

A Comparative Study of the Perceptions of German POWs in North Carolina

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In September 1942, 150,000 German POWs received by American forces from the overwhelmed British forces were being contained in isolated camps, primarily in the Southwest, where their risk to the population and of becoming sensationalized in the media would be minimal. The number of military personnel and civilian employees in crucial industries being deployed overseas was increasing, resulting in critical shortages. By March 1943, the U.S. State and War Departments began using POW labor on military installations to ease labor shortages. In August 1943, an official policy was developed for POW leasing to civilian contractors in order to alleviate shortages in specified industries. During the fall of 1943, North Carolina welcomed her first prisoners of war under the new labor initiative.<sup>1</sup>

Nearly three thousand Italian POWs arrived in batches at Camp Butner, just outside of Durham, in the fall of 1943. These Italian POWs were dispersed to Tarboro, Scotland Neck, and Windsor via Camp Williamston in groups of no more than five hundred at a time to perform various manual labor assignments. By May 1944, tensions between the northern and southern Italians made supervision difficult and too costly for temporary camps based out of winterized tents, and the Italians were transferred to another state. German POWs had been arriving at Camp Butner during this same period. While some prisoners remained at one site for most of their time, some were transferred due to their ideology, ethnicity, or health, so POW counts remained fluid. At Camp Butner's peak, there were 5,487 German POWs on base or in one of the branch camps.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Department of the Army. *History of Prisoner of War Utilization by the United States Army, 1776-1945*. Lt. Col. George G. Lewis and Capt. John Mewha, Department of the Army Pamphlet no. 20-213. (1955 Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, Reprint, Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2002), 101-9; Arnold Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*. (1979; repr., Chelsea, MI: Scarborough House Publishers, 1991), 2; Robert D. Billinger, Jr. *Nazi POWs in the Tarheel State*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008), 105; Henry L. Stimson to George C. Marshall, 28 September 1942. Copy Seen in Marshall Foundation National Archives Project, Xerox 983, George C. Marshall Library, Lexington, Virginia. (Original in National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.)

<sup>2</sup> Billinger, 58-60.

Interesting theories have arisen in secondary sources exploring German prisoners of war interned in the United States during World War II. Matthias Reiss posits that the public became infatuated with the Nazi body after comparing the media's image of the Nazi soldiers as "Aryan Supermen" to the real POWs in the camps. Reiss claims the prisoners' presence was not only well known by the camps' neighbors, but the prisoners morphed into endeared pseudo-family members and even sex symbols. Reiss believes the positive image of the German POW was predominant, despite negative instances. The most sensational examples of fraternization given by Reiss occur in Texas, Kansas, Wisconsin, and Massachusetts, though he applies his assumptions with broad strokes.<sup>3</sup> Robert Billinger, Jr, however, takes the opposite extreme, claiming that news reports regarding POWs were tightly controlled by the military prior to 1945. Billinger further states that an overwhelming amount of POW coverage can be found in the late- and immediate post-war months when the German atrocities were being publicized. The overarching theme of these articles concerned possible coddling of POWs while American citizens and POWs were making sacrifices.<sup>4</sup> These two scholars' works serve as the ends of a continuum reflecting the sentiments of Americans toward their captives. When interviews with people who remember the POW camps in North Carolina and articles regarding the German POWs from the *Greensboro Daily News (GDN)* are compared against the continuum, one can see that events and the sentiment of North Carolina citizens more resembled Billinger than Reiss.

### **North Carolina's Earliest German Prisoners of War**

World War II was not the first time North Carolina hosted German prisoners of war. During World War I, the resort town of Hot Springs nestled in the Pisgah National Forest northwest of Asheville became a temporary home to about four thousand Enemy Prisoners of

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<sup>3</sup> Matthias Reiss. "Bronzed Bodies Behind Barbed Wire," *Journal of Military History*, 69, no. 2 (April 2005): 475-504.

<sup>4</sup> Billinger, 156.

War (EPOWs) and Enemy Aliens (EAs). Additionally, twenty-seven families of the EAs had moved to the area, rented housing, and enrolled children into the schools. The EAs were German merchant marines, arrested and imprisoned in Ellis Island, once World War I officially began in 1914. Life in the camp has been portrayed as idyllic and pampered, and one reporter noted that the “fence and guards are chiefly to keep out curious Americans, not to keep in the Germans.” The families occupying nearby rental homes were allowed one-hour visits with the prisoners each Sunday. For the rest of their time the prisoners grew crops, received technical training, crafted a miniature German village, received censored correspondence, and ate well. Their food rations were calculated at fifty cents per day per prisoner, and prepared by German prisoners who were cooks on the confiscated merchant marine ships. By September 1918, all prisoners, excepting those still battling a month-long outbreak of typhoid fever, had been relocated to more substantial, military-like camps in Tennessee and Georgia.<sup>5</sup>

While Richard Winter’s piece promotes the feeling of a quaint small town, a portion of whose residents just happen to be surrounded by barbed wire fence and armed guards, the review of newspapers of the time project a different image. A *Washington Post* article from August 27, 1917, comments on the prisoners’ facility having been a hotel. The prisoners’ treatment is given special attention through the loaded comment that “they eat their meals at a hotel which the government has leased, just as other guests of a hotel would do.”<sup>6</sup> The journalist fails to mention that the government-leased hotel is no longer operating as a hotel, but a prison camp. On November 17, 1917, the *Washington Post* continued the rants about perceived “pampering of

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Winter, “Hot Springs, North Carolina – A World War I Internment Camp,” *Journal of North Carolina Postal History Society*, 27, no. 1 (Winter 2008), 6-7;

[http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/statepostalhistory/NCPHS\\_HotSprings.pdf](http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/statepostalhistory/NCPHS_HotSprings.pdf) (accessed April 7, 2010). “Interned Germans at Hot Springs, N.C.” *New York Times*, August 12, 1917, <http://news.google.com/newspapers> (accessed April 24, 2010). Robert C. Doyle, *The Enemy in Our Hands: America’s Treatment of Prisoners of War from the Revolution to the War on Terror* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 169.

<sup>6</sup> “U.S. Treating German Prisoners Well,” *Washington Post (1877-1922)*, August 27, 1917, <http://www.proquest.com> (accessed April 26, 2010).

prisoners of war.”<sup>7</sup> In this instance, a group of Ashville women were questioning the fairness of the German prisoners’ diet while American citizens were forced to endure a rationing system. Their concerns garnered enough national attention that President Hoover responded by ordering the prisoners’ rations to be trimmed. The following day’s *Washington Post* carried a response to the exaggerated claims of pampered POWs. The Labor Department insisted that the Hot Spring internees were receiving “Three meals of substantial but plain fare prepared by their own cooks, [which] is the daily quota of each man...A sufficient amount of palatable food is furnished to satisfy a normal man, but any semblance of luxury or extravagance is not to be found in the bill of fare.”<sup>8</sup> This controversy over the possibility of German POWs being exempt from rationing that American citizens must endure demonstrates that the relationship and feelings between citizens and POWs was much more complex than alleged; and, even in World War I, North Carolinians were primarily concerned with the possible coddling of POWs while citizens suffered.

### **German Submariners at Fort Bragg**

During May 1942, the U.S. Navy and Coast Guard sank four German submarines off the North Carolina coast as American antisubmarine technology was near perfection. The Coast Guard Cutter *Icarus* torpedoed and sank the *U-352* near Cape Lookout on May 9, 1942. Of the forty-four crew and officers, eleven perished as the U-boat sank. The twelfth fatality was Gerd Reussel, who died from wounds suffered during the attack, while aboard the *Icarus* en route to

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<sup>7</sup> “Hoover Would Cut Ration to Germans: At Hot Springs Interned Men are Eating 5 Meals a Day,” *Washington Post* (1877-1922), November 17, 1917, <http://www.proquest.com> (accessed April 26, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> “Don’t Get 5 Meals A Day: German Prisoners at Hot Springs Have Three, Say U.S. Officials,” *Washington Post* (1877-1922), November 18, 1917, <http://www.proquest.com> (accessed April 26, 2010).

Charleston's naval yard. The thirty-two survivors were transferred to Fort Bragg and became the first prisoners of war (POWs) held in North Carolina during World War II.<sup>9</sup>

The vital intelligence, which these submariners were believed to possess, led officials to transfer the German prisoners for interrogation proceedings in Washington, D.C. The crews of two other sunken German submarines, the *U-162* and the *U-595*, followed in the footsteps of the *U-352* crew as Fort Bragg became the holding cell for prisoners awaiting interrogations in Washington. In September 1942, Fort Bragg was listed as a temporary camp housing one hundred and forty of the nearly eighty thousand POWs already in the states. While other prisoner camps across the United States began to emerge in 1942, Fort Bragg was heading into hiatus. Though the records were fuzzy, by June 1, 1943, the first wave of North Carolina's German POWs had been transferred to other camps.<sup>10</sup> During this early POW period at Fort Bragg there were no articles in the *GDN* covering the many visitors. The absence of articles is more consistent with Billinger's findings of military scrutiny than Reiss's belief of American fascination with the Germans.

### **Logistics of POW Camps**

In order to make operation of the camps more efficient, the US Army issued a training manual for guards to aid in the political classification of German POWs. After cautioning the reader to "Use this pamphlet, use your common sense, and temper both with a judicious skepticism," the guide explained how to solicit help from anti-Nazis.<sup>11</sup> The guide begins with

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<sup>9</sup> Billinger, 20-1; David Stick, *Graveyard of the Atlantic: Shipwrecks of the North Carolina Coast*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1952), 238. A pattern in primary and secondary sources demonstrated a nomenclatural shift from WWI to WWII, as EPOW became POW.

<sup>10</sup> Billinger, 22-4; Department of the Army., 85.

<sup>11</sup> Special Projects Branch, "What About the German Prisoner!" Prisoner of War Division, Provost Marshal General's Office. Copy seen in Marshall Foundation National Archives Project, Verifax 3524, George C. Marshall Library, Lexington, Virginia. (Original in "Miscellaneous papers on enemy prisoners of war. February 17, 1943-December 17, 1945," National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.)

the “Opportunists” or “March Violets,” and cites a description from the *New York Times* article “German in Defeat is no Superman”:

Tall, gaunt with weak blue eyes behind thick-lensed glasses this German ... was typical of thousands of those taken by the American First Army in the last two weeks’ fighting... This representative of the master race was neither a professional officer nor a professional Nazi... although nature had never intended him to be either a soldier or a Nazi he tried awfully hard to be one.... This type of non-soldier, non-Nazi makes up a vast proportion of the regular army divisions which we are encountering. On the surface they are meek, ineffectual men. Beneath, they are frustrated bullies – cruel, treacherous, blind to what is happening around them.

If handled properly, the Special Projects Branch believes the “March Violets” will seize the opportunity to change sides again. Once they take a side, they are firmly committed until another opportunity presents itself. Non-Nazis, however, are “loyal Germans” who do not share the same political ideology. They were believed to follow the Reich blindly on their quest to be patriotic. The Professional Soldier is defined as merely a well-trained machine that is following orders. While great detail and space are given to defining the “March Violets,” Professional soldiers, and the non-Nazis, the guide persistently reiterates that guards are not to label a POW as “good” or “bad,” since all are Nazis and “have violated every decent code for the sake of a ‘Greater Germany.’” These descriptions are only to aid the guards in finding liaisons to help them maintain order in the camps.<sup>12</sup> One must consider the ramifications of the wording in this guide that is coming from the military – especially during war time. As these views are disseminated through the guards, who are not career military men, they are likely to be shared with and endorsed by their families. Subsequently, they would be even less likely to fit Reiss’ pattern of fostering endearment for the “bronzed bodies.”

