the spot where Adolph Huebner was murdered by Americans," and they refused to work during a three-day mourning period. Malice was not proved in the guard's court-martial, which concluded he had acted within regulations. American military personnel, however, largely shared the feelings of the prisoners, and the guard was transferred immediately.11

This episode marred an otherwise exceptional record of the American military in its relations with the men it guarded. A description of the guards at Concordia contained in an official report of March 20, 1945, helps to explain their conduct toward the POWs:

The general appearance, attitude, and morale of the guard at Concordia is above average. They have adequate facilities. Colonel [George W.] Eggers [Eggerss] (base commander) is a strict disciplinarian and his attitude is personified in a guard that is better dressed, has better bearing, and executes the proper military courtesies.12

The first impression made by the guards and POWs on each other, however, was not wholly favorable. Guards were originally "arrogant" and resented the "arrogant" and "cocky" Afrika Korps. But as differences between them lessened, the guards "came to think of them [POWs] just like GI's." A former guard at Concordia explained that the guards "respected them" and "treated them like human beings" and "they came to respect us."13 Friction between particular guards and POWs could not always be avoided, but American personnel treated the POWs correctly and carefully followed the Geneva Convention. Gerd Kruse concurred with regard to his treatment. "I think it was good," he said. "I cannot complain, cannot complain at all."14

For guards and POWs to become friendly was common. Americans, for example, generously supplied a POW band with beer when it played at the Concordia noncommissioned officers' club. Guards consistently overlooked minor violations of camp policy and permitted prisoners to have shortwave radios and to manufacture schnapps. According to one American, "the most beautiful still" he had ever seen was constructed by some of the prisoners at Concordia. Some guards not only disregarded POW infractions but themselves violated regulations through small business transactions with and the performance of favors for prisoners. Although some guards may have profited in a small way from these activities, the basis for such exchanges was humanitarian rather than commercial. The guards intermittently "cleaned up" Concordia when they received advance notice of an inspector general's visit.

While Americans came to look upon POWs as "ordinary" like themselves, the prisoners were first confounded and then usually impressed when they compared the American and the German military systems. The U.S. Army was markedly more democratic, egalitarian, and lenient than the German. Especially obvious to the POWs was the absence of a "caste" system in the American army. POWs watched uncomprehendingly when an American sergeant "chewed out" an officer with impunity. Even before POWs were exposed to civilians, they had learned that Americans had decidedly different attitudes about status and authority.15

12. Record Group 389, Records of the Provost Marshal General, file 233, box 1612, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
15. M. Eugene Hobson interview, January 15, 1984; also oral accounts given at Stalag Sunflower project meetings by Carl Stangel (former guard at Camp Concordia) and Lyle Johnson (former guard at Council Grove), notes in possession of authors; Teufel, "History of Camp Concordia," 56–61.
Civilian employees at the camps frequently did not know what to expect from the POWs. Bernadine Cummings, who worked in the transportation office at Camp Concordia, described her first meeting with prisoners:

My first encounter with prisoners at the camps was when they came in to get a drink of water in the wing of the building where I was at. And I was a little . . . apprehensive at the time not knowing what to expect of them because they came in and clicked their heels and saluted, and I couldn’t figure out what that was all about.  

Kansans at the base camps liked the POWs’ work ethic, politeness, and good humor. They also found mutual interests and attitudes that led to friendships. Such was the experience of Mrs. Cummings:

My relationships with most of the prisoners that worked around was very congenial. They were people just like you and I. They all had feelings, they had concerns about their families, and whether they were alive or what was happening. They were just normal people to be around.  

Relatives were another contact between American civilian society and the POWs in the Kansas camps. Probably only in a war in which the United States was a participant could so many members of the same family be found on opposite sides. Relatives traveled from throughout the country to visit kin interned at Phillips and Concordia. Not surprisingly, many German-American Kansans, the largest ethnic group in the state, found that they had relatives in the camps. Kansan Hazel Gill recalled that she and her mother visited Concordia on weekends to take cookies, candy, and reading materials to a cousin, who “was a very nice person.” Her brother received a battle star when he fought with the American army in Germany during World War II.  

