

CAMP ALGONA SYSTEM
A Brief Summary
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During WW2, Algona, Iowa was the site of a main camp for prisoners of war. This camp was 'home' to a total of 10,000 German prisoners from April 1944 to February 1946. The value of the work done by the prisoners in the 4 state region was estimated at \$3,506,000. A total of 34 branch camps were supervised from Algona. The average monthly camp system population was 3,216, although the number kept in the Algona camp rarely exceeded 2,500. Although many visitors remark they had no idea such a camp existed, it had a huge economic impact on the community of Algona and the surrounding area.

In January of 2001, the Camp Algona POW Project committee was organized with the purpose of collecting existing information and artifacts from American and German personnel who were at the camp. We also have located over 60 of the former PWs who are still living; as well as the families of PWs who are deceased. We have collected over 500 photographs of PWs, camp buildings, American personnel and work sites of the PWs. We also have 500 scanned images of letters, diaries, paintings, journals, drawings, records and other keepsake items from both American and German personnel. We have conducted 80 interviews with both Americans and Germans, by mail, phone or in person. Our goal is to develop a museum in the city of Algona.

Let's go back to 1943, the turning point of the war. The Allies in Europe and the Pacific were advancing on the Axis forces, which produced thousands of prisoners. What should the Allies do with the PWs? England had been housing prisoners since the early part of the war, but could handle no more. The answer came by creating a huge PW complex in the US. The government erected over 600 camps in record time. Although they had different locations and some differences, most were from the same blueprint.

A camp in Algona.

In Algona that year, officials received notice that the US government was going to purchase land close to the city for a prison camp. 287 acres of land was purchased from 4 owners, 1.5 miles west of the junction of Hwy. 18 and 169. The Howard R. Green Company was the architectural firm who drew the specifications, unique to our location. The Corps of Engineers was in charge of the actual construction of the camp, but many sub-contractors were employed from the area. In less than 3 months, the camp was built at a cost of \$1,215,968. \$120 per acre was the government offer to the landowners.

Why was Algona chosen as the site? Our research has not found a definitive answer. Some say it was because of Vice President Henry Wallace and his involvement of Pioneer, who had a large seed corn production plant in Algona. Research at the Wallace Foundation finds no such link. Although we may never know the exact reason for choosing Algona as the site, its location in the center of the 4 state area seems to be significant.

One fact is clear. ***The existence of the camp was the most significant event that happened to Algona in the war.*** It was the daily reminder of the war for our citizens.

Many civilians from the area were in and out of the camp daily for a variety of reasons. Many families with servicemen overseas were invited to the camp for recognition and support by the American staff. Every time someone drove by the camp or saw a military vehicle or military personnel, they were reminded of the sacrifice of their loved ones on other fronts.

The 287-acre site was divided into the prisoner stockade compound and the American garrison echelon. The stockade was surrounded by 2 rows of 10-foot chain link fence topped with barbed wire. 8 guard towers were manned with adequate weapons and connected to the post HQ by telephone. There were 3 prisoner compounds of 20 barracks each, 3 mess halls, shower and latrine building, recreation building, craft and education building, supply building and canteen. In addition there was a 150-bed hospital and dispensary that was staffed by American and German medical personnel. It was considered the finest medical facility in the county at the time.

The American garrison contained buildings for the Post Headquarters, Commanding Officer, quartermaster, officer mess hall and quarters as well as an officer's club. There was also a dispensary, guardhouse, troop barracks, post exchange, theater, fire station, several warehouses, shower and latrine buildings, nurses quarters and carpenter and paint shop. The motor pool area even contained a stable for horses used by the guards. All told there were 178 frame buildings, built of wood frame on concrete footings. They were covered with fiberboard and were heated with coal burning stoves in each end.

At the peak of the camp's existence, there were 79 civilians working there. Many married American officers and enlisted men lived in Algona or the surrounding area. This many extra renters created an unprecedented housing shortage in the area. Camp personnel spent \$120,000 in rent, food and utilities in the city of Algona during their time here.

Today, nothing is left. The buildings were torn down or sold, as is, in early 1946. A series of auctions provided many in the area with some cheap lumber as well as electrical and plumbing fixtures. Today the site is owned by the City of Algona and serves as the location of our National Guard Armory and city Airport.

The Branch Camp System.