Once victory in the European theatre had been declared in May 1945, the prisoners were not ordered to pack for immediate repatriation. The political entity formerly known as Germany

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<sup>12</sup> Special Projects Branch, “What About...”

no longer existed, and this was given as an excuse to hold the German POW as laborers while the battle in the Pacific theatre continued. As repatriation began those who were not working, about 50,000 labeled “dead wood”, were ordered to go in May 1945. Laboring POWs were scheduled to be released from U.S. custody gradually, by the tens of thousands, over the next fourteen months.<sup>13</sup>

While some of these prisoners would be sent directly to their homeland, the vast majority would become statistics within the “Bread Principle.” This diplomatic agreement between the U.S. and France allowed for the transfer of 1.3 million German POWs, from camps in the U.S. and the Rhineland, for “agricultural and rehabilitation work” in France. The program was briefly halted when reports circulated of malnutrition and mistreatment of the POWs at the hands of the French, but resumed after the French met requests for the necessary clothing and food supplies. Though the majority of the prisoners were used in agriculture, 42,452 were locating and disarming over one million mines scattered over the French landscape by the Germans. The French military anticipated a loss of 30,000 lives during the mission.<sup>14</sup> The act of handing over 1.3 million prisoners for periods of up to two years in such dangerous work does not appear to be consistent with the image of the German POW as an adopted son or object of infatuation.

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<sup>13</sup> Associated Press, “German War Prisoner Question is Unsettled,” *Asheville Citizen*, May 24, 1945; Brigadier General B. M. Bryan, “Disposition of German Prisoners of War,” 16 May 1945. Copy seen in Marshall Foundation National Archives Project, Verifax 2433, George C. Marshall Library, Lexington, VA. (Original in “Repatriation Messages September 15-Dec.11, 1945,” National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.)

<sup>14</sup> “Resumption of Transfers of American-held Prisoners of War to the French,” 7 November 1945. Copy seen in Marshall Foundation National Archives Project, Verifax 2671, George C. Marshall Library, Lexington, VA. (Original in, “Under Secretary of War’s Memmoranum on importation of additional prisoners of war,” National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.); “Status of the Transfer to the French Government of German Prisoners of War,” Copy seen in Marshall Foundation National Archives Project, Verifax 3524, George C. Marshall Library, Lexington, VA. (Original in “WDGAP 383.6,” National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.); “Embassy of France in the United States, No. 970,” 7 December 1945. Copy seen in Marshall Foundation National Archives Project, Verifax 2671, George C. Marshall Library, Lexington, VA. (Original in “Miscellaneous Papers on Enemy Prisoners of War. February 17, 1943 – December 17, 1945,” National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.); Associated Press, “France Demands Nazi Prisoners Seek Out Mines,” *Asheville Citizen*, April 25, 1945.

## Legalities of Labor Camps

Motivated by the experiences of World War I, American military planners began developing policies for alien and prisoner of war camps once World War II began in the European theater. The U.S. State Department's policies began emerging as early as 1940, and were based on their interpretations of the 1929 Geneva Convention, which focused on prisoners of war. These policies permitted POWs to be used for labor so long as they were duly compensated and their work did not benefit the war effort. Interesting theories concerning the ambiguity of POW work benefiting the captor's war effort have been posited and implemented.<sup>15</sup> In the Department of the Army Pamphlet regarding POW utilization, one clever example of possible interpretations was given:

[The U.S. planners]...decided that the prisoners could not work on projects solely of value to active war operations. For example, POWs could manufacture trucks and truck parts, some of which would be used by the general public while others would eventually be used by the military. But they could not be employed in manufacturing parts that were exclusively used on tanks.<sup>16</sup>

Howard Levie recognized the ambiguity and resultant questionable operating procedures in his research. Levie also discovered that there existed a general excusatory response by Detaining Powers, being that work in acceptable environments provides POWs with activities to maintain positive physical and mental health conditions. Regardless of opposing views on POW labor, one must consider the damage to the physical and economic structures of the many countries involved in World War II, along with the fact that eighteen- to thirty-five million people were held as prisoners by the end of the war. Facing such devastation and drastic shifts in able-bodied

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<sup>15</sup> Department of the Army, 75-7; Howard S. Levie, "The Employment of Prisoners of War," *American Journal of International Law*, 57, no. 2 (April, 1963), 322, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2195984> (accessed April 21, 2010); Gerald H. Davis, "Prisoners of War in Twentieth-Century War Economies," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 12, no. 4 (October, 1977), 624, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/260164> (accessed April 7, 2010). Davis notes prisoner estimates ranged from 12,000,000 to 35,000,000, but his itemized list places the minimum at 18,000,000.

<sup>16</sup> Department of the Army. 77.

workers, it seems almost imminent that POW labor would become a prominent element of World War II and the following period of reconstruction.<sup>17</sup>

One crucial point of contention in POW labor is compensation. Opponents of compensation will argue that POWs should not be compensated due to the expense incurred in providing appropriate living conditions for the POWs when the funds should be directed to the war effort. The U.S. decided to pay POWs eighty cents per day of labor in addition to their military salary as mandated by the 1929 Geneva Convention. Work was divided into three categories: Class I labor was not compensable as it was maintenance of the POW camp, Class II was compensable labor, and Contract labor was the most desired. Contracted POWs were to be paid at least eighty cents per day and were the charges of the contractor when outside of the camp perimeter. Contract labor, especially in the agricultural and lumber industries, was representative of most camps to emerge in North Carolina.<sup>18</sup>

Those companies and individual farms or dairies wishing to lease POW laborers were expected to pay the government for each laborer the average hourly rate a citizen would anticipate for that job. The *Wilmington Morning Star (WMS)*, which tended to be more open with their coverage of the POW labor program, announced the terms of the Wilmington POW camp labor contracts. Fertilizer plants, typically paying civilians forty-five cents per hour, were allowed to pay forty-two and one-half cents to account for their transportation costs. Each company was responsible for providing transportation for the POWs to and from the job site. After prisoners' accounts were credited eighty cent for each day of work, the government retains the remainder to cover the overhead of running a camp. Companies or individuals wishing to

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<sup>17</sup> Levie, 323; Davis, 624.

<sup>18</sup> Department of the Army, 78-9; Krammer, 83-4; John Brown Mason, "German Prisoners of War in the United States," *American Journal of International Law*, 39, no. 2 (April, 1945), 207, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2192341> (accessed April 7, 2010). Based on rank, POWs' monthly pay ranged from \$20 to \$40 per month.

participate in this POW labor program were asked to submit request forms, and they were approved or denied based on their respective industry. Harvesting of perishable crops during a period when food rations were so critical was given priority; lumber, pulpwood, and fertilizer companies' requests were filled next; and, finally general labor or farm work requests were satisfied.<sup>19</sup>

As early as May 1944, the War Department was declaring the POW labor program a success with over nineteen million man-days of employment gained. The costs were considered minimal and measured in terms of a minimum pay rate, a great percentage of which was returned to the military when the POWs cashed in their vouchers at the camp canteen. Additionally, there were a mere 285 escapees, with only five remaining unaccounted for. Additional benefits that outweighed the costs were the educational opportunities believed to exist in having the Nazi POWs actively involved in American culture. Officials enthusiastically hoped that the Germans would "absorb material from newspapers, books, motion pictures, radio and correspondence courses which they acquire in the camps."<sup>20</sup>

### **The Camps of North Carolina**

The majority of work being performed by the German POWs at Camp Butner was camp maintenance, with a few groups being leased out for civilian contract work detail. The situation was the same for Camp Butner's branch camps which emerged at military installations between February and May 1944. This period saw the creation of POW branch camps at Camp Mackall,

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<sup>19</sup> "War Prisoners Working Here," *Wilmington Morning Star*, February 15, 1944; Associated Press, "War Prisoners Ready for Work," *Wilmington Morning Star*, February 21, 1944; "Priority List for Prisoners' Use Received," *Wilmington Morning Star*, April 21, 1944.

<sup>20</sup> Associated Press, "U.S. Holds 183,618 Prisoners of War; 285 Have Escaped – Five Still At Large," *Wilmington Morning Star*, May 8, 1944.

north of Hoffman; Camp Davis, south of Wilmington; Camp Sutton, in Monroe; Wilmington, near Bluethenthal Air Field; and Williamston, in Martin County. Fort Mackall made the *GDN* in May 1945 for deciding to install as guards American soldiers formerly held as prisoners in Germany.<sup>21</sup> Fort Bragg, in Fayetteville, was authorized in the initial War Department planning stages to serve as one of ten temporary camps. The early plan naively considered only the initial 150,000 prisoners transferred from British forces, of which a mere 140 were to go to Ft. Bragg.<sup>22</sup> According to Billinger, Ft. Bragg began receiving POWs in May 1944, and emerged as a base camp like Butner. Whenever possible, the POWs were housed in existing buildings. Camps Mackall, Sutton, Wilmington, and Williamston provided winterized tents for the POWs. Eventually, Wilmington's POWs were moved into the barracks at the former Marine hospital.<sup>23</sup>

A temporary branch camp was established in Wilmington on Carolina Beach Road, and locals were expecting the arrival of 250 Italians to work in agriculture by February 1944. A last minute announcement informed locals that 250 Nazis would be coming to their coastal town instead of the far less dreaded Italians. Lt. James Hayes spoke to a local group in Carolina Beach group regarding the experiences with the German POWs interned locally and contracted to work in pulpwood. He described their initial attitude upon arrival as very arrogant, but added that he felt they were softening. While the 274 prisoners remained "strongly in favor of the Nazi regime," they were not allowed to openly discuss politics. By late February 1944, the prisoners at the temporary Carolina Beach Road camp were working in fertilizer plants, dairies, and performing routine camp maintenance. The observer is left to wonder if the arrogant, pro-Nazi behavior was the trigger for "jeering" and "derisive conduct" reportedly demonstrated toward

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<sup>21</sup>"Ex-War Prisoners to Guard Germans at Camp Mackall," *Greensboro Daily News*, May 17, 1945.

<sup>22</sup>W. A. Wood, Jr. to Colonel Richards, 3 October 1942. Copy seen in Marshall Foundation National Archives Project, Xerox 1683, George C. Marshall Library, Lexington, Virginia. (Original in National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.)

<sup>23</sup>Billinger, 27-32, 51, 58-60, 70-75.

them by the camp guards. Being on the coast, the citizens and soldiers stationed in the area were likely irritated over the extra inconvenience they suffered from residing in a blackout zone.<sup>24</sup>

Elizabeth Norfleet Stallings was living in Southport in Brunswick County from 1943 to 1945, and remembered well the blackout zones of the Carolina coast. She served as a Home Demonstration Agent for the Agricultural Extension Agency during those two years. This job required much travel in Brunswick and the surrounding counties, exposing her to areas housing POW camps. Mrs. Stallings fondly reminisced about her Plymouth getting twenty miles-per-gallon and the Agricultural Extension Agency provided her with gas rations of fifteen miles-per-gallon. She would eventually save enough gas to make a trip home to Roxobel, near Scotland Neck and Ahoskie. Throughout her travels Mrs. Stallings never encountered a POW camp. She was not even aware that there were camps holding German or Italian prisoners of war in North Carolina. She said rather than harboring any feelings for Germans she was more concerned with making the expected appearances at the local USO club to dance with the naval officers.<sup>25</sup>

Mary Alice Wildman, nee Rose, was in her late teens when she became a volunteer nurse's aide for the American Red Cross in Wilmington, North Carolina, during the war. She recalled first encountering the German POWs as a member of her high school's tennis team. Mrs. Wildman said the POWs were at a work site next to the public tennis courts. Though separated by a fence, the POWs attempted to be a part of the action by cheering for the players. She fondly remembered how some POWs would occasionally try to initiate a conversation, but the language barrier proved stronger than the fence. While being a supportive audience or

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<sup>24</sup> "Prisoners Due Here Next Week," *Wilmington Morning Star*, February 5, 1944; "More Prisoners Placed in Camp," *Wilmington Morning Star*, February 27, 1944; "Troops Reported Jeering Germans," *Wilmington Morning Star*, February 28, 1944; "German Prisoners Weaken on Naziism," *Wilmington Morning Star*, May 25, 1944.