The policy at the base camps was to keep the POWs active. Commanders “favored keeping the minds and bodies of . . . wards occupied, not only for reasons of

17. Ibid. 
security, but also in order to develop their capabilities for later life. The POWs had a wide variety of jobs in the camps. They worked at construction and maintenance, had office assignments, and ran many of the shops.

The POWs gave Camp Concordia much of its attractive appearance, and army reports described it as a beautiful facility. Attractive gardens and neat lawns could not conceal the fact that Concordia was a POW camp, but they provided it with an unexpected aesthetic quality. Prisoners planted Chinese elms in straight rows along the post entrance road. Mature trees now mark the spot, together with rock walks, built by the POWs, that now wind through yards and fields. Skilled at masonry, the POWs constructed a fence that stills stands at the camp entrance. Manually adept, the prisoners used scraps, surplus materials, and original ideas to turn plain building interiors into attractive and colorful rooms. Small officers' clubs, decorated and called "casinos," were talked about throughout the area.

The prisoners at Concordia, especially the officers, were well educated, as their pastimes reflected. POWs used their leisure time to pursue physical activity and athletics; to acquire and practice hobbies; to read, study, and take academic courses; to present and attend cultural and entertainment events such as plays and band concerts, including those by the Afrika Korps band; and to publish a camp newspaper, the *Neue Stacheldraht Nachrichten* (New Barbed Wire News). Painting and drawing were popular activities, and the creations of the POWs ranged from rudimentary to highly professional. The POWs sold and gave to civilians their artwork as well as the carvings, models, and

20. Descriptions of camp life are based on numerous reports and memoranda in Record Group 389, box 1612, National Archives; files of the *Neue Stacheldraht Nachrichten* on reel 4, POW Camp Newspapers, microfilm series from the Library of Congress; Teufel, "History of Camp Concordia," 29-31; oral accounts from informants cited above; examination of the photograph collections from which the illustrations for this article were selected; and personal examination of the campsite.
toys that they made from bits of wood, metal, and cloth. Looking toward the end of the war, some prisoners made toy trains, animals, and cars to take to their children, whom many had never seen.21

American authorities encouraged both self-study and organized education in the camps, especially at Concordia. The library at Concordia had more than eight thousand volumes, was considered one of the best collections in Kansas, and was probably the largest of any camp. The POW University of Camp Concordia was organized, and its structure and curriculum paralleled those of a civilian institution. POW officers were the instructors of courses that ranged from beginning English to technical medical subjects. The POW University had substantial enrollments, and the instructors always knew where their students were. As of March 1945, 927 POWs were enrolled in 230 courses. Some of the prisoners eventually earned academic credit through the POW University.22

Life in Camp Concordia was good for the POWs, who had experienced a lower standard of living as civilians than that of Americans and had known severe deprivation in the army. They were unaccustomed to soap and other basic amenities. For many, the issue of clothing they received was the largest wardrobe in their lives.

Most POWs had not before had such an abundance and variety of food, and they relished white bread like cake. Camp authorities gave supplies to the prisoners and allowed them to serve dishes of their choice in the mess halls. Cooks prepared standard German fare

21. Ibid.; also examination of miscellaneous POW artifacts in the possession of Bernadine Cummings, Charles and Isabel Bloser, the Cloud County Historical Society Museum, Concordia, and other parties.

and also baked cakes, tarts, and delicacies. Within a short time, many prisoners could not fit in the uniforms they had been issued on their arrival. Frieda Goedcke managed to send her husband, interned at Concordia, a food package for Christmas for 1943. "Everybody just laughed" when he opened it, she recalled, and he wrote "don’t send me any more food. . . . We got everything here that you can think of." His letters frequently mentioned how well provisioned the POWs were and that he wished, given the shortages in Germany, that he could mail items to her. Many POWs stated that they wanted to remain in the United States to enjoy the unprecedented material comfort.  

The prisoners at Camp Phillips reacted to "luxuries" and food much as did those at Concordia, and the only complaint made to the American commander was that the diet included too much meat and too few potatoes. He thereupon adjusted the rations and found later that the additional potatoes "were used for two things . . . making mashed potatoes . . . and making a little . . . schnapps or vodka."  