The branch camp 'empire' reached 285 miles east of Algona to Clinton; 220 miles south to Shenandoah; 185 miles west to Onawa and almost 500 miles north to Grafton, North Dakota. The kind of work that the PWs performed was as varied as the communities in which they were held. They served farmers, worked in canneries, nurseries, milk processing plants and a box and barrel factory. They detasseled hybrid corn for DeKalb and Pioneer in Humboldt and Algona. They cut timber and pulpwood in northern Minnesota. They worked in brick and tile factories, did silo construction, cleared drainage ditches of scrub trees and in two camps, were employed in the unpleasant work of eviscerating chickens. In a July 1945 press release, Camp Commander Lt. Col. A. T. Lobdell recorded the most spectacular prisoner agricultural effort. He reported that over 2,400 POWs working out of seven southern Minnesota branch camps, saved an estimated 65% of a record-breaking pea crop. **'If prisoners of war had not been utilized' he reported, 'a total of 2,594,150 cases of canned peas**

would not have been made available.' He added that the peas saved by the POWs had a retail value of \$9,812,757.

Their living conditions in branch camps were very different than in the main camp. According to government regulations, no tax funds could be used for branch camp housing. Most of the POWs were contracted to private employers; whose responsibility it was to provide housing. In cases where former CCC camps still existed, branch camp personnel could use them. In Tabor, Iowa, POWs lived in a former college dormitory. The Muscatine, IA, camp was housed in a solid three-story brick fish hatchery near Fairport. Unused fairground buildings, barracks once used by migratory Mexican laborers, and a former warehouse also sheltered PWs. At the Owatonna, MN branch on the Cashman Nursery Farm prisoners stayed in a spacious mansion of a former state senator, until it burned down. At St. Charles, MN, they stayed at the beautiful Whitewater State Park. *George Lobdell, 'Algona Camp Was Central Point for POW Branch Camps,' in the Algona Upper Des Moines, February 8, 2001, section B, p.1.

The size of the camps varied greatly. The Onawa, IA, branch never had more than 50 PWs, but 585 PWs were located in Fairmont, MN. However, most camps usually had a census of between 225-350 PWs guarded and supervised by between 12 – 18 Americans. This ratio was a part of the policy of 'calculated risk'. Until June of 1945, we didn't have surplus of American soldiers to serve as guards. The policy recognized that we needed to use a large enough number to adequately guard the PWs, realizing the likelihood that they were probably not going to go far, even if they did escape. There were some escapes from the system, although none for more than several days.

The German PW in the Algona System.

The first PWs in the Algona system were captured in the Northern Africa campaign. Some may have been in captivity since mid 1943. After June of 1944, many more German prisoners were brought to the U.S. as a result of the Normandy invasion. The prison workers in Algona and the branch camps were paid a wage of .10 hour not to exceed .80 per day. The wage was in script that was negotiable in their canteen. .10 per day was paid to non-workers, including those with the rank of Sgt. and above. **No PW ever worked at a job where free American labor was available.**

From the profits of their own canteen, PWs bought musical equipment, sports equipment, magazine subscriptions, etc. The prisoners planted and harvested vegetables from a 65-acre garden on the campsite. The materials for the world famous Nativity Scene, which they left here as a gift, was paid for by the PWs. In the main camp there was a prisoner staffed 15-piece orchestra, a chorus and a dramatic club. In the branch camps, activities varied widely. The YMCA played a significant role in making frequent visits to the camps and provided the PWs with countless recreational and cultural materials. Adherence to the Geneva Convention by the American captors resulted in fair treatment for the prisoners.

The American GI at Camp Algona.

The American personnel varied in age and qualifications. Some of the officers, such as Lt. Col. Lobdell and others were in their fifties during this time. Many American camp guards were 'limited service' men who were unqualified for overseas duty. After

May of 1945, the American personnel included many returning GIs from the European theater. Although many were in Algona or its branches only a short time, most had a positive impact on the community.

One of the most unique circumstances involved 5 Americans who had been held by the Germans in prison camps. Once these three were brought back to the states and given time to recover, they were brought to Camp Algona as **guards of German prisoners**. Native Iowans Roy Olinger, Melvin Yetmar, Donald Brommer, Lawrence Klenske and Stanley Pearce have always felt the cruel irony thrust on them by the U.S. government. Klenske and Pearce are deceased, but our committee has interviewed the others.

Suddenly it's gone.

On September 15, 1945, the Algona system reached its largest POW population of 5,452 captives. It was also during this month that the largest gross revenue was earned by the labor of the PWs. As quickly as the camp had been built and inhabited, it also vanished. A group of 2,000 PWs shipped out in November of 1945, followed by several hundred at a time until the last of the German and Americans left in February of 1946. Although there are few visible remains of Camp Algona, its importance is permanently etched in our history. Camp Algona is our community's link to World War II. The Nativity Scene, housed on the Kossuth County Fairgrounds, is the lasting legacy of the prisoners who were here. Building a display facility to remember those American and German servicemen who were connected by war in the Camp Algona system remains the undimmed goal of the Camp Algona committee.