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Norfleet Stallings, interview with author, Greensboro, NC, November 18, 2010.

attempting to be conversational, Mrs. Wildman insisted the encounters were always polite and cordial, and absent of any insinuation of further intimacy.<sup>26</sup>

Mrs. Wildman's next encounter was at Bluethenthal Air Field as a nurse's aide in the infirmary. She was one of a few young girls who tended specifically to the German POWs confined to a separate area of the infirmary. When asked about the response from the locals to the presence of these POWs, Mrs. Wildman said most people only wanted to know if she and her cohorts were afraid of having to care for Germans. She recalls a strong mutual lack of trust between the nurse's aides and the POWs, rather than any lasting sense of fear. The lack of trust and standoffishness experienced by these parties in absence of a protective fence is in stark contrast to the light-hearted scene depicted at the fenced-in tennis courts.<sup>27</sup>

The majority of the POWs seen in the infirmary were being treated for cuts and poison ivy outbreaks, with only a few bearing serious illnesses. Mrs. Wildman remembers her superiors accusing the prisoners of intentionally contracting poison ivy or cutting themselves to get out of their work duties, the specifics of which were unknown to Mrs. Wildman. Since the quality of food served to German prisoners in a country whose citizens were subject to rations was of major concern in the historiography, Mrs. Wildman was specifically asked about their dietary and living habits. She said they received the same food and facilities as the American soldiers at the base. She never heard complaints from the prisoners.<sup>28</sup>

The overall attitude of the German POWs interned at Bluethenthal was that of a professional soldier constantly concerned with appearances. Mrs. Wildman stated they would stand and click their heels to attention, remaining at attention during the presence of the nurse's aides. On one memorable occasion a prisoner had attempted to stand too quickly after receiving

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<sup>26</sup> Mary Alice Rose Wildman, interview by author, Greensboro, NC, November 19, 2010.

<sup>27</sup> Wildman interview.

<sup>28</sup> Wildman interview.

a sponge bath and accidentally overturned a wash basin. Mrs. Wildman remembered being afraid for an instant when the prisoner was startled. Her fear quickly subsided as he apologized profusely in German and cleaned up the mess perfectly. Throughout this intimate interaction, Mrs. Wildman maintains that a barrier existed between the nurse's aides and the prisoners. She recalls no interactions between the prisoners and other civilians, or any escapes.<sup>29</sup>

Contract labor during this period represented only a small percentage of the labor performed by the POWs. The most common industries to contract POW labor were lumber and pulpwood, and agricultural fields. Those contracted for agricultural labor may be assigned to picking cotton, harvesting peanuts, priming tobacco, or working in dairies, slaughterhouses, and fertilizer plants. The lumber and pulpwood industries' production rates were in dire straits due to labor shortages. By 1942, the lumber industry had suffered a production decline of twenty-seven percent, which was compounded by an increased demand fueled by military construction.<sup>30</sup> The initial step taken to resolve the severe slump in lumber production was a minimally effective "freeze order" ...that prohibited workers in logging and lumbering from seeking employment in other industries."<sup>31</sup> The next action taken to rescue the lumber industry was the implementation of POW labor in 1943. Thus, jobs in the lumber and pulpwood fields were some of the first to be mass contracted in North Carolina.<sup>32</sup>

As the number of captured German soldiers increased, and the severity of the labor shortage increased, so too did the size and scope of the POW labor program. Five more camps opened as satellites to Butner between August and October 1944. New Bern, which housed

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<sup>29</sup> Wildman interview.

<sup>30</sup> Billinger, 30-32, 70-5; James E. Fickle and Donald W. Ellis, "POWs in the Piney Woods: German Prisoners of War in the Southern Lumber Industry, 1943-1945," *Journal of Southern History*, 56, no. 4 (November, 1990), 697-8, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2210933> (accessed April 7, 2010).

<sup>31</sup> Fickle and Ellis, 698.

<sup>32</sup> Fickle and Ellis, 698; Billinger 106-7.

prisoners in a Civilian Conservation Corps modeled barrack, was on the banks of the Neuse River. Scotland Neck, which formerly housed only Italian POWs, now operated eight weeks for the harvesting of peanuts by German POWs. Seymour Johnson Field, which occupied unused barracks on the base, used POW labor to maintain the camp. Some POWs from Seymour Johnson were leased out to farmers in Johnston County for thirty cents a day. The *GDN* article that announced this contract was placed on the third page of the second section and contained only mundane facts.<sup>33</sup> Ahoskie, a contract labor camp composed of tents in Hertford County, leased POWs out for lumber, pulpwood, and an occasional peanut harvest. Camp Winston Salem, located in the National Guard Armory, contracted the POWs to a variety of companies, the most well-known being R. J. Reynolds. The opening of these camps saw the predominance of POW jobs beginning to shift from camp maintenance to contracted employment. A small portion of the POW labor was being contracted for duties that do not fit well under the category of “critical needs.”<sup>34</sup> Robert Billinger cites an April 1945 report on the activities of POWs at Camp Butner. This report notes that one hundred ten POWs were “employed as mess attendants at Duke University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.”<sup>35</sup>

During the latter stages of the conflict in the European theater, Germans were surrendering by the thousands and leaving the Allies overwhelmed. By V-E Day when shipments of POWs to the United States had been terminated, nearly four hundred thousand Germans were interned in the U.S., with nearly twenty-six thousand having arrived in May 1945, alone.<sup>36</sup> Another two-million two-hundred thousand German POWs were in open-air pens under U.S. supervision in Europe. This was also the time of the last surge of POW labor in North

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<sup>33</sup> “Johnston Farmers To Get Nazi Workers,” *Greensboro Daily News*, August 2, 1945.

<sup>34</sup> Billinger, 78-84.

<sup>35</sup> Billinger, 108.

<sup>36</sup> US Army, *Poll of German Prisoner of War Opinion*, Office of the Provost Marshall General, 194? This publication provides 378,898 as the “peak” number of German POWs held in the US.

Carolina. Five new branch camps of Butner were opened in May 1945, with only one closing before the spring of 1946. Camp Whiteville, open May to November 1945, was a small camp dedicated to supplying labor to the local lumber industry. The POWs were frequently sick and quotas were difficult to meet.

Moore General Hospital in Swannanoa, housed contracted POWs in the former CCC barracks near Asheville, and these laborers were attendants in the TB ward, according to Billinger's research. The April 11, 1945, *Asheville Citizen (AC)* article announcing the impending arrival of 250 POWs stated that 50 prisoners would arrive first to "complete the camp." The camp would include seven buildings within a fenced compound north of the hospital. Duties were to include "work in the laundry, grounds maintenance, janitor service, and other manual labor. They will not wait on the patients," stressed Major Oscar Nations. The next day's paper contained coverage of an organized protest of the prisoners. Primary concern was given to the fact that Moore General Hospital cared for returning soldiers, and Asheville residents were vocal with their fear of mixing wounded soldiers with the enemy. Again, Major Nations, Moore General Hospital's executive officer, insisted that the prisoners would not be in contact with patients. In the May 16, 1945, issue the arrival of the first 50 prisoners was covered. It was again stressed that the POWs would not be working with patients. The remaining 200 prisoners arrived on May 25, 1945. A couple of days later the POWs were photographed working around the former CCC barracks and in their camp kitchen. This article presented their duties a bit more vaguely as "...maintenance of the hospital grounds, janitorial service, work in the hospital laundry, and in other such jobs for which civilian labor is not at present available." The availability of TB ward attendants was not covered.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Billinger, 87-88; "250 Prisoners to be sent to Moore Hospital Soon," *Asheville Citizen*, April 11, 1945; "Plan for Use of Prisoners is Protested," *Asheville Citizen*, April 12, 1945; "50 Nazi War Prisoners Now at Moore Hospital,"

Greensboro was home to an Army Air Force base, also known as the Overseas Replacement Depot (ORD). The arrival of POWs in Greensboro was announced by a small, inconspicuous article tucked away on the bottom of the last page of the *GDN*.<sup>38</sup> Greensboro's POWs performed camp maintenance duties and were contracted to farms and a fertilizer company. Edenton naval air station had POWs performing camp maintenance and various duties for the U.S. Navy. Finally, the Roanoke Rapids tent-based camp provided labor for the still struggling lumber industry. As late as April 26, 1945, Representative Kerr was making desperate requests for immediate labor assistance in "the state's eastern pulpwood forests and farms."<sup>39</sup>

### **Kurt Rossmeisl**

One of the more memorable personas in North Carolina's prisoner of war history is Kurt Rossmeisl. Born on May 21, 1906, in Brůx (Bohemia), Rossmeisl's colorful interviews included exotic employment opportunities in Belgium, Holland, East Indies, and China between 1923 and 1941. Though Rossmeisl implied that he married his Dutch wife, Anna Kok, after a brief courtship in 1941, records on file with the Dutch National Archives indicate they were married May 9, 1942, at The Hague. Their daughter Bruhilde Ingeborg Walburga Rossmeisl was born May 27, 1942, in Amsterdam. Rossmeisl, who identifies himself as a 'Czech,' claims that he joined the Germany army in 1941 because it was purportedly safer than hiding from the Gestapo. Being a prolific linguist, Rossmeisl claims he was assigned as a translator to Field Marshall Erwin Rommel. He entered the army with the intent of being captured and transferred to Canada by the British, but was thrilled when his dream was actualized in Tunis by American troops who

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*Asheville Citizen*, May 16, 1945; "Hospital has Full Quota of 250 Nazi Prisoners," *Asheville Citizen*, May 26, 1945; "250 Nazi Prisoners Now at Work at Moore Hospital," *Asheville Citizen*, May 27, 1945.

<sup>38</sup> "War Prisoners Group to Fill Jobs at ORD," *Greensboro Daily News*, August 8, 1945.

<sup>39</sup> Krammer, 229-30; Associated Press, "Kerr Seeks More War Prisoners for State," *Asheville Citizen*, April 27, 1945.

“could supply better food and living conditions than the British.”<sup>40</sup> While the date and time of Rossmeisl’s capture and transport to Fort Hunt, Virginia, is elusive, the next decade and a half of his life is punctuated by time and date markers.<sup>41</sup>

After a period of interrogations at Fort Hunt and a brief tour of a few southern prison camps, Rossmeisl arrived at Camp Butner, North Carolina. On August 4, 1945, Rossmeisl allegedly “pushed a wheelbarrow past several guards during a wood-gathering detail...and caught a train to Chicago.” Ironically, this was the same day that newspapers told of his former superior, Rommel, being taken for a ride in the country with Generals Maisel and Bugdorff from which he failed to return alive. Although the infamous ride occurred the prior October, the full story was finally emerging. The official story from the Reich was that Rommel purportedly committed suicide to avoid an embarrassing trial for his involvement in the infamous July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1944, plot to kill Hitler immortalized in the film “Valkyrie.”<sup>42</sup>

Rossmeisl’s version of his escape, lampooning the guards in a manner worthy of Monty Python, is disputed by one of Rossmeisl’s fellow inmates, Max Reiter, who posits that Rossmeisl’s version was to protect the guards who aided in his escape, and was much less sensational. Reiter recalls Rossmeisl said his goodbyes and left in a car outside the gate. The guards are believed to have assisted in coordinating the get-away car, ignoring Rossmeisl’s exit, and delaying the escapee alarm and press releases.<sup>43</sup>

According to Rossmeisl, he had received information from fellow prisoners that Czechoslovakia was under communist rule, and the stories were enough to force him to escape

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<sup>40</sup> Kurt Rossmeisl, “Afrika Korps Officer Intent on Being Seized in Tunis,” *Toledo Blade*, June 23, 1959, <http://news.google.com/newspapers> (accessed April 24, 2010).

<sup>41</sup> Robert Rankin, “POW Tells of Flight, Hopes to Stay in U.S.,” *Washington Post and Times Herald (1954-1959)*, May 12, 1959, <http://www.proquest.com> (accessed April 24, 2010); Christian Post, e-mail message to author forwarding electronic information from Dutch National Archives, August 14, 2010; Rossmeisl, “Afrika Korps...”

<sup>42</sup> Associated Press, “Rommel Killed Himself, Says 17-Year-Old Son,” *Asheville Citizen*, August 5, 1945, (reprint of August 4, 1945, German article).