A controversial issue in the POW program in America was the attempt to ingrain democratic values in the prisoners. Capt. Karl C. Teufel was assigned responsibility for the indoctrination program at Concordia, which was considered as well organized for such work as any camp. Teufel was considered able by his superiors, who reported he won the "confidence" of many POWs through "diligence and tact."  

The program had several phases. The first was to remove "Nazi leaders" from the camp so that anti-Nazi officers could "assert themselves as leaders and teachers of the objective viewpoint." Teufel was able to enlist between forty and fifty POWs "to combat Nazism" in the camp as well as later to work with the Allied occupation forces in Germany to "weed out" Nazism. The POWs were "of substantial prewar status, many of them holders of high academic degrees, each able to speak and understand English, and above all, men with an objective viewpoint." They were also "more altruistic than would normally be supposed." Conditions attached to their cooperation with Americans were that it "be within the bounds of their honor as German patriots and . . . further all projects in the ultimate interest of their country."  

"A bit fearfully at first," Teufel recalled, "and always secretly, the officers began . . . active assistance. They divulged the inner thoughts and activities of the compounds, kept their fingers on the pulses of the Nazis . . . and began a long and careful intelligence procedure to transfer eventually the 'incorrigibles.' Most Nazis had been transferred by May 1945, and "the backbone of Nazism was broken." Upon their departure, anti-Nazis began to exercise authority. Although American authorities controlled the sources of information and regulated materials to ensure that the content was appropriate, they did not use coercion on the POWs, and they hardly could have been charged with the worst forms of brainwashing.

Authorities tried to influence POWs largely by making available to them materials that many Americans read (magazines such as Reader's Digest and newspapers such as the New York Times), movies they watched (Keys of the Kingdom was a favorite), or broadcasts they heard (radios were considered "excellent natural indoctrination"). POW attendance at religious services was encouraged but not compulsory. The only "formal" indoctrination in any sense was in the POW University, which had a curriculum modified to emphasize democracy.

Teufel summarized the methods and the success of the program:

As a result of "spontaneous responses on the part of German prisoners of war" and through their own "self-indoctrination," Nazism faded out, and a growing confidence in America and the democratic way of life began to replace it. Re-education was accomplished by natural means from within, by and for Germans, and as it is felt it will have to be done in Germany. 28

Many prisoners, however, were receiving an education in democracy more effective than that provided by any official program. They were learning about democracy from their contact with Kansans, especially outside the barbed wire, in communities throughout the state.

The simple presence of German prisoners in Kansas would have been of little consequence for the region had not the prisoners enjoyed the opportunity to meet Kansans. That opportunity was abundant, mainly because in accordance with the Geneva Convention and an act of Congress, the United States deployed prisoners to alleviate the wartime labor shortage. The work performed could neither be directly related to the war effort nor place the prisoners in a situation that compromised American security. Enlisted men among the prisoners had to work if so assigned; officers worked only if they volunteered to do so.

In other areas of the country, POWs performed industrial labor under guidelines from the War Manpower Commission, an agency of the United States Department of Labor. Although a few businesses and even some municipalities in Kansas availed themselves of this source of labor, prisoners in Kansas mostly performed agricultural work under a system organized by the Office of Labor in the United States Department of Agriculture and administered by the federal-state Agricultural Extension Service. Gov. Andrew Schoeppe 27 and F. O. Blecha, assistant farm labor supervisor of the state extension service, advised farmers that POW labor was available if they organized local efforts to employ it. In some localities, such as Council Grove, farmers working with their county extension agents formed associations to arrange reasonable accommodations and orderly employment of the POWs. In others, such as Peabody, a few prominent farmers took the lead. To receive prisoners, representatives of a locality had to sign a certificate that other labor was unavailable and a contract to employ the POWs. The army then established a branch camp filled with POWs to work for local farmers. 29

