

Enemy Among Us

Traveling through the fertile farmland of eastern North Carolina during the summer of 1944, Joseph Buchen's thoughts drifted to an earlier time in Germany and the family left behind after being drafted into Hitler's army. He wondered how they were coping now that the Allies had begun massive bombing of his homeland. But why, you might ask, was a German soldier at the height of World War II traveling through eastern North Carolina? The answer might surprise you, but Joseph was among a dozen or so German prisoners of war on their way to the waterfront of Washington, N.C. to perform a day's work at the Moss Planing Mill.



Williamston POW Camp

Following the surrender of 230,000 Axis troops in Tunisia, North Africa on May 12, 1943, the U.S. Army established prisoner of war camps in many southern states, including North Carolina, to house some of the captured German and Italian soldiers. The Army's prisoner of war program was so secret that few people other than the guards who ran the camps and the civilian employers who "leased" the services of the prisoners from the military knew of its existence. One such camp was located in Williamston, a satellite of a major camp located in Butner, N.C. Joseph Buchen was one of approximately 500 prisoners housed at the camp which was located near the banks of the Roanoke River. At first, the Williamston camp housed mostly Italian prisoners, but by mid 1944, the Italians were replaced by Germans. Betty Bryant describes the camp in Martin County Heritage, "Living quarters for the prisoners as well as the guards, were tent structures composed of a raised wooden floor, 20' by 20', sides boarded to shoulder-level, and a tent top. Each living unit housed 6 men. All other structures in the camp were also tents, except for the recreational building and the small chapel standing just outside the compound." The men in the camp were hired out by the U.S. Army to perform manual labor on local farms

and lumber mills. Wages were collected by the Army in compensation for the work done by the prisoners. Most of the pay went towards the upkeep of the camp while prisoners were able to retain a small percentage of the earnings for themselves. The Williamston camp remained open until the end of World War II when the prisoners were repatriated to Europe.



German POWs harvesting lettuce in Eastern NC

Several citizens of Beaufort County can recall the time when the prisoners worked among them or can recollect the stories told to them by family members. John T. Jones recalls stories told by his mother about German prisoners working on his grandfather's Yeatsville farm. Girls of the community would often enjoy watching as the often times blond, blue eyed soldiers worked shirtless in the fields. Harold Lane, former manager at the Moss Planing Mill, had high regard for the German prisoners. Lane remembers that the Germans were the "Best working people you have ever seen." Each day, after being trucked from the Williamston camp to Washington, the men set to work providing labor for the mill. Most were not fluent in English so prisoners like Joseph Buchen, who was fluent in seven languages, became their overseer serving to translate commands. Besides being hard-working and reliable, many of the Germans were skilled craftsmen. Following a fire at the mill, Buchen volunteered the prisoners to rebuild a destroyed building. Lane agreed, sketched the structure, gave the plans to Buchen and the building was completed in half the time expected. To celebrate the completion, Lane recalls, the prisoners held a traditional German "topping out" ritual by nailing a small pine tree found on the mill yard to the top of the building's gable.



Whiting Toler Sketch of Prisoner "escape"

According to Lane, armed guards were not employed at the mill. The prisoners were free to move about the yard. They could even swim in the Pamlico River during their lunch break as long as they did not stray too far from the mill's landing. But one hot summer day one prisoner decided to test his fate and find out if he could swim to the distant highway bridge, a length of about two thirds of a mile. Needless to say, considerable time passed and eventually the supervisors at the mill noticed he was missing. Local historian Whiting Toler recalled the story told to him by his mother of the ensuing confusion and mayhem following the "escape." Sirens blared, police cars raced down Water Street and mothers sheltered their children to indoors. Those same mothers then stationed themselves at second story windows to keep a wary eye out for the escapee. Quoting from a June 29, 1944 article in the Washington Daily News, "Rudolph Wahlich, 27, German war prisoner who has been working at the Moss Planing Mill, made an unsuccessful attempt to escape yesterday afternoon. He was captured near the buoy yard at Bridge and Main streets after having swum from the mill where he entered the water. Police reported that Wahlich had been gone for more than an hour before his absence was noticed by officers at the mill. Army officers joined with city police, the sheriff's force and State highway patrol in searching the docks along the river."



German POWs at Moss Planing Mill

Toler recalls the account of the arresting officer, Piney Jackson, in which he marched the barefoot Wahlich down Main Street towards the jail. The pavement being hot caused the prisoner to hop about in such away that merchants standing in their store fronts taunted Wahlich about his "goose stepping." Wahlich responded to his hecklers in broken English "Hot, not funny! Hot, not funny!" Upon arriving at the police station, Wahlich declared, "I was just taking a swim."



Joseph Buchen

The "escape" attempt notwithstanding, relations between the citizens of Beaufort County and the German prisoners were generally good. For the most part the men working on the farms and in the mills were well mannered and courteous. Some enduring friendships were even forged. Joseph Buchen, upon returning to Germany, was given assistance by Harold Lane and his wife Louise in the form of clothing and money. With their help, he was able to complete his college degree. Buchen's positive wartime experience in North Carolina must have convinced him to return to America. The Lanes again came to his aid by successfully petitioning the U.S. Government to permit Buchen to immigrate to the United States. Upon arriving in New York, Buchen settled into a career with General Electric and eventually moved to California.

Overall, the Italian and German prisoners of war contributed significantly to the American war effort by performing nearly two million man-days of labor in North Carolina's agricultural and other rural industries. But the enduring legacy of the prisoner of war experience may be the bonds forged by the prisoners with their American captors, facilitating a post war friendship that has continued to this day.

Sources:

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