<sup>43</sup> Krammer, 138-9; Billinger, 137-9.

his imminent repatriation to Communist Czechoslovakia. On August 5, 1945, Kurt Rossmeisl caught a train to Chicago and became Frank Ellis. The persona of Frank Ellis was modeled after a farmer near Camp Butner; one that Rossmeisl described as “a hard-working native of the North Carolina hill country – a hillbilly. He’s not too bright, but he’s willing.” Rossmeisl encountered this farmer on adventures he supposedly orchestrated in lieu of camp duties. He convinced the farmer he was a U.S. soldier who had just returned from the Pacific theatre. After earning the farmer’s respect, he was made privy to stories of the area from which he learned “geographical details.” In an autobiographical six-part series for the *Toledo Blade*, Rossmeisl revealed his plans for escape, ranging from disguises to saving money. He boasts that,

I’m egotistical enough to believe that advance thinking and planning were more responsible for my escape than any laxity by the United States military authority. And I’m a little proud that I’m one of only three prisoners of war who escaped in the United States and have remained at large.<sup>44</sup>

In the second installment Rossmeisl praised the treatment he received as prisoner of war in the United States, and then provided an informative flashback to his youth in order to provide the reader with the proper background for his story’s sake. He recounted the many jobs he held as a teen, one of which was a hired-hand on a tobacco plantation in the Indies. Rossmeisl fast-forwards to his escape and a surreal encounter in Roxboro, during which he spoke with his version of a Southern accent that is eerily reminiscent of the *Brer Rabbit* stories. At a café in Roxboro, Rossmeisl claims that he conversed with two “Negro soldiers” who agreed to take him to Danville, Virginia. Any serious follower of American history would question this scenario

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<sup>44</sup> Kurt Rossmeisl, “Rommel Lieutenant Spends 14 Years in America, Then Surrenders to FBI,” *Toledo Blade*, June 21, 1959.

considering the racial climate and Jim Crow laws in the American South prior to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.<sup>45</sup>

Once in Chicago, Frank Ellis, the prisoner formerly known as Kurt Rossmeisl, acquired a boarding room and Social Security card. This escapade appears to further lampoon U.S. government offices, as he explains his lack of a Social Security card to the clerk, “Ah’m from No’th Ca’lina. Been workin’ on my folks’ farm and just decided to cut mahself in on the gravy in the big city.” He successfully walks out with a Social Security number. Over a period of fourteen years, Frank worked various odd jobs in Chicago, joined a lodge, and appeared to have a successful life excluding a family. He smugly recalls:

Often I entertained them with tales of back-breaking labor on the tobacco plantations, or lying in the fields at night tending smudge pots. My accounts of shooting and skinning squirrels also were popular. I had never touched a squirrel in my life. I was really the life of the party quite often, even though I never allowed myself more than two drinks.

This success is credited to his average physical description and above-average communication skills. Rossmeisl was fluent in German, English, Dutch, French, Spanish, Malayan, Russian, and Italian.<sup>46</sup>

Kurt Rossmeisl’s social life was hindered by health problems, and he opted for surgery in hopes of relief sometime prior to the winter of 1958. Upon returning to his job as a bellman at the LaSalle Hotel, he was informed by co-workers in a jocular manner that some people suspected he was the infamous Kurt Rossmeisl based on a recent magazine article. Frank Ellis

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<sup>45</sup> Kurt Rossmeisl, “Ex-Desert Fighter Makes Long-Planned Escape from Prison Camp in South,” *Toledo Blade*, June 22, 1959.

<sup>46</sup> Rossmeisl, “Afrika Korps...”; Billinger, 138; Krammer, 139; “German War Prisoner Escapes From Butner,” *Greensboro Daily News*, August 12, 1945; Associated Press, “Escaped German Prisoner of War, Free for 14 Years, Is Arrested,” *Daytona Beach Morning Journal*, May 11, 1959, <http://www.news.google.com/newspapers> (accessed April 24, 2010); Rankin, “POW Tells...”; Associated Press, “Nazi Prisoner Makes Escape From Butner,” *Greensboro Daily News*, August 10, 1945; Kurt Rossmeisl, “Fugitive Reaches Chicago, Settles Down in Routine,” *Toledo Blade*, June 24, 1959; Kurt Rossmeisl, “Illness Strikes, Luck Runs Out for Escapee,” *Toledo Blade*, June 25, 1959.

became jittery and decided to run. Under the pretense of seeking a climate friendly to his arthritis, Ellis decided to leave Chicago and head to Arizona, via Cincinnati. Again, the astute reader may question why one would head east for a destination in the west.<sup>47</sup>

On May 10, 1959, Rossmeisl turned himself in to the FBI office in Cincinnati, Ohio. He explained how he had been posing as North Carolina farmer Frank Ellis, desperately sought to move to Arizona to relieve his crippling arthritis, and was ending his run from the authorities, broke and sick in Cincinnati. Rossmeisl relates his questioning by the doubting FBI officers as if he was recalling an episode of “Keystone Cops.” The FBI subsequently handed him over to Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS). In a ruling issued by INS on May 29, 1959, it was determined that Kurt Rossmeisl entered the country legally, as a prisoner of war. However, he was ordered to leave the country since he did not have valid citizenship. Once in Germany, he would be permitted to apply for American citizenship. Rossmeisl pleaded to stay, pledged his love of America, and vowed to return.<sup>48</sup> On July 7, 1959, Rossmeisl arrived in Nuertingen, West Germany, where he swore he would stay and that he’d “had enough of over there,” referencing the United States. He is reported to have stayed with his sister in Nuertingen because his wife having heard nothing from him for five years divorced him on July 3, 1950. One important detail Kurt Rossmeisl left out of his autobiography was his gambling habit. The *Chicago Daily News* reported that the maid who cleaned the hotel in which he resided told their reporter of his gambling failures and that he owed “big sums” to creditors. The numerous inconsistencies

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<sup>47</sup> Kurt Rossmeisl, “Illness Strikes...” Based on Rossmeisl’s vague narrative this author attempted to locate the elusive magazine article that exposed his real identity without success.

<sup>48</sup> Reuter’s, “War Escapee Stays Abroad,” *Spokesman-Review*, July 18, 1959, <http://news.google.com/newspapers> (accessed April 24, 2010); Kurt Rossmeisl, “Surrender Marks End of Years as Fugitive,” *Toledo Blade*, June 26, 1959.

within Rossmeisl loosely woven tale are only further convoluted by his FBI file. While he portrays the life of a semi-skilled laborer the FBI counters his tale with an 1132-page file.<sup>49</sup>

As many of the details on Kurt Rossmeisl fade into the past, the remaining pieces form the image of a colorful but master manipulator. After his overdue repatriation to Germany, Rossmeisl left a scant trail for researchers to follow. Upon his surrender in Cincinnati, the assumed alias of Frank Ellis was replaced by his real name on his illegally obtained Social Security card. The Social Security administration reported that Kurt Rossmeisl provided his date of birth as May 21, 1906, and he received his last benefit payment through the U.S. Consulate in Barcelona, Spain, in January 1974.<sup>50</sup> One is left to wonder about the expert advice Rossmeisl received to aid in his collection of Social Security benefits. Did he begin receiving disability benefits in 1959 upon his surrender due to his debilitating arthritis, or was it straight retirement benefits once he turned 65? What lifestyle was he able to enjoy with the combined income of U.S. Social Security and West German military pension? What sort of tangled web did he weave from Neurtingen, West Germany to Barcelona between 1959 and 1974?

### **Broad News Coverage, Experiences, and Perceptions**

In reviewing the *Greensboro Daily News (GDN)*, *Asheville Citizen (AC)*, and *Wilmington Morning Star (WMS)* reported several interesting stories during the months of camp openings or major prisoner transfers. On September 14, 1943, Private John Donnelly apprehended two

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<sup>49</sup> Reuter's, "War Escapee Stays Abroad,"; Associated Press, "War Prison Fugitive Says He'll Quit U.S." *Washington Post and Times Herald (1954-1959)*, June 5, 1959, <http://www.proquest.com> (accessed April 24, 2010); Krammer, 139; Christian Post email; Chicago Daily News Service, "Horses Tied to Downfall of Ex-POW," *Washington Post and Times Herald (1954-1959)*, May 13, 1959, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed December 3, 2010); David M. Hardy, Section Chief, FBI Records Management Division, letter to author "FOIPA Request No: 1152517-000," September 1, 2010. This FBI Request Number references the author's active request for Kurt Rossmeisl's FBI file. This file has been in processing since September 29, 2010.

<sup>50</sup>Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Kurt Rossmeisl," *Family Search U.S. Social Security Death Index*, [http://www.familysearch.org/Eng/Search/SSDI/individual\\_record.asp?recid=328249775&lds=3&region=-1&regionfriendly=&frompage=99](http://www.familysearch.org/Eng/Search/SSDI/individual_record.asp?recid=328249775&lds=3&region=-1&regionfriendly=&frompage=99) (accessed May 8, 2010).

escaped POWs near Austonio, Texas. The article is succinct and inconspicuous on the fourth page of the second section.<sup>51</sup> In contrast, a few weeks later a large article with a bold heading proclaims, “Two die as prison train is wrecked.” This article covers a train derailment in Charlottesville, Virginia, which claimed the lives of two railroad employees and injured seven soldiers and two POWs. The article provides a play-by-play of the accident, along with the following patriotic commentary, “The prisoners of war who fought the losing battle of Germany’s “new order” had an opportunity to view the rolling country around Shadwell, Va., boyhood home of Thomas Jefferson, father of American democracy.”<sup>52</sup> The treatment of this wreck, which killed and injured Americans, garnered much grander attention than other POW stories. The story minimized the injuries sustained by the POWs, while magnifying patriotism. Even in 1943, this article is veering from Reiss’s end of the continuum of affection for Germans.

The first of several headlines in January 1945 was “War Prisoners Give Trouble: Germans Accused of Insubordination.”<sup>53</sup> POWs held in Camp Pickett, Virginia, were refusing to work overtime at a fertilizer factory in Danville due to faulty equipment. Several prisoners were said to be facing charges of insubordination. This article received higher billing than a routine escape, but not near the heights of the train wreck involving deaths and injuries of Americans. A prime example of the routine escape can be found on January 17, 1945. Two sentences are allotted for the reporting of Ewald Grauer’s escape from a transport convoy en route to Wilmington from Camp Butner.<sup>54</sup> A few days later the apparent suicide of Killian Kernberger at Camp Butner was minimally reported in three sentences.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> International News Service, “Soldier Takes Nazi Prisoners in Texas,” *Greensboro Daily News*, September 15, 1943.

<sup>52</sup> Associated Press, “Two Die as Prison Train is Wrecked,” *Greensboro Daily News*, September 27, 1943.

<sup>53</sup> “War Prisoners Give Trouble: Germans Accused of Insubordination,” *Greensboro Daily News*, January 13, 1945.

<sup>54</sup> Associated Press, “Prisoner of War Sought At Clinton,” *Greensboro Daily News*, January 17, 1945.

<sup>55</sup> Associated Press, “Family Trouble Causes Nazi to Hang Himself,” *Greensboro Daily News*, January 21, 1945.

As the German atrocities were becoming more well-known in April 1945, the *AC* proclaimed in bold letters that “Americans’ Hate of Nazis Grows as they Advance.” The American soldiers told of the Jewish girls starved until their “arms [were] no bigger around than your thumb.” This first-hand account calls into question the insistence of the German people that they were unaware of the Reich’s atrocious treatment of the Jews, as the American soldiers explained how, after being starved and beaten, the prisoners of the Germans served as slave labor on civilian farms. As the soldier’s exclamation, “To hell with them!” reverberates through the Associated Press wires; the American public is unable to ignore this sentiment.<sup>56</sup>

In response to the news coverage of American soldiers held in Nazi prisoner of war camps, Secretary of War Harry Stimson declared, “It is our relentless determination that the perpetrators of the heinous crimes against American citizens and against civilization itself will be brought to justice.” The American prisoners were not being provided with food, shelter, or medical treatment as demanded by the 1929 Geneva Convention. Returning soldiers were reporting weight loss averaging 50 pounds. The public then reads of German POWs held in the United States striking from their contract labor assignments because their cigarette ration was late or they simply did not feel like working. Bread and water diets were promptly issued for these prisoners.<sup>57</sup>

More negative perceptions of the Germans were presented to the public as an American congressional delegation toured Buchenwald. Congressmen Hall of New York and Kunkel of Pennsylvania, along with Congresswoman Luce of Connecticut, were given a private tour of the emaciated victims, the hanging wall, bodies awaiting disposal in the furnace, and barracks filled

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<sup>56</sup> Wes Gallagher, “Americans’ Hate of Nazis Grows as they Advance,” *Asheville Citizen*, April 7, 1945.

