

Stalag Wisconsin

Inside WW II prisoner-of-war camps



OVER
75
PHOTOS

by Betty Cowley

Camp Rhinelander 1945

If you didn't hire them, you didn't know that German prisoners of war were in the area. The farms near Rhinelander were far apart with lots of woodland between them. Back into the woods an abandoned CCC camp hid and housed the 190 PW's that arrived in Oneida County. In a federal nursery two miles west of Rhinelander near Highway 8, the U.S. Forest Service LobLolly Pine Tree Lab stood adjacent to the PW Camp. The abandoned camp needed only a good cleaning to prepare it for new occupants. The largest building became sleeping quarters for the PW's. German speaking camp Commander Captain Kunze and his forty or so guards slept in another dormitory type building. This work battalion found the old CCC mess and bathing facilities still usable. While some food arrived from Fort Sheridan, most of the food was purchased from a local A & P in downtown Rhinelander. Captain Kunze negotiated a deal with the A&P to buy quality beef and call it "bologna." This gesture proved well worth the money. The PW's appreciated the "bologna sausage" and responded with excellent cooperation throughout their stay. With no cleared level area large enough for soccer, there was little recreation available here, other than cards, reading and letter writing. The local Dr. Van Komaszynski contracted with the camp to provide medical services and tended the PW's and guards as needed. At Camp Rhinelander security was minimal, with neither a fence, guard station or tower. Dispatched each morning in Jeeps, U.S. Army MP's stationed with the PW's accompanied the prisoner work details to the area farms. Always visible for show, the guns were not loaded, as the guards never worried for their own safety or about escapes.¹

The PW's came to Rhinelander in two waves, the first ninety arrived on August 29, 1945, with the additional 100 trucked in on September 4th. The Oneida County Farm Labor Association Cooperative had arrangements with the government for their assis-

tance to pick beans and harvest potatoes at the going wage of fifty-five cents per hour.² Thirty-five U.S. Army MP's accompanied the first contingent of prisoners when they arrived with their gear in twenty-four trucks and two jeeps. Major Elmer A. Ward, assisted by German speaking Captain A. I. Kunze, was in charge of this company of PW's.³ School buses and trucks used to pick up and deliver the PW's to their work sites each morning, returned them to camp again in the evening. Even with the additional 100 prisoners that did arrive later, the potato growers still had a serious labor shortage and put a plea for help in the October 11, 1945, edition of *The New North*.⁴ The farmers recruited high school teens for Saturday work to help save the crop. Camp Rhineland closed at the end of October as the potato harvest ended.⁵

RECOLLECTIONS

Lynn Bell. Milwaukee, WI -

"They started giving us rides in the wheelbarrows around the area. They were laughing and so were we. These men had uniforms on with real big PW on the back of their fatigue type shirts. My siblings and I didn't know anything about prisoners of war. We were just snooping around the big warehouse just a stone's throw from our house three miles east of Rhineland. Farmers stored their potatoes there at the time. We never saw the men again."⁶



PW's from Camp Rhineland pick up rocks from a field, 1945.
Photo courtesy of W.C. Schroeder.

DeLore Deau. Rhinelander, WI -

DeLore Deau recalled about fifty PW's being fed sack lunches in Browns' Park near the old Chicago North Western depot. About 16 years old at the time, he was surprised to see that these enemy soldiers were mere kids rather than the terrible "Huns" American media had told him about.⁷

Deau also recalled a young German woman who came to town in the mid 1990s. She inquired about the camp and prisoners. She was attempting to trace her father's tour of Wisconsin when he was held as a PW during the war.⁸

Sgt. Anthony E Beres. Dunedin, FL -

Tony Beres offered several stories about his time spent as a guard at Camp Rhinelander. Private Kay Kettner, one of Tony's fellow MP's was an unhappy man, although a native of Rhinelander. Recently rescued from a German PW camp he returned to the states until his enlistment was up. One can only imagine his thoughts about our treatment of the German PW's stationed in Camp Rhinelander. One day his emotions erupted and he burned the entire PW payroll. Since the payroll was military scrip, it was not too difficult to replace, but did take some time to get more. "I was one of three military personnel who knew about this incident and covered for him," recalled Tony.⁹



Sgt. Anthony Beres at Camp Rhinelander, 1945. Photo courtesy of Anthony Beres.