From Camp Phillips and Camp Concordia, and from base camps in Colorado and Nebraska, prisoners and guards dispersed to branch camps scattered across Kansas. Locations included areas of German-American concentration in the south-central and north-central parts of the state where citizens could converse with the prisoners in their own language. The branch camps contained from a handful to two hundred POWs. Farmers who wished to employ prisoners came to the branch camps before 8:00 A.M. and picked up POWs, generally in groups of four, whom they were to return to the camp by 6:00 P.M. Farmers were advised to work alongside the prisoners, to give them rest breaks, to have other farmhands dress in another color besides blue (since the POWs wore blue), and to prevent the prisoners from operating power machinery — but some did. Written guidelines cautioned, "Do not enter into general conversation with the prisoners and by all means do not discuss anything of a political nature, especially anything concerning the war" — but some did. For POW labor, the farmers paid wages that corresponded to the going rates for civilian agricultural labor. Most of the money went to the army, but the POWs received a percentage to save or spend at their camp canteens. 30

The facilities available for branch camps varied among the localities. In some places, such as Lawrence and Peabody, the prisoners lodged at least temporarily in tents. In others, such as Council Grove, old Civilian Conservation Corps camp buildings were reactivated.

28. Ibid., 71.
29. Memoranda, guidelines, and circulars pertaining to employment of POWs in industry in Record Group 211, Records of the War Manpower Commission, boxes 175-78, National Archives; similar materials for agricultural labor in Record Group 224, Records of the Office of Labor, boxes 15, 58, and 91, National Archives; clipping from Topeka Daily Capital, August 10, 1943, Library, Kansas State Historical Society; comments at a public forum at the Council Grove Public Library, April 20, 1989; Tate Chase, interview with O'Brien, July 14, 1982; Joseph S. Miller, "German POWs at Peabody and Concordia, Kansas, During World War II," seminar paper, 1978, Department of History, Bethel College, copy in Men- nocie Library and Archives, Bethel College, North Newton.
to house prisoners. In still other locations, POWs occupied business buildings downtown. In Peabody they moved into the Eyestone Building, a two-story brick structure. The army put bars on the windows (which still remain) and erected a cinder-block wall around an exercise yard. The guards lodged upstairs, the prisoners downstairs.31

Security for prisoners on work details was strict at first, with watchful guards accompanying each group of prisoners. Thereafter it loosened. Often the prisoners worked without guards, or, if present, the guards were relaxed. Some Kansans recalled seeing prisoners climbing into trucks, with the guards handing their rifles up to the prisoners and the prisoners handing the weapons back to the guards after they had climbed in. Ernest Claassen, one of the farmers who employed POWs near Peabody, observed the easing of vigilance:

The guard was out there with four prisoners. It was a long day and nothing for the guard to do, so finally he laid down under a tree and went to sleep. As the prisoners were working, they saw the American lieutenant coming from the camp in Peabody on an inspection trip. They quickly woke up the guard so he could be guarding them properly when the lieutenant came around.32

Prisoners from the base camps, too, worked outside the compounds. Officers at Camp Phillips organized work details designated by color and then allowed the prisoners themselves to administer the program of agricultural labor. So many prisoners went out to work that there were too few simple colors to identify the details, resulting in such designations as Dunkelgruen-rot (dark green-red) and Dunkelgruen-gelb (dark green-yellow). By the spring of 1945 few enlisted men remained interned at Camp Concordia, but the officers eagerly volunteered to fill out work details. "No guards were sent with these prisoners," reported Teufel, "and there was no single case of unpleasantness."33

Daily, close association between Kansans and the POWs compelled both groups to confront questions of ideology and culture. Although the state was not swept by the frenzied patriotism and fierce hatred of Germany that had prevailed during World War I, Kansans had a deep revulsion toward Nazism. Yet, they usually avoided associating the POWs with National Socialism and judged them as individuals without regard to the official philosophy of the state they served. Kansans generally thought that "they . . . had to go to the army whether they wanted to or not, just like . . . our boys." Reflecting a Kansas ranch woman, "I really didn't feel that they were Nazis, but just young men fighting for their country."34