<sup>57</sup> Associated Press, “U.S. Denounces Nazi Treatment of War Captives: German Prisoners are Likely to Lose some Privileges,” *Asheville Citizen*, April 13, 1945; Associated Press, “Bread and Water Diet Ordered for Prisoners,” *Asheville Citizen*, April 22, 1945

with metal shelves in lieu of beds. The delegation demanded that the American people be shown news film so that one could “realize fully what debased beasts the Germans are.” The American public was just beginning to digest images of Nazi atrocities. Images that implied the Nazis had rejected any sense that Jews could be anything but expendable tools to be stored, used, and disposed of as one does general warehouse stock. It seems one would be hard-pressed to find Americans gushing with adoration for these Nazi Supermen.<sup>58</sup>

One should not preemptively assume that Reiss’ theory of infatuation with the German bronzed body existed early in the labor program and was simply decimated by the coverage of concentration camp atrocities in the spring of 1945. News coverage consistently warned the public of the Nazi groups, as well as their sinister intentions, that were operating within local prison camps. Gerhart H. Seger, a German living in exile in New York, had communication with some former anti-Nazi compatriots now being held in prisoner of war camps. His sources corroborated military intelligence reports that Nazi factions were alive and imposing a reign of terror within the camps. Those who failed to remain loyal to the Fuehrer were swiftly subjected to make-shift military tribunals and beaten or executed for their sins.<sup>59</sup>

William “Bill” Murray of Roanoke, Virginia, was about fifteen years old when the United States had the greatest number of German prisoners of war on her soil. Murray had been a member of a high school fraternity, the “Pinchie-Winchies,” and their apparel bore the letters “PW.” Though he and his fraternity brothers wore clothing that was coincidentally similar to the POWs’, they never thought about it. Murray and his neighbors were aware of the presence of the German prisoners, but no one desired any interaction with a prisoner. He vividly remembered the number of men from his area killed in the European theatre. The houses lining the streets he

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<sup>58</sup> Associated Press, “Rep. Luce Sees Atrocity Camp at Buchenwald,” *Asheville Citizen*, April 22, 1945.

<sup>59</sup> Associated Press, “Nazi Organizations are Reported Active in U.S. War Prisoner Camps,” *Wilmington Morning Star*, February 24, 1944.

often walked sported yellow ribbons with a star for each family member lost in the war. Murray's uncle had been part of the D-Day invasion and returned home with horrific stories of body parts floating in the English Channel. When asked if he knew of anyone or any rumors of anyone having a relationship with or curiously seeking out any of the German prisoners, he unhesitatingly responded that "They never talked about prisoners of wars or wanting to go up and hug or kiss or see any damn Germans. Nobody liked the Germans or Japanese; we hated them."<sup>60</sup>

As a freshman at Virginia Tech, Bill Murray lived in the same dorms that had housed the POWs. There he had the ability to admire the skill and craftsmanship of the Germans. They had crafted a pool table for the dayroom with hand-carved pool cues from saplings harvested in the nearby woods, and built bridges for the trails created by Civilian Conservation Corps.<sup>61</sup> This sentiment illustrates the unique perspective that many Americans have for the German people: on one hand they are admired for their organization, skill, and determination; on the other hand they are hated for their arrogance and diabolical deeds.

Public opinion was critical of the excellent treatment being given the German POWs, and was apparently voluminous enough to generate editorials as early as March 1944. The *WMS* wished to remind citizens that the experiences of the repatriated Americans was enough to make "one's blood boil at the inhuman treatment they were subjected to while in German confinement," but the United States would continue to follow the Geneva Convention. The editorialist insisted that this was proper warfare and would leave the nation with a clear conscience, but in no way validated Hitler's claims that "we are soft." Aside from desires to issue reciprocal treatment, camp neighbors were also anxious enough over the perception of the

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<sup>60</sup> William Murray, interview with author, Greensboro, NC, November 16, 2010.

<sup>61</sup> William Murray, interview.

Nazi POW that rumors of escapes escalated out of control in March 1944. The *WMS* reported that the Sheriff's Department, State Highway Patrol office, and local Army officials over the Carolina Beach Road temporary camp had recently received a barrage of calls from concerned citizens. "Hundreds of rumors" of multiple escapes, manhunts, and shootings were quickly put to rest as officials insisted there have been no escapes from this facility. Felix Scroggs of the United States Employment Service had only a few days earlier attempted to subdue the anxiety of local residents in a press conference regarding the arrival of additional German POWs. Scroggs portrayed the prisoners as content and compliant in his attempts to reassure the locals. In a follow-up article, the prisoners are again depicted as compliant and, possibly, as unwilling Nazi soldiers. The intent behind such endearing descriptions appears clearly to be the pacification of anxious locals fearing the trauma of German POWs running loose in their neighborhoods. It is possible that Matthias Reiss encountered similar articles and interpreted them to indicate fascination and adoration.<sup>62</sup>

On August 2, 1945, the report of a guard at Camp Carson, Colorado, killing three POWs who allegedly "made threatening remarks" received moderate attention. The title was smaller than the next article covering a child being killed by an automobile, but still larger than most escape or labor related articles. The *Asheville Citizen* allotted a liberal amount of space to the pleas of a local soldier who had just returned from three and one-half months in a German prison camp. Pfc. James Pickelsimer detailed his experiences with freezing temperatures, horse meat, and lice; then requested that he be allowed to return the favor.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Editor, "We Obey the Rules," *Wilmington Morning Star*, March 18, 1944; "Officers Deny Nazi Prisoners Escaping Here," *Wilmington Morning Star*, March 14, 1944; "More POWs are Expected in Near Future," *Wilmington Morning Star*, March 3, 1944; "500 Additional Nazi War Prisoners Due at Camp Davis Today," *Wilmington Morning Star*, March 17, 1944.

<sup>63</sup> Associated Press, "German Prisoners Killed by Guard," *Greensboro Daily News*, August 2, 1945; "Brevard Man, Freed From Prison, Would Like to Guard Nazis," *Asheville Citizen*, May 6, 1945.

The day after Rossmeisl's infamous escape, DeWitt Tapp wrote what appears to be a human interest piece detailing the mannerisms of POWs working tobacco in Hoke County, North Carolina. His story eerily reads like a zoologist's diary charting the daily activities of a group of chimpanzees.

These Germans did not at first know anything about tobacco harvesting but they are quick to learn and make good farm hands. You have to show them how, but they readily grasp it after seeing you do anything once. They are fast workers in the field and can break tobacco from the stalks and send it to the barn faster than it can be strung. After the first day in the field they have no trouble separating the ripe leaf from the green...A funny thing about the Germans is the way they take to water. When they come in from the fields at noon they will go to a spigot, take off their shirts and let the water run all over their bodies.<sup>64</sup>

Articles like Tapp's were not in short supply as citizens appeared to be fascinated with that which was deemed unfamiliar or dangerous. Observers continuously remarked on the behavior and abilities of the German prisoners. Those working in fertilizer plants around Wilmington were studied as they operated the equipment and noted to "have a knack for machinery." Since so much of the POW labor was involved with agriculture and lumber, the North Carolina State College Extension Service editor, Frank Jeter, visited the Carolina Beach camp for a pre-planned, yet unofficial, visit. Jeter remarked:

They looked little like supermen when I saw them stripped to the waist in the warm spring sunshine and engaged in such ordinary pastoral occupations as harvesting truck crops. Did not one notice the non-commissioned officer of the United States Army standing in bored but alert attention in the background, he would never know that those blond boys out there in the field were former German soldiers filled with a lust to kill and arrogant in a false assumption of superior qualities which they did not possess.

After viewing these accommodations that were not lacking in comfort and food, Jeter contemplated about the accommodations afforded to the American prisoners held in German

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<sup>64</sup> Dewitt Tapp, "German Prisoners Used to Harvest Tobacco in Hoke," *Greensboro Daily News*, August 5, 1945.

Stalags. His comments, though scathing, were likely reflective of the local opinion, seeing as though no complaints were printed in the *WMS* in subsequent issues.<sup>65</sup>

One of the more interesting articles to make the May 1945 *GDN* was about Private Howard J. Wright of Greensboro sending a German sergeant's uniform home to his mother. Private Wright was with a medical unit, and his mother assumed the uniform belonged to a dead German soldier in their care. Wright's brother is pictured wearing the uniform, the parts of which are discussed piecemeal, breaking down the image of the Nazi 'Superman.'<sup>66</sup> While on the surface, this interest in the image of the Nazi 'Superman' may corroborate Reiss's theory, the manner in which the American citizens examine the memorabilia could be classified more as an act of macabre salvaging from the enemy of war than out of adulation for Nazi 'Supermen.'

The *Wilmington Morning Star* presented a weekly column, "Ration Roundup," and a daily "Rationing at a Glance," and the *Asheville Citizen* offered "Rationing Guide." With North Carolina's citizens living under wartime ration programs, papers offering updates and advice, and home demonstration agents helping homemakers make the most of what little they had, it was no surprise to find the majority concerned with the diet of the German POW.

### Conclusion

Interviews and news articles covering the prisoner of war experiences in North Carolina were primarily concerned with the potential coddling of prisoners and how Americans felt that POWs should be handled. Interviews demonstrate that most North Carolinians had one of three typical experiences with German POWs. Some had experiences like Mrs. Stallings and were

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<sup>65</sup> "More Prisoners Placed..."; F. H. Jeter, "New Hanover Prison Camp Wins Praise from Jeter," *Wilmington Morning Star*, May 22, 1944.

<sup>66</sup> Betty Vaughn Millar, "Greensboro Soldier Sends Mother Flashy Uniform of Nazi 'Superman'," *Greensboro Daily News*, May 4, 1945.

completely unaware of the enemy among them. Others were like Mr. Murray and had heard that prisoners were in their midst, but never saw any. Then there were a small few who had exciting personal encounters like Mrs. Wildman.

The news articles and government documents were not only reflective of the fears held by the citizens should something go awry with the POW labor program, but they fueled the anxiety, as well. North Carolinians were aware of the dichotomy of the German persona and they wanted as little interaction with the POWs as possible. The voluminous rumors in Wilmington that sparked fear are indicative of the general perceptions of German POWs held in North Carolina and an infatuation with “bronzed bodies” was not a component. On May 1, 1945, a large article accompanied by two photos demonstrated how “no coddling [was] given [to] Nazis at Ft. Bragg.” A brief narrative of the work program, the adherence to the Geneva Convention, and the lack of coddling follow the photos. The author, Jason Reynolds, states the commonly held belief of German coddling and exceptional treatment is “loose talk based on hearsay that came from somewhere across the creek.”<sup>67</sup> Reynolds’ statement is more consistent with Billinger, and reaffirms this author’s position that Reiss painted American’s affection for German POWs too broadly, as the events Reiss cited were outside of North Carolina.

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<sup>67</sup> Jason Reynolds, “No Coddling Given Nazis at Ft. Bragg,” *Greensboro Daily News*, May 1, 1945.

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#### IV. Oral Histories

Elizabeth Norfleet Stallings, interview with author, Greensboro, NC, November 18, 2010. Appendix 1.

Mary Alice Rose Wildman, interview by author, Greensboro, NC, November 19, 2010. Appendix 2.

William Murray, interview with author, Greensboro, NC, November 16, 2010. Appendix 3.

Appendix 1

*A Comparative Study of the Perceptions of German POWs in North Carolina*

Interview Transcript

**Interviewer:** Sonia Parsons Haga  
**Respondent:** Elizabeth Norfleet Stallings  
**Date:** November 18, 2010  
**Place:** Respondent's Home  
**College:** University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
**Professor:** Dr. Jeff Jones  
**Course:** HSS 490, Senior Honors Thesis  
**Date Completed:** November 18, 2010

Sonia Parsons Haga

Elizabeth Norfleet Stallings

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Persons present: Sonia Parsons Haga  
Mrs. Elizabeth Norfleet Stallings

ENS: I'm Elizabeth Norfleet Stallings, born December the 21<sup>st</sup>, 1919.