According to Tony, the MP's here had a unique pastime. They went bullhead fishing, which is best done after dark. With a lantern in hand, a local woman, Ms. Dorothy Yurich, led the way to Pine Lake about a half mile from camp. Fishing was often very good and the men sometimes brought back up to 100 fish. They would then rouse the cooks out of bed to do the honors. "Who would care about breakfast, after a meal of catfish?" asked Beres. After the feed, "Ms. Yurich would be escorted home by a soldier we all could trust our sisters with." Dorothy also served as local intelligence, telling the guards where they

could and could not go in Rhineland. ¹⁰

In consortium with the University of Wisconsin, Leleah Starke raised seed potatoes, insuring quality and quantity for the state potato growers. Tony remembered that Ms. Starke spoke mostly German, so she quickly bonded with the PW's hired on her 100-acre farm. Her good German home cooking also helped the relationship between her and the prisoners she hired. ¹¹

Tony Beres mentioned that Captain Kunze recognized the artistic talents of one young PW. As a result, he kept this prisoner back at camp to protect his hands. The commander brought small photos of his family and the artist enlarged them in oils. ¹²

Assigned to help the company clerk, Sergeant Beres recorded the work of the PW's during their stay. Two heel-clicking Germans among the prisoners surprisingly regarded the American soldiers as true gentlemen. These two and most of the others in the detachment of PW's at Rhineland had been captured in Africa. Told the German Luftwaffe had leveled New York, they had been very surprised to see the Statue of Liberty greeting them as they came through the Port of New York. The fact that the German leadership had misinformed them became immediately obvious to them, and they quickly opened to information provided by their captors. Tony had no fear of the prisoners. Without even a side-arm he would take an English speaking prisoner with him on his bi-weekly runs to Fort Sheridan for supplies. Of the four different PW camps to which Tony was assigned, he found Camp Rhineland to be the most lax about security. But he also remembered, the prisoners had no place to go, terrorized by the sound of wolves howling in the woods each night. ¹³

Juanita Stafford Kichfski. Rhineland, WI -

Three PW's loaded and stacked the gunny sacks of potatoes onto the back of trucks, hauled them to the Stafford warehouse and restacked them inside. Juanita Kichfsk said that at the end of each day they reported the number of sacks they had stacked and at the end of the season they told her dad the total of number of sacks of potatoes in his warehouse. Their record keeping was actually unnecessary because a ticket system that allowed the pickers to be paid by the number of sacks they filled also gave the count. But Juanita still recalled how impressed her father, Joe Stafford, was with the accuracy of the prisoners and especially how they maintained the accumulating count in their heads over the entire season. ¹⁴

Betty Kuczmariski. Rhineland, WI -

It didn't happen too often, but a couple of times the PW's worked an extra hour or so before heading back to Camp Rhineland. Fearing a predicted frost during the night, the prisoners worked until done picking the potatoes in the field. Their assigned school bus waited to take them back to camp. Betty Kuczmariski doesn't remember the PW's complaining about the overtime. Perhaps it was because her husband, Emil, had said, "If you want a horse to work you have to feed it and treat it right." According to Betty, that was his philosophy in dealing with the prisoners as well.¹⁵

Marvin Stafford. Eagle River, WI -

Handshakes went all round when the season was over. The three PW's seemed a little saddened about moving on. During their work in our potato fields, Dad had treated them to Lucky Strike cigarettes and mother had supplemented their sack lunches with whatever we had on the table. Marvin Stafford recalled that one of the three PW's could speak a little English and his mother could speak a little German. The prisoners expressed surprise at the size of this country and our industry and seemed to understand the futility of the war. Mother received a letter from one after he was repatriated.¹⁶

Non-fiction

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