Any initial reserve that some Kansans may have had toward the POWs usually changed quickly to feelings of compatibility and even affection. POW attitudes and behavior often were responsible for the change. Nearly without exception, Kansans recall the POWs as "just charming" or "very courteous." POWs often adopted Kansas families as their own for the duration of the war, and many would make the association permanent. Observed one woman, "They liked the home atmosphere with the man and woman and the cooking and all of that going on."35 They played with the children, helped around the house, and talked about crops and livestock. The farm background of many POWs gave them a common bond with Kansans. When war rationing caused shortages in work gloves, POWs helped to make them up from camp sources. Grateful farmers and ranchers did not ask how they were come by. Nearly all Kansans who became close to the POWs have recollections of their thoughtfulness. Esther McKnight remembered that her husband was bedfast when the POWs came to work on the farm, and when he was allowed up, they "were very good to him and helped him around the house and yard until he was able to go on his own." Many Kansans were sufficiently taken with the POWs that they "would gladly have kept . . . them on."36

On at least one occasion a returning American soldier met POWs working in his own community in Kansas. Carl Balzer, a private in the Medical Corps, came home in 1945 to find POW Fraiz Pater respectfully on the farm of his fiancée's father, Nelson Smith. It happened that Pater was of stereotypical physique for a German soldier—rangy build, blond hair, and blue eyes. Carl's fiancée, Loel, introduced the two men. They shook hands, began conversing in English, soon

34. Tate Chase interview, July 14, 1982.
35. Ibid.
switched to German, and commenced pitching hay together from the same rack.37

Only a rare serious incident detracted from the pattern of exceptional civility between Kansans and POWs. Except for some mischievous conduct, such as that by a POW nicknamed Adolf who compulsively carved swastikas on any available wood surface, there were few cases of genuine enmity on either side. A farmer near Reading hit a POW because he was balzy; a group of prisoners on a farm close to El Dorado once suddenly refused to work; and some students and young persons protested publicly when POWs exercised on the Peabody High School athletic field. Individuals in Newton complained to the United States Manpower Commission that POWs employed in the American Flour Mills were likely to put arsenic or glass into flour at the mill, presumably because some of the flour was going to Russia. Such incidents, however, could not sour good relations between Kansans and POWs, relations that were strengthened by daily association and by hard work side by side. Typically, Kansans and POWs came to regard one another simply as persons in a peculiar situation, and as they learned about one another, especially the many characteristics they shared, they came to see their own virtues in the others.38

Although prisoners were supposed either to return to camp for lunch or to carry their lunches, many farm women fed them at their own tables. Others took them to cafés. Recalled Wilafred Godsey, whose parents operated a café in Portis and fed prisoners:

My mother prepared a family style setting for anywhere up to a dozen or more men. To enable them to enjoy their dinner without being stared at my parents served them in our living quarters. My parents prepared food for the enemy and tried to make them as comfortable as they could. My brother was the same age as some of those boys.39

Sometimes distressed by what they considered wasteful American methods, and occasionally disturbed by American tastes — the prisoners despised corn at the table, considering it fare fit only for hogs — still, the Germans were impressed by the productivity of American agriculture. They also contributed to that productivity. They stacked hay, spread manure, sowed and shocked wheat, cleared brush, plucked chickens, blocked beets, and painted buildings. In Douglas County during the summer of 1945 they dug potatoes for twenty-three commercial potato growers. Perhaps worst of all, from the prisoners’ point of view, they shocked and threshed kaffir corn. Threshing kaffir under the Kansas sun, Ernest Claassen recalled, even inspired one POW to verse:

Of course this was in German, and I guess they got rather tired of this continual work, windy, dusty, and not always pleasant, and so one of them made this little rhyme: Gott schuf Menschen, Affen, Tiere, und in seinem grossen Zorn, schuf er Kansas und das Kaffir Corn. Translated that would be, God made men, apes, and other animals, and in his great wrath, created Kansas and kaffir corn.40

The POWs were more impressed, though, by the kindnesses and general good treatment they received from Kansans. Isabel Blasser, whose husband Charles employed many prisoners on his farms near Concordia, recalled an encounter with prisoners who asked to tour her home after dinner:

After they finished the officer of the day asked if they might walk through our house to see an American home. I said they were welcome to. And as they went through, this one prisoner took his hand and pulled it along the piano keys like you’d touch something you liked. I said, does he play? He said, beautifully. Would you like to? He said he’d love to. He sat down and played a Viennese waltz and other things, and it was just lovely.41

Two prisoners later presented Mrs. Blasser with paintings they completed in Kansas but could not carry home with them.