SPH: So, you lived...you grew up in Roxobel?

ENS: That's right.

SPH: And what county was that in?

ENS: Bertie.

SPH: Bertie? And, in that area there was Ahoskie and Scotland Neck that had POW camps, and they were there from 1943 to 1946. That whole time what were you doing and did you have any idea that they were there?

ENS: I didn't live in Roxobel at that time. I was...I lived in Brunswick County in Southport. I was a Home Demonstration Agent for Brunswick County for those two years. It was still...Roxobel was still my old home, but my parents and grandparents and all were there. But I was 23 when I went to Brunswick County. It was during the war. And so...there was a gas ration and I didn't get home too often.

SPH: So what did the Home Demonstration Agents do?

ENS: We taught...we had clubs in the county of women, and I met with each club once a month. And we taught 'em how to sew and make clothes out of feed bags, how to cook, and how to preserve food, and how to do gardens, and you know, everything during the war that you were trying to conserve, and ...it was a great program. It was the same program that had 4-H Clubs.

SPH: So instead of the typical classes that you could take...I remember in the '70s and '80s they would offer cooking courses and stuff like that...so instead of the typical courses, they

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Elizabeth Norfleet Stallings

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were more geared to how to survive with the rations and how to make do with what we had because of the war situation?

ENS: Well we did that of course. 'Cause we had those points of what you could buy and what you couldn't. Brunswick was mostly a rural county. And so people had gardens, and raised chicken and pigs, and everything, and you taught 'em how to use all that. And of course, you had a small allowance for sugar, meats and things. But you'd gtry to get 'em to be self-sufficient, you know.

SPH: So, what was the gas rationing like when you would go back to Roxobel?

ENS: Well, since I was...had to go all over the counties to teach these women in the clubs I had a larger allowance than just people...people that just lived in town and didn't have to work out of town or anything. But, I had a funny little car back then...it was a little Plymouth. I got 20 miles to the gallon, which we thought was good then. The rationing was based on 15 miles to the gallon so I eventually saved up, you know enough, so that I could make the trip back home – like Thanksgiving or Christmas or something.

SPH: When you did go back home did you ever hear of any talk from your relatives or neighbors about the POW camps?

ENS: No.

SPH: Never heard anything about the Germans, or Italians?

ENS: Never knew they were there.

SPH: So you talked about a naval base...

ENS: um-hmm

SPH: ...that you would see. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Sonia Parsons Haga

Elizabeth Norfleet Stallings

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ENS: Well, Southport is right at the mouth of the Cape Fear River. But the Outer Banks, like Nags Head and all down there, there is Oak Island. At the end of Oak Island on the east...well, if you were looking at the ocean it was on the left hand side at the end. It was what they called a Section Base where they trained young officers, young naval officers. And then they also had a Coast Guard station on Oak Island. And of course we were at the age where we knew all of 'em. The boys – men. 'Cause most of 'em were just fresh out of college and being trained to be junior officers, you know.

SPH: So instead of going to try to find where German POWs were you were going to the naval bases...

ENS: Well, we couldn't get in, but they would come out and we'd all go up to the USO and all that and somebody in town always introduced us to all of the new crop that was coming in. So they knew that...the local people...that we introduced them to, you know.

SPH: We also talked about the blackout zones.

ENS: Um-hmm.

SPH: Could you tell me how the blackout zones worked?

ENS: The blackout? Well I was staying with a young family that was right on the water itself. You had heavy curtains on all of your windows. And then the only lights you could have in the front part of your house was a blue Christmas tree light bulb at night. And when you drove your car at night the only lights you could use were your parking lights.

SPH: Do you remember about how far in from the coast that the blackout zone...

ENS: I don't know how far it went in.

SPH: Had you heard about any of the German POWs anywhere else in North Carolina?

Sonia Parsons Haga

Elizabeth Norfleet Stallings

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ENS: No, I hadn't. I'm sure that somebody around knew, but I never heard anything about it.

SPH: And the blue Christmas light had to be on the inside of the house?

ENS: Oh yeah.

SPH: And so there were no lights on the outside and just the one light on the front side of the house. Or the side that faced the...

ENS: Well you had...see, Southport being right there on the water...the German submarines had sunk right many small ships out there – off the Cape Fear, you know, where it went into the ocean. You could see - I don't how many miles if you were out in the ocean, how far you could see in. So anybody that lived in Southport just had to keep the whole house dark, you know.

SPH: Oh, wow, the whole house.

ENS: Unless they had like I said a blue Christmas tree light somewhere – but with the blackout curtains on all your windows.

SPH: So pretty much were you able to get anything done at night?

ENS: Partied.

SPH: Partied? (both laugh)

ENS: Well you see...I was at the age...you worked all day and the young officers would come over from the base to the USO or to somebody's home and everybody would have a party. I don't mean you'd have a lot of eating and all that, 'cause all that was rationed. But you got together and played games and sang, you know all that stuff that we did in our time. But as far as getting any work done, there wasn't any way. Of course we weren't interested in that, anyway. But all of the young women in town and around that

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Elizabeth Norfleet Stallings

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maybe 5 miles away 'cause you didn't have gas to come back and forth were expected to go to the USO at least three nights a week. 'Cause they had all of the enlisted men too from the Section base and from the Coast Guard station...and it was strange...usually the young officers didn't mix in with the enlisted ones. But since it was the only place...they did there.

SPH: So you said all of the young women were *expected* to go...

ENS: Well, it wasn't any law...but it was just like in town, "*Why weren't you there?*" You know? And so we enjoyed it. You really learned how to dance with people from all over the country.

SPH: So y'all danced. Did they have live bands? Or did they play..

ENS: No, they had records, you know.

SPH: And did they sell alcohol, or was it just regular beverages?

ENS: It wasn't supposed to be any alcohol. It was supposed to be just cokes and lemonade and that kind of stuff. Of course, some of the boys would get a coke inside and then go back outside, you know, where they had it hidden and pour some alcohol in that. You know all that went on. But not *inside* the USO.

SPH: So y'all just kind of got together and went about three times a week?

ENS: Yeah, we tried to go 'bout three times a week.

SPH: So, Roxobel, you said it was close to Ahoskie?

ENS: About 15 miles from Ahoskie. Ahoskie's in Hertford County – the adjoining county.

SPH: What was Ahoskie? Did you go to Ahoskie a lot?

Sonia Parsons Haga

Elizabeth Norfleet Stallings

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ENS: No. In that area of the state, if you lived in those northeastern counties you knew people in all of the surrounding counties and you just visited and that kind of stuff. At that time Ahoskie had maybe a Belks store and you know two or three things like that. But not like it has today. But it had more stores than we did in Roxobel.

SPH: So, was Ahoskie and Scotland Neck – were they just really rural areas, sparsely populated at that point? Or, were they fairly bustling?

ENS: Well Scotland neck was older than Ahoskie. It was settled in...started in the 1700s. And it was...everybody in that area just about...if you were a doctor, or a lawyer, or a business man you still had a farm, you know. And so, it was primarily agriculture.

SPH: So do you think the way the house were...most of it being farmland...do you think it was easier for them to put POW camps out there and so few people knew about it.

ENS: I don't know. 'Cause I don't know where they were.

SPH: They were set up in tents. I don't exactly where in Ahoskie and Scotland Neck.

ENS: Well they would have been outside of town...in that area. 'Cause if they'd been in town we would have known it, you know.

SPH: Did you know about the, um...Camp Davis? When you were in Southport, how close were you to Camp Davis?

ENS: let's see...Where was Camp Davis?

SPH: Right outside of Wilmington.

ENS: Wilmington? No, we didn't have any connection with them.

SPH: Okay. Because they had POWs on their base.

ENS: They had what?

Sonia Parsons Haga

Elizabeth Norfleet Stallings

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SPH: POWs on their base.

ENS: Oh, no. We got to Wilmington just once in a while 'cause it was about 20 miles and you didn't have gas to go up there very often.

\*Prior to this recorded interview, Sonia Parsons Haga conducted an interview with Mrs. Stallings without audio equipment and compiled a transcript based on those notes. The original interview contains a few minor details regarding the blackout zones and enforcement procedures, coping with gas rationing, and geographic and biographical facts. The text follows.

*A Comparative Study of the Perceptions of German POWs in North Carolina*

Interview Transcript

<b>Interviewer:</b>	Sonia Parsons Haga
<b>Respondent:</b>	Elizabeth Norfleet Stallings
<b>Date:</b>	September 8, 2010
<b>Place:</b>	Respondent's Home
<b>College:</b>	University of North Carolina at Greensboro
<b>Professor:</b>	Dr. Jeff Jones
<b>Date Completed:</b>	September 8, 2010

Sonia Parsons Haga

Elizabeth Norfleet Stallings Interview

1/2

September 8, 2010

Persons present: Mrs. Elizabeth Norfleet Stallings  
Mrs. Sonia Parsons Haga

Mrs. Elizabeth Norfleet Stallings said that she worked as a Home Demonstration Agent for the Extension Agency in Southport [Brunswick County, NC] from 1943 until the spring of 1945. She grew up in the town of Roxobel in Bertie County. When asked if she knew of the German POW camps on the North Carolina coast, specifically Ahoskie and Scotland Neck, Mrs. Stallings replied that she had no idea. She stated that Roxobel was across the Roanoke River from Scotland Neck and Ahoskie was about 15 miles north of Roxobel, but not on the Roanoke River. During this time she lived in Southport and would save up gas rations to go home every now and then. Mrs. Stallings explained that gas rations during World War II were calculated on a car that got 15 miles to the gallon, while her car got 20 miles to the gallon. She said she was allotted more gas rations than most people because she had to drive around the county to teach women domestic courses for the Extension Agency. The drive from Southport to Roxobel was 200 miles, and the speed limit had been reduced to 35 mph to conserve gas. The trip took forever, she said, so she didn't go home that often. Once in Roxobel, Mrs. Stallings said no one ever mentioned the German POW camps to her and she never thought to ask anyone about them. When asked if she was aware that German POWs were being brought to the United States during World War II, Mrs. Stallings replied that she did, but she didn't know where they were being kept. I asked her if she was aware of any POWs being held in North Carolina, specifically, and she did not. She said that if that information had been given to her it didn't register. The main things on people's mind at the time, she continued, was working, worrying about American soldiers overseas, and having fun on the weekends. She said she was 23 years old when she

moved to Southport and was right near the naval base. She was more concerned with meeting the sailors stationed there than whether any German POWs were in the state. Mrs. Stallings also recalled that during the war there was a blackout zone so many blocks in from the shipyard. If your house was in the blackout zone, you were only allowed one blue Christmas tree size light bulb in the front of your home. I asked if that was for a porch light or on the inside and she confirmed it was inside. No one was allowed to burn porch lights and black curtains had to cover all of the windows on the front of the house at night. Older men who were not fit to go overseas were given the task of making neighborhood patrols to make certain that residents were following the blackout regulations. She added that vehicles were only allowed to use their parking lights when driving within the blackout zone. Mrs. Stallings added that she also had no knowledge of the POWs held at the Greensboro ORD [Overseas Redeployment Depot, operated by the U.S. Army Air Force], but her husband, Ray Hightower Stallings, might have known of the POWs. He passed away eight or nine years ago. She said she is attempting to reach friends of his, if they are still alive, to see if they have any recollection of the POWs. Mrs. Stallings added that she has heard stories from friends who lived in Greensboro during the war regarding the ORD. They told of entertaining soldiers awaiting deployment, and taking them into their homes for a while. But they never mentioned the German POWs.

Appendix 2

*A Comparative Study of the Perceptions of German POWs in North Carolina*

Interview Transcript

**Interviewer:** Sonia Parsons Haga  
**Respondent:** Mary Alice Rose Wildman  
**Date:** November 19, 2010  
**Place:** Narrator's Home  
**College:** University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
**Professor:** Dr. Jeff Jones  
**Course:** HSS 490, Senior Honors Thesis  
**Date Completed:** November 19, 2010

Sonia Parsons Haga

Mary Alice Rose Wildman

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Persons present: Sonia Parsons Haga  
Mrs. Mary Alice Rose Wildman

SPH: If you could state your name and date of birth.

