

WWII Prisoner of War Camps in Texomaland

Federal Requirements for housing POWs in WWII

During WWII, Oklahoma met the basic requirements for the establishment of enemy POW camps governed by the Office of the U.S. Provost Marshal General. The guidelines for POW camps required that these camps be located away from urban and industrial areas for security, in regions with mild climates to reduce construction costs, and where POW labor could assist with farm labor shortages.

The Geneva Convention of 1929 allowed the use of POWs as laborers. An estimated 20,000 German POWs worked at Oklahoma POW camps. The U.S. Army built six major base camps and two dozen branch camps in Oklahoma. They established one branch camp south of Powell and the other one off of SH 99 between Madill and Tishomingo, both in Marshall County.

President Roosevelt believed that if the U.S. treated the German POWs well, the enemies would treat the U.S. POWs with respect overseas. The POW camps were grouped into compounds. Each POW compound could house 1,000 men. These compounds incorporated barracks, latrines, mess halls, recreation areas, and fire departments. Each POW camp had one to five compounds. The U.S. Army supplied the POWs with the same rations as U.S. troops. Our U.S. troop's quarters were of the same quality as the POW compounds.

Fences surrounded the compounds. Our government built quarters for our commissioned and non-commissioned troops, hospitals, administration buildings, gas stations, and warehouses outside of the compound fences. Some camps even had a theatre and an officer's club. The whole outfit employed civilians, U.S. Troops, and POWs.

First, the U.S. processed the POWs in New York City where they received medical exams and were then sent across the U.S. to various camps via trains. The Germans had a hard time believing that they could travel for four days and remain in the same country. And, they found out that Germany had not crippled America as Hitler's propaganda had led them to believe when they saw our citizens going about their daily lives with little wartime interruption.

The POW officers ran their compounds with regular army routines, and non-commissioned officers did not have to work. The U.S. paid the POWs for their farm labor when the war ended as dictated by the 1929 Geneva Convention.

Powell Oklahoma POW Camp

The Madill Provisional Internment Camp Headquarters opened on April 29, 1943, in the Old First National Bank Building and served as administrative headquarters for several POW camps. The Powell POW camp also opened on April 29th and housed 600 men. We clothed the German POWs in surplus military fatigues with the letters "PW" stitched on them. They worked five days a week for eight hours a day.

"John I. Bridgeman . . . worked . . . at Powell and remembered talking with one German . . . who had several children the same age as Bridgeman's children. The prisoner . . . wished he could see his own children. Bridgeman's two children . . . remembered going into the camp with their father and seeing the 'red-haired German baker'. The baker used to give the children sweets and cinnamon rolls which he had baked. Bridgeman recalled the impeccable kitchens run by the Germans. 'They were very frugal with their provisions, wasting very little.'"

The POW camp in Powell brought electricity to the City of Powell for the first time. The Powell camp was not as large as other camps. It built barracks for the men in both armies, four guard towers, a post exchange, and a gas station. The German's quarters and mess hall occupied only 200 square yards encompassed by a fence, and the guard towers sat at each corner of the square. Most of the POWs who worked out of the Powell camp were between 19 and 25 years old.

Not much remains at this camp because the U.S. Army tore down and removed all of the buildings. At one time, you could still see the concrete guard tower pilings, the water well, the prisoner shower floors, and the electrical switch box and line.

German POWs Help Build Lake Texoma

"'Achtung!' shouted the burly men as they mechanically felled trees in the fall of 1943. The workers had never heard the English terms—'Timber!' or 'Watch out!' They were prisoners of German origin placed in an internment camp located south of Powell. The prisoners were to help in clearing the area to be flooded by the Denison Dam impoundment (later to be named Lake Texoma)."

Sources

The Madill City County Library: Call Numbers: R 929 MAR, Marshall County Newspaper 14122-56. Contents: Texoman, 1975, Jan 11 thru 1976, Dec 25. Missing issues Jan 4, 1975

Bill Corbett, "Prisoner of War Camps," The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture, www.okhistory.org (accessed October 12, 2017).

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