Kansans, for their part, were pleased with the men who worked among them as prisoners, especially with their industriousness. Witness the testimony of Dick Holmquist of Smolan, who employed POWs from Camp Phillips to clear brush:

I gave ‘em axes and saws and a jug of water, and they went to work. They were woodsmen, every one of them. And they trimmed out to nothing. I told them to stop that, and I came out there with a tractor a day

37. Loel and Carl Balzer, interview with O’Brien and Isem, September 24, 1982; clipping from Hutchinson News supplied by Loel Balzer.
38. Charles Blasser, interview with Isem and O’Brien, October 24, 1982; Alberta Brinkman, interview with O’Brien, February 10, 1984; Mary Berns, interview with O’Brien, December 20, 1982; public comments at a Butler County Historical Society meeting, December 1, 1983; Miller, “German POWs at Peabody and Concordia, Kansas, During World War II,” 32–33; Ernest Claassen, interview with Isem, September 5, 1982, Flint Hills Oral History Project, Lyon County Historical Museum, Emporia; Tate Chase interview, July 14, 1982; James G. Gray to F. W. Hunter, January 5, 1944, Record Group 211, box 20–469.
40. Ernest Claassen interview, November 1, 1982.
later and pushed the big brush together into a pile and burned it. They just shook their heads and said it was the most wasteful thing they had ever seen, 'cause back there, they burned the leaves, even. 42

Or Charles Blosser:
I got along with them real good, and the men working for me, they got along with them. They were anxious to get out of the camp and get some exercise. They would tell you they could do this and that where they had no experience. But they'd try, and they were not lazy, they'd work. If they didn't, you'd turn their name in to the camp, and they didn't get to come back again. 43

Or Ernest Claassen:
They were simply my kind of people. They were out there to work, willing to work. Since I knew German, I could converse with them very well. Enjoyed working with them. 44

As Wilafred Godsey summed it up, "They were good ambassadors." 45

When World War II ended, the Kansas POW camps closed, and the last prisoners left the state in 1946. It was a long time, however, before many of the POWs reached home. Some of them were delayed at Camp Eustis in Virginia to receive political indoctrination. The prisoners called it "a shot of democracy." These POWs were eligible to work for the American occupation forces when they returned to Germany. 46

Less fortunate POWs were detained a year or longer in Great Britain and France to work in mines, on farms, and at military depots. Their letters to Kansans expressed thanks for the kindness they had received, described their homesickness, and compared Kansas favorably with Europe. Typical letters were written by former POW laborers to the McKnight family, who

44. Ernest Claassen interview, November 1, 1982.

---

Prisoners with "PW" stenciled on their backs and civilian workers dismantle barracks at Camp Concordia.
farmed near Eskridge. They commented on food shortages, lack of tobacco, and unpleasant working conditions and indicated their eagerness to return to country and family. A sentiment shared by the POWs was expressed typically as follows: "The nice treatment I received while working... for you made my confinement easier to bear and I am grateful to you."  

The eventual return of the POWs to their ravaged country did not end the story of Stalag Sunflower. The POW experience permanently changed the attitudes of both the prisoners and Kansans, and those changes had an influence upon their respective societies. Relations between Kansans and POWs generated good will that helped to erase the bitterness of war and set a policy of friendship between the United States and Germany.

Kansans who knew POWs have acknowledged that the experience affected their ideas on Allied policies to be pursued at the end of the war. They have attested that they became less punitive toward Germany and unwilling to blame an entire people for the excesses of the Nazis. Of this change resulting from contact with POWs, one person reflected, "I think that it mellowed me a lot, and I had a lot more compassion for people who, really, maybe, didn't want to go and fight. Maybe they didn't like Hitler either." Many Kansans came to subscribe to a just peace and leniency toward those Germans who were not Nazis, which became the western policy toward the defeated nation. Although geopolitical realities may be the decisive explanation for the shift in post-war German policy, this change was aided by the humanitarian impulses such as those expressed by a profusion of Kansans.