MAW: Mary Alice Rose Wildman. And I was born August the 21st, 1924.

SPH: So where did you grow up?

MAW: I grew up in Wilmington, North Carolina.

SPH: Wilmington, okay. Did...so, in 1943...is when the prisoners first started coming into  
Wilmington, Camp Davis...Were you familiar with the Camp Davis area?

MAW: Yes, I was.

SPH: Did you see any of the German POWs that were coming in?

MAW: We saw them in Wilmington. I played tennis at a tennis court at...they were city tennis courts, and they were quartered somewhere right next to that. And they would come over when we played tennis and watch us play tennis. They were behind a fence. I don't know whether it was barbed wire, or what it was. But they were behind a fence. They evidently had a free period or something because they would watch us play tennis. And then they would cheer us and we'd wave at them or something, you know, when we'd get a good ball or something, you know, and play well. And they seemed to be very interested in our playing tennis. We didn't usually talk to them 'cause a lot of them didn't speak English. But I did come in contact with them too. I became a nurse's aide for the American Red Cross. And I was working during the day, but we'd go out about 6 to help with the shift...help the nurses...at the...it's called Bluenthal Army Air base which was right near Wilmington. And they had a clinic there for any soldiers and they had some soldiers but they kept the German soldiers POWs separate. We would sort of

Sonia Parsons Haga

Mary Alice Rose Wildman

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help out at night. And we'd wait on them, you know, and we'd give them water or anything that had to be done for them. When we first started going they were very military. They would stand up and click their feet together if they could get up and stand there and at attention almost. And we didn't know exactly how to handle them at first. But then as time went on when we'd go out they became more friendly and tried to say a few words but there was never much conversation between you and them. You just did the things you had to do for them. And they would say, "Thank you," in German, and they seemed to appreciate what you did. And a lot of them came to that base, because – I was told – that they were using them in some sort of labor and that they would try to get poison ivy or cut themselves some way so they could get into the clinic and get out of the work at that time. They were...well some of them did not do that, but there were some that did that. And so we had to treat the poison ivy and different things like that. They were always very polite to us and, you know, sort of retain that militaristic attitude. Maybe they told them to do that, I'm not sure. But that's the main times I would see them. And I also knew a German POW – now that wasn't during the '40s – this was later. My daughter moved to Roanoke, Virginia. And the... a German POW who had been over here as a POW had liked it so much – and he was not stationed in North Carolina, he was somewhere else – but he liked it so much he decided to come back to America. So, he went back and married a German girl and came to Roanoke, Virginia. And it was very...they moved across the street from my daughter. The man that lived across from him had been a POW of the Germans. And so they became very good friends. I thought this was sort of a interesting thing that he liked America so much that

Sonia Parsons Haga

Mary Alice Rose Wildman

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he came back. Otto...his name was Otto. So he was...he loved America. He said it was because of the good treatment he got as a POW here and he liked the people.

SPH: When you were a nurse's aide at Bluenthal, did ...one thing I keep seeing in the studies are the controversies over not only their care, but their food. There will be a lot of editorials in papers complaining about the general public living under rations, but POWs are receiving better food than the average citizen received. Did you see anything with the food that went with that?

MAW: The only thing I saw was that they were getting regular army food that they got on the base there, which was alright with the GIs. So I guess they seemed to like it there, because as I say, some of them came there because they were trying to get out of being confined or having to do hard work somewhere. I'm not sure about the hard work but I know they must have been out where they would get poison ivy, because I remember that particularly. Quite a few of them were sort of allergic to it, and we treated quite a few for that; some with cuts, though, and different things. I don't know if they were using some sort of utensils that they'd cut themselves on, or something. But they were all very friendly to us and seemed to appreciate what we did.

SPH: Do you know of any of the other females in the area that were interested in the German POWs, as far as wanting to get to know them or wanting to date them, or...

MAW: Not the Red Cross girls that went out with me.

SPH: Okay. Any of them that you saw at both Camp Davis and Bluenthal, did there ever seem to be any tension between the Germans? There are also theories that there were Nazi factions within the camp and then those that were less dedicated to Hitler and that

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conflict existed between those two. Did you ever witness anything or were they always just pretty much well-behaved?

MAW: They were well-behaved – the ones that I came in contact with. And I don't know whether any of the others had trouble at all. I don't know. But they seemed to be very well-behaved at the base and at the...evidently where they were being held near this tennis court. And they didn't try to get out or anything.

SPH: So you never heard of any escapes?

MAW: No I didn't. But I...of course, I heard of...No, I didn't. I didn't hear of escapes.

SPH: Had you heard about any of the Italian POWs that were held a little bit north of there.

MAW: No, I didn't come in contact with any of those.

SPH: Okay, so they um...was there any talk in the community about the German POWs?

MAW: Well people mentioned them and asked us about them. And asked us were we afraid to, you know, do this nurse's aide work with them. Not many of us seemed to be bothered because they did – they were all pretty well-behaved. I don't know if they were being watched by some of the American soldiers. I'm not sure. I did not see that. But, I guess some people just didn't trust them and were afraid of them, but I never had that feeling.

(end of Part 1)

SPH: Could you describe what Camp Davis looked like – the part that you could see when you were playing tennis?

MAW: That wasn't Camp Davis. That was Wilmington. They were in Wilmington. And I don't whether they kept them to do some particular work. Now I did go to Camp Davis and we'd just see them in the distance. I didn't ever get up close to them. But these were Germans, that were POWs, that were at a – at some – facility there and I think they must

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have worked because if they were sick or anything they'd come to that clinic at the hospital at Bluenthal Air Force Base; so that's where I came in contact with them more. And it was every night during most of the week that we would go there in a Red Cross bus and we would work them. And they were always, you know, very friendly and we never had any problem at that place. And the others that watched us play tennis were...didn't try to get out of the fence or anything else. They were evidently held there in Wilmington.

SPH: That's interesting...

MAW: ...at 8<sup>th</sup> and Ann. That's the name...that's where they were.

SPH: At 8<sup>th</sup> and Ann Streets?

MAW: Um-hmm.

SPH: Was that really close to Bluenthal?

MAW: No, Bluenthal Air Force Air base was out – I don't know how far – just outside of Wilmington...maybe 10 miles or so.

SPH: Did you ever notice or did you ever hear of anybody in the community going out there to just look at them – to check out for themselves...what did they look like?

MAW: No. They didn't – I don't think they would have allowed that. You know the military hospital. And I don't know how much that they... they did some work around Wilmington. But I don't know how close people were to them when they were doing this. I know they were well-supervised by our military. And maybe that's the reason we didn't have any trouble, or maybe they just weren't the type that would give trouble. Maybe they wouldn't allow those that were not friendly to be – to come in contact with American citizens.

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SPH: Okay. That's interesting because I had not heard of that facility in my research yet. So the tennis court that y'all played at...

MAW: That was in Wilmington. It was sort of uh...you know, I wish I knew the name of that place where they were being held, but I'm sorry I don't remember it. It was uh...the tennis courts were uh...there quite a few there, and the high school tennis team used to practice there.

SPH: So was it kind of like a community center?

MAW: Well, just tennis courts. And we practiced there. They were public tennis courts, but the high school practiced there because they didn't have any at the high school. And I was on the tennis team. But they really were interested and they would cheer and watch us play when we played. And every now and then we'd say something – people would say something to them – and they would try to answer. But I didn't ever notice much...very, you know, a lot of conversation between the Americans and the Germans. Although there was a friendly...you know, well you know, they sort of did have a friendly attitude toward the tennis players and we had quite a few of the high school tennis players there. But I can certainly remember them cheering us on.

SPH: What did they wear?

MAW: Just sort of work clothes. When I saw them...you know, I can't...at the base, of course, they were in hospital, you know, gowns. And the others, I think they just had on...they were some type of uniform-type thing. It was light; looked they were shirts and pants – I think they were the same color. But I'm not sure about that.

SPH: Did they have the big 'PW' stamped on it?

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MAW: I'm not sure. 'Cause I've forgotten that. And I saw them mostly at the air base and they were in the hospital gowns then. They told us...I remember one night one of 'em got up so fast he knocked the basin over where we were washing them and it frightened me to death because, you know, you just had the feeling, well, maybe he was going to do something. But he didn't. He apologized and cleaned up...he cleaned up the place, you know. I remember that because he was so apologetic. So we had good contact with them – the American Red Cross – we were nursing aides. We only had good contact. And then I had... it was nice when they were watching us play tennis we seemed to have some rapport there. So I didn't come in contact...and I have the feeling that those – if they were at Camp Davis or Bluenthal – that they...were probably...the ones that gave them trouble might have been incarcerated more. Because these were friendlier.

SPH: There's a lot of talk about the age difference and their behavior. The younger group –they claimed – were more aggressive. Did these appear to be early 20s or were they older, like closer to 30 or closer to 40?

MAW: I think they were close to 30 or something. I didn't notice many of the real young ones there.

SPH: Do you remember about what year, like '43, '44, '45?

MAW: It probably was '44 or maybe '43, '44.

SPH: '43-'44. Okay.

MAW: Or even '42. I'm not sure whether any of them came in in '42 or not. But it was right along at that time, but between '42 and '44. I think. And I'm not sure they kept them there through '45. But they might have. I don't know when they sent them back.

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SPH: Looking back at all the different times that you had to interact with the German POWs is there any one thing that really stood out as a positive or negative experience?

MAW: Well, it was just positive because they, you know, like I say, they were so...they seem to be very appreciative of us helping them. They seemed to like the sports, and you know, and having some rapport with the younger people, you know, as we played tennis and we were from the high school. So they seemed to want, you know, to talk to you. But most of them did not say too much. They tried to at the air base, but they didn't say too much. So I did have the feeling that they were being guarded in some way. And I think that's about all. I didn't come in contact with anymore that I can remember.

Appendix 3

*A Comparative Study of the Perceptions of German POWs in North Carolina*

Interview Transcript

**Interviewer:** Sonia Parsons Haga  
**Respondent:** William Murray  
**Date:** November 16, 2010  
**Place:** Narrator's Home  
**College:** University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
**Professor:** Dr. Jeff Jones  
**Course:** HSS 490, Senior Honors Thesis  
**Date Completed:** November 16, 2010

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Persons present: Sonia Parsons Haga  
Mr. William Murray

SPH: What they would like to know is your name...

WM: My name is Bill Murray or William Murray. I was born in Roanoke, Virginia. I went to Virginia Polytechnical Institute – called Virginia Tech today. And uh, let's see, I reckon I was, the war ended in 1946 I think, I was about 15 – I was sixteen years old that year and born in the 1930s, so I would be sixteen years old. And we hardly - Roanoke was about fifty miles from Radford and also from Virginia Tech. Radford Arsenal and Virginia Tech are about 24 miles apart. That's probably the largest arsenal in the world – making ammunition for World War II. And to this day they make it. Uh, it's a well-guarded place – it was. And how I got to know about it...we heard about prisoners of war. I was in a fraternity in high school – we had fraternities – and it was called the "Pinchie Winchies" and we had these shirts we had 'PW's on the back of 'em, and of course that's what prisoners of war – all the German prisoners of war wore – they wore not khaki - they wore blue jeans and blue shirts and they had 'PW's on 'em – their backs. So they say. I never saw one really, never saw one. All I saw was a result of their work. They did wonderful work. They built bridges across small streams and things, they worked on the parkway which made – uh, the CCC – I forget what they call it. Do you remember what they call it back in the '30s?

SPH: Um-hmm.

WM: FDR put the people to work who didn't have any work. They worked along them and helped build the parkways – actually, not the parkways but the trails through the mountains and things. I never heard of any one of them escaping. And as far as people

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going up and visit with them, I don't ever remember anybody doing that. Because they were in kind of a secluded place as you could imagine. I've been to the place. I lived there for six months in a barracks. You ever hear of 'Stalag 16' and all that stuff?

SPH: Um-hmm.

WM: Alright, that's exactly how that place was set up. They had quadrants and they had the lights and towers with guns in it and they had dormitories set up there. And that's how they lived. I was a freshman at Virginia Tech which was a military school in those days in 1949 and they was supposed to have three dormitories built for us in the upper quadrangle which they weren't finished. We were supposed to go to school in September and they were not going to be finished until February. So they had no place for 1,500 of us to live, but they did have the Radford Arsenal. So we went over there where these prisoners had been and they just took three – actually, two squares – and put our regiment over there which was 1,300...I reckon freshman, sophomores, and juniors and seniors – actually, mostly freshmen and sophomores. 'Cause you have class – in military school you have class structures, you know? The seniors outrank the juniors, the juniors outrank the sophomores, and all the way down to the rats. So we got up there and um, on the main campus and they assigned us over there. So they drove us over there and mother cried the whole way 'cause she said they put me in jail 'cause the barbed wire was still all up and everything, gun towers and turrets were all there, and it looked just like you see on television and these movies except that the Germans weren't there. But the Germans were a very innovative people and the barracks were probably in the best shape you could

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have possibly had. You go to a hospital and you wouldn't see the floors shine any better. And we learned something from 'em. I don't know where they got their mattresses but they had to build everything. We brought them up there and they went to work building their own place to sleep and eat and everything. I'm sure we...as I said I was a kid, I'm sure we provided the materials but the Germans had to do the work. As you went in the arsenal – of course, the arsenal was very heavily guarded 'cause that's where all the ammunition was. But when we got there the elder gates were not guarded...so they were there. And uh, I reckon the only guards were the cadet guards at the gate. You know, just to keep on-lookers out. But there were no – hardly any – people, except the relatives of the cadets came up to see them when I was there and there were no Germans there. So I can't tell you any more than that except the fact that Radford Arsenal – you ought to go up and see it – I don't know what it's like today, but it looked like you had a city under construction and someone dropped an atomic bomb on it and everything ceased. (WM slammed hand on table to emphasize the word “ceased.”) You had people digging where ditches were dug over here, where they put the foundation over here, where this group over here was a little bit more, until the finished building was over there. Step, step, step, step, step. (Mr. Murray made gestures during this part simulating the stair-step construction that he had witnessed.) All over the whole place – the way the whole place was. Later on in life, I spent a few years there and I did not see any prisoners of war and never heard – and I heard three aunts – and they never talked about prisoners of wars or wanting to go up and hug or kiss or see any damn Germans. Nobody liked the Germans or Japanese; we hated them. There were killing our people. Particularly, my uncle's in

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the navy. He was in that big landing over there in France where all these Americans got killed – particularly ones from Bedford. And he said you could see heads floating around in the water out here; it was terrible. Thousands of them, not just a hundred, and um, so that's the reasons we didn't like the Germans, we didn't like them. But they were treated very nicely. We treated our soldiers – our prisoners – well. The Germans treated ours half-way well, the Japanese treated them terrible. Terrible. You didn't want to be a Japanese prisoner of war. You heard of Corregidor and all of that stuff, I reckon?

SPH: um-hmm.

WM: Are you a history major?

SPH: um-hmm.

WM: You ought to know some of that – all that. I just happened to live through it and you are reading about it. Jeff Jones, do you know him?

SPH: um-hmm.

WM: He ought to know something about that.

SPH: Yeah, he's my faculty advisor for this paper.

WM: I like Jeff. He's a smart boy. So I can only tell you this that I went in active duty in the air force, came back and was in the reserve, must been – this would be in the '50s or the '60s, probably the '50s – latter '50s. And we decided that we wanted – the air force decided they wanted to build an air ... our government is so damn dumb ... they wanted to build a air station in Roanoke, Virginia, what we'd call a recovery station. The philosophy was that we'd send our fighter or jets: B52s, B47s, and things like that, and they had B36s; over to Russia and drop bombs, the atomic bombs, and we came back we

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had to wash off the residue of the nuclear fallout on our own planes. So, they had a recovery squad in Roanoke, Virginia, and all over the country. Of course, the East Coast was the shortest way over there; naturally, they didn't have any on the West Coast. So, um... where are we going to get the materials to build this? So we got um, remember I am just a Captain at this time, so the Colonel in charge of our base was the City Manager of Roanoke, Virginia, and he had some political pull and he got with the Secretary of Defense and got them to give us some Quonset huts. Do you know what a Quonset huts is?

SPH: um-hmm.

WM: Pre-fab, really, that they had up there...they did build some of those, too. That's where they kept supplies basically. So, they gave them to us if we would bring them down and build them in Roanoke for them. So my job at that time I go the sorry job of being Transportation Officer. So we sent our boys up there with our trucks and we put – parts were laying all over the place up there – just like that train track (motioned to a toy train near the table) you divide it up here, eventually you would put it back together if you could see where it went; so they just went up there, picked up the pieces we needed, loaded up and brought it back to Roanoke and built a Quonset hut and it's still in Roanoke to this day in William Field. And that's the last time I ever had anything to do with Radford Arsenal.

SPH: The fraternity...how do you spell that?

WM: Pinchie Winchie? P-I-N-C-H-I-E W-I-N-C-H-I-E. We had girls' sororities and boys' fraternities in high school in those days. We had the Revelers, the Pinchie Winchies, and

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the Katanas (sic) were the boys. And we had the FFs, and the Sub-Debs, and the Letter Gamas were the girls. All we did was a social thing, put parties on, and dances and things of this type after football games, hops. The school didn't put on but two things a year. They put on...I think they had a Christmas dance and they had a Valentine's dance or something. But the fraternities and sororities took up – all the weekends there was something to do if you're in one of 'em. Luckily, I was in one of 'em. Get your tail beat to get in one of 'em, but that's all right.

SPH: Having the initials 'PW', were y'all aware at that time that the POWs had 'PW' marked...

WM: Sure

SPH: Did y'all make any jokes or...

WM: No. We didn't joke about it. We didn't worry about it. We wouldn't worried about the prisoners of war at all.

SPH: So they just never were a thought.

WM: Now when they came to town they apparently came through on the train in shifts over to Norfolk, and from Norfolk straight up there, and on trains and...um, I forget the name of that little town – let 'em out there and took 'em over there. They sure as hell didn't march 'em over there, it was too far. The reason I say that is Virginia Tech at that time had 3,200 people in the school. They were all military. The biggest rivalry in America at that time other than the Army-Navy game was the VA Tech-VMI football game on Thanksgiving Day. In Roanoke there were big parades and they ... And they moved our cadet corps down from Blacksburg to Roanoke on those trains. We called it the Huckleberry because it was so slow that you could jump off the train and pick up berries

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and eat 'em they claim. I never did that but I rode the train for four years. And it was slow, but we had a great...one of the greatest time in my life was marching in that parade on Thanksgiving Day. Thousands of people came to see it. We had a big band. As they still do at VA Tech, and the military is still there, by the way – cadet corps is.

SPH: And so the POWs used that same train when...

WM: We don't know. Had no idea. My Granddaddy was a railroad engineer and he never mentioned hauling any prisoners of war. He was an engineer with the railroad. The engineer in those days was kind of like a pilot in an airplane. He was in charge of everybody, the brakemen and everybody worked for the engineer on that particular train. The picture of the Powhatan Arrow over there (motioning to the wall to his far left), Granddaddy was the first engineer to ever run that. He was President of the Brotherhood of Railroad Engineers and Firemen, or whatever they called it. It was kind of like a union.

SPH: My grandfather was in it in Salisbury – or East Spencer.

WM: Well, he would be in the Southern Railroad. This was the Norfolk & Western Railroad went that way. NW they'd call it. So that's all that I know about the prisoners of war. We never had any escape. We never saw any. We never looked for any, really. We saw the results, though. We had these parties – the sororities and fraternities had these parties – called, not slumber parties of course, cabin parties. And we had those in the country. Out where we – Baldwin Cabin which I can't find any more, it had about eight or ten bedrooms in it and baths and so forth. And our club would rent that and they would stay there and they'd invite all the other people in town and school to come. And the

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coaches...so there was no really drinking on the premises. But down below there was a creek and I remember the bridge was down there and the POWs had built that bridge. I never saw them work on it but they had built it. We were told they had built it. They did a beautiful job. They did great work. When we moved into these barracks they stripped them down but they had pool tables that they had made, cue sticks they had made out of wood out of the forest. So they were very self-sufficient. The Germans are very smart folks.

SPH: Did they have some type of material like the felt on it, or was it just basic...

WM: I forgot. I have really forgotten.

SPH: That is really neat.

WM: I haven't seen that since 1949. That was what you call the day room. It was a room where you could gather everybody in the barracks together for a meeting. They call them day rooms. And they do that in the service today.

SPH: And so, basically, when you were growing up and they were there, they were pretty much a non-issue and nobody ever really talked about them.

WM: That's right. We just hated the Germans. We hated the Japs.

SPH: Were you aware of any of the Italian POWs and enemy aliens?

WM: No. I don't remember them ever having any of those. Maybe they did. They might have been in the mix. You know, we never saw them. How could we tell?

SPH: Right. Okay.

WM: I always heard that there were a lot of blondes. Most of the Germans were blond - probably from the Alsace-Lorraine area up there between France and Germany. And

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there's no distinction whether they was Gestapo people or whether they was just regular army or air force pilots or whoever they were. They were just prisoners. And we never saw them. As I've said a hundred times now we had not seen them.

(Interview was concluded, and then Mr. Murray began speaking again. Audio PT 2)

WM: My first roommate was a rat and was from Connecticut – Hartford, CT. I had gotten a job;

I had been working as a lumber jack in the summer time to make money to go to college on. And I think I made a \$1.15 an hour – and that's after digging ditches at \$0.70 an hour, I moved up the scale after about four years of working the summer times. And lucky to have a job. Anyhow, his daddy, he said, "Dad has a construction company up in Connecticut. I'll call him up and get you a job." He had been spending a lot of time at my mother and dad's house, where they were feeding him and everything. So he said, "Come up and spend the summer with us." I said, "Really?" He said, "Daddy'll give you a \$1.85 an hour and let you stay at our house." And I didn't know how nice his house was but he had a big swimming pool, full-time maid, everything. And you weren't supposed to have a car at Blacksburg, either, but as soon as school let out he went down and got his new car. He'd brought one down here and put in a garage and parked it the whole year. Nobody has somebody come by and check on it for him. So I...he can't say he had one on campus 'cause he never did. So we rode up there and his daddy was a submarine captain in the German navy and he had surrendered the submarine to the Americans up there. And somehow or other they let him stay in America. And he founded that Anderson Ferrell (sic) Construction Company which was the largest

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construction company so far east. He gave me a job. He made a bunch of money for himself – his house was out in West Hartford. Anyhow, we got along pretty good. Got along real – well, his dad was real pleased to be in America. Germany was all tore up and everything in those years and no way much to make ‘em any money. And did you ever hear the story about that train? You see these trains in Ham’s running around? That’s the kind of trains they made in Germany. And the true story about that is that these two brothers were in the Germany army and they were captured by the Russians. And of course, they were imprisoned but they escaped. And their daddy had been rather influential industrialist. They were in E. Germany and when they came the communists had taken over everything and devastated their homes and everything. People don’t realize how sorry the damn communists are. We got a bunch in this country that think we ought to do all that. No, no, no. There’s no since in those folks. So those kids escaped and they were probably about thirty years old and they got back over in W. Germany because they were basically broke. But went to some banks that survived and the people remembered them from the business that their daddies had had. Their daddies were shot and killed. They just grabbed and killed the civilians: mothers and brothers, sisters, everybody. War is hell! Nobody in this country really realizes it, but it is. So anyhow they got the idea they’d...where could they make some money? So nobody was making a train that you’d run outdoors – that train would run in snow or outdoors in the rain. So they came up with that train – started making that train. That’s how that train got started. I saw their factory over there and I wanted to buy one. So I bought one. They’re a little expensive but the exchange rate was good when I was there. It wasn’t so bad. They’ve

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gone up a little bit now – those German Marks. But I don't trade money, so I don't know. That's the best train you ever saw. You pick that engine up – that's heavy. It won't jump the track. You can run that thing full force...All the rest of the Lionels I've had. I've got some trains, believe me. But that's the best one. And the Germans made it. So what they did they did very, very well. To this day, I understand. Mercedes Benz sells pretty good, don't they? BMWs do pretty good – and last a long time. That's bad though if you had to repeat sales. Well honey, I'm gonna have to go.