German POWs in the United States received the most humane treatment of captives in modern warfare. It was a conspicuous example of decency in a war of unparalleled inhumanity. A former prisoner wrote Virgil Lundberg, commander of Camp Phillips:

These last few months were the best time I ever had... and I remember them very often. When I talk to my parents about our housing, food, work, entertainment, and so forth, they are very glad that I have had such a good time and that their worrying was just for nothing.

Generous treatment ensured that the mass of POWs returned home without deep resentment of their former enemy. Some had even been transformed into "Yankeephiles." Many POWs vowed to Kansans that Germany and America would be fast friends and never fight again. Repatriated POWs spread their favorable impression of America and propounded close relations between the two countries. A policy of decency helped to eradicate a spirit of revenge in the defeated society and resulted in an enormous reserve of good will. Few wars have such a consequence.

Few POWs were uninfluenced by what they heard and saw in Kansas. As captives, they learned the rudiments of democracy and the advantages of freedom. POWs were astounded when they first heard Kansans utter epithets against the president and learned of the social mobility that enabled sons of farmers to be officers in the American military services. This opportunity to absorb practical lessons in democracy made a greater impact on POW beliefs than official education programs in the camps. Not all POWs came to believe in democracy or to discard all of their earlier convictions. For example, even POWs who concluded that American institutions were superior to those of National Socialism remained reluctant to dismiss Hitler's peacetime accomplishments. Nevertheless, the background POWs acquired in Kansas was transferred to their own society and contributed to the successful introduction of democracy in West Germany.

War usually pulls people apart, but World War II united Kansans and POWs in friendships that have continued to the present. The first letters that Kansans received from Germany described the devastation and severity of life. A former POW wrote: "Conditions here... are sad. Everything is ruins and more ruins," adding "that is the folly of war." His later letters described acute and widespread suffering. Food was in short supply, and, he lamented, "nobody has enough to eat, the rations are too small for everyone." Although food was the critical item, he stated: "We need everything, and cannot buy anything." Kansans who had not experienced the carnage were told that "you cannot believe how bad we are living here."

Another repatriated POW corroborated the destitution and despair in the defeated country. Without regular food rations for four months, his family often had no bread and subsisted largely on turnips. The worst part of the situation was that "not even for infants can one receive necessary food." Hungry and cold, the family sat "in the kitchen wearing overcoats," while he wished "for the better time I had in America. I wish I were still there." He thought, "Better to be a prisoner forever in America than to endure this continual
hunger. In desperation, he asked for seed to try to grow sorghum.\textsuperscript{52}

Kansans who had befriended POWs responded to their appeals with packages of food, clothing, and other virtually unobtainable items. They received overwhelming gratitude. When one former POW received a package, he wrote:

You cannot imagine how glad we were of the things, especially of the soap. Now we can wash thoroughly again after a long time and I also can shave well. My wife was able to bake a cake for Easter. That was a big joy . . . We shall not forget your kindness.

He poignantly reflected on the past and the implications for the future. "The war has brought so much misfortune and grief that we may ask, why that? It must be possible that all peoples come to an agreement and live in peace instead of destroying each other."\textsuperscript{53}

The nature of the correspondence that crossed the Atlantic changed as the world stabilized and the lives of the principals returned somewhat to normal. Both Kansans and former POWs recalled funny and pleasant experiences and exchanged information on family, jobs, and common interests. Former POWs invariably inquired about crops, and Kansans inevitably wrote about them. When a generation had passed, the emphasis on children was expanded to include grandchildren. Usually, they had good news to share, but the mail also brought crushing news of illness and death, and Kansans opened black-edged letters from Germany with apprehension. Habitually expressed in the letters was the wish that the writers could visit one another. When a disappointed former POW indicated that his family could not accept an invitation to come to Kansas, he added, "we will not give up . . . hope."\textsuperscript{54}

Although Heinrich Schmidt died with his hope unfulfilled, the hopes of many Kansans and former

\textsuperscript{52} Sigmund Trabala to Harry Scott family, February 19, 1947.
\textsuperscript{53} Heinrich Schmidt to Harry Scott family, March 29, 1948.
\textsuperscript{54} Heinrich Schmidt to Mr. and Mrs. Harry Scott, December 20, 1968.
POWs became reality. These reunions brought them even closer together. The emotion of the reunion of Loel and Carl Balzer with Franz Paier was duplicated many times. The families corresponded after the war, and the Balzers stayed with Paier on their first trip to Europe in 1974. They were driving on country roads and confused about directions to the Paier farm, when, Loel recalled:

[a] car passed us and stopped ... then we stopped and the man got out and ... We recognized him just like that ... I always said of that whole trip, if I could remember ... only one minute ... I would want this next minute. ... He came over to Carl first, two soldiers who had been enemies, and he ... just hugged him for the longest time. There just wasn't a dry eye in the group.

The Balzers have visited Paier and his family four times since the first reunion, and Loel recalled, "everytime ... we stay another day longer." "Friendship is pretty fragile," she said, "if somebody isn't your next door neighbor you don't see them as often. You know how it is. But ... this friendship survived time and language and war and distance."

Former POWs have often returned to the sites where they were interned and visited with friends. These reunions have on occasion been cause for community celebrations such as that for Erik Kosin. Only nineteen when at Camp Concordia, he was sufficiently fluent in English to act as an interpreter as well as a mail clerk, a talent that aided him in making acquaintances and close friends. He maintained contact with them after the war, and a community picnic was held in his honor when he returned to Concordia in 1976. Kosin had a daughter who was an exchange student in America at that time.

America has been a symbol of opportunity to which even the POWs were not immune. Only a few of the POWs who wished to return to the United States were

55. Loel Balzer interview, September 24, 1982.
56. Concordia Blade-Empire, June 22, 1976; Manhattan Mercury, June 20, 1976; tape of radio interview with Erik Kosin provided by Bernadine Cummings.
able to do so; however, those few probably had many of the experiences of Gerd Kruse, Franz Altenhofen, and Heinrich Goedecke. In an antiaircraft unit when captured in North Africa, Gerd Kruse was eventually confined at Camp Concordia; later assigned to a branch camp, he worked on a farm close to Deshler, Nebraska. "When I set foot on German soil and I saw what happened," he recounted, "I just as soon turned around and got on a ship...back to where I came from." When a group of farmers in Kansas and Nebraska decided to send food packages to former POWs, Kruse's name was chosen from the list by the farmer for whom he had worked. This association led first to letters between the farmer's daughter and Kruse, then love, then her trip to Germany to marry him. Kruse and his family live on the same farm where he worked as a POW.

Like Kruse, Franz Altenhofen was captured in North Africa, but he was interned at Camp Phillips and later worked on farms near El Dorado, where, he recalled, "even as a POW going out to a cafe everyone was friendly." Back in Germany, he maintained contact with and received food and clothing packages from an El Dorado pharmacist who had befriended him. He returned to El Dorado in 1952 to work at his sponsor's factory, where he became foreman until it closed. Altenhofen then moved to Newton, where he was employed by Hesston. All of his children and grandchildren are Kansans.

Heinrich Goedecke was a naval officer in North Africa when taken prisoner, but for some reason he was incarcerated with army personnel at Camp Concordia. He liked the United States, and its lure became stronger the longer he was in Germany. American sponsors helped Goedecke and his wife and children come to Salina, Kansas. Heinrich's widow, Frieda, reflected on the reasons they left their land to become immigrants and then American citizens:

My husband really did like it here, and he said there was lots of room to live and there are opportunities to make something of yourself there. So this was more or less the reason to come -- and the freedom you know. And he thought for our children that would be good to come here.

What they had seen, and faith in themselves, led them to pursue the American dream:

We've been here since 1952 and we accomplish a lot. We came with two suitcases and two boxes and today we have a manufacturing company, and we have a retail store. So we can't put that in two boxes and a suitcase anymore. And you can do it here in America. I think that is the only place where you can do it."