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# German and Italian Prisoners of War in Albuquerque, 1943–1946

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SUSAN BADGER DOYLE

Approximately 120,000 American soldiers were taken prisoner in World War II. The 95,000 captured in Europe and the 25,000 captured in the Pacific arena were kept in German and Japanese concentration camps.<sup>1</sup> New Mexicans were particularly affected. Of the 1,800 soldiers in the New Mexico National Guard who went to the Philippines, only 900 returned.<sup>2</sup> Several memorials in Albuquerque honor those New Mexicans who died on Bataan or in Japanese prison camps. In contrast, hundreds of thousands of German and Italian soldiers were taken prisoner by the United States. By the spring of 1945, in fact, 425,000 of these prisoners of war (POWs) had been shipped to 750 camps in America. Three times as many European POWs as the total number of Americans taken prisoner in Europe and the Pacific were housed in America, and yet there is surprisingly little awareness today of this massive "invasion."

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1. Lee Kennett, G.I., *The American Soldier in World War II* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1987), 184.

2. John Pershing Jolly, *History [of the] National Guard of New Mexico, 1606–1963* (Santa Fe: Office of the Adjutant General, 1964), 78.

In the early spring of 1942 the United States government began seriously to consider the unanticipated problem of what to do with soldiers captured overseas. As a reaction to the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Congress had already authorized the establishment of nine camps on December 8, 1941—designated as alien enemy internment camps to house Japanese Americans. Roswell and Lordsburg, in southern New Mexico, were among these camp sites. As national attention turned to housing these captured prisoners, camp construction proceeded rapidly. Rumors abounded in both New Mexico communities that large numbers of Japanese Americans would be removed from the West Coast to the camps.

By the summer months, a public mood of reluctant acceptance was apparent in New Mexico. Just in time, for the camps were ready, and the Lordsburg camp received 613 Japanese American internees in July. In November the first group of 250 German prisoners arrived at Camp Roswell. Both facilities had a capacity of 4,800 men, but were only partially filled for the first few months of operation. Beginning in May 1943, however, 175,000 Germans and Italians captured in North Africa flooded into the American POW camps. As a result, both New Mexico camps were filled to capacity in the summer of 1943 and remained filled for the duration of the program. In the beginning, German prisoners were housed at Camp Roswell, and Italians were housed at Camp Lordsburg, but in mid-1944 Germans replaced Italians at Camp Lordsburg.<sup>3</sup>

Eventually, 155 major POW camps were established in the United States, using existing Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps left over from the Depression years, army bases, and newly constructed camps. Two-thirds of these were in the South and Southwest. A Prisoner of War Division was established in the Army's Office of the Provost Marshall General,<sup>4</sup> and POW camps were placed under the control of the commanding general of the Service Command in which each was located. New Mexico fell under the jurisdiction of the five-state Eighth Service Command, which included Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, New Mexico, and Louisiana.

POWs were given the same rations as American soldiers at home—which were better than the K-rations of soldiers at the front and far better than the food available to Germans in their homeland—so most

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3. Jake W. Spidle, "Axis Invasion of the American West: POWs in New Mexico, 1942-1946," *New Mexico Historical Review* 49 (April 1974), 94-97.

4. Spidle, "Axis Prisoners of War in the United States, 1942-1946: A Bibliographical Essay," *Military Affairs* 39 (April 1975), 63.

POWs gained weight.<sup>5</sup> Criticisms routinely appeared in the national media of their being “pampered” and appearing “fat as hogs.”<sup>6</sup> All camps had canteens, and POWs were paid \$3 per month in coupons (up to \$40 per month for officers) with which they could purchase cigarettes, additional food, candy, toilet items, and, at some camps, beer and wine.

Although all camps were secured by guards with machine guns and surrounded by high wire fences topped with barbed wire, life in them was relatively comfortable, including recreational, educational, and social activities. Moreover, POWs could subscribe to newspapers and purchase books, and weekly movies were shown. Many camps published their own camp papers. Prisoners had radios, but German POWs generally did not believe American broadcasts since, it seems, they could not tell truth from propaganda.<sup>7</sup> Often prisoners put on theatrical productions and at some camps had orchestras or dance bands.

Upon arrival, POWs were issued blue denim work clothes with a large white “PW” stenciled on the back of the shirts “to identify them as prisoners of war and, if necessary, provide a target for the guards in the event of their escape.”<sup>8</sup> As time went by, feelings moderated. The initial overreaction to the POWs as a security risk to Americans was overcome, and the letters were often painted orange and haphazardly placed on shirt sleeves and even pants legs.

The spring of 1943 was the turning point in the army’s POW operations. Since the Geneva Convention of 1929 allowed captors to use their prisoners as a labor source and provided guidelines for their treatment as such, the government decided in January to use POWs as laborers on American army bases to free G.I.s for overseas duty. That spring, with so many able-bodied men away at war, America was facing a critical labor shortage in all sectors, particularly in agriculture. The obvious answer was to expand the POW work program to meet the needs of the civilian labor sector. Implementation began immediately, and in April 1943 the War Department announced that POW labor would be made available to civilians. Bureaucratic haggling over control of the program continued, however, until fall. More effectively

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5. Spidle, “Axis Invasion,” 102.

6. Arnold Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America* (New York: Stein and Day, 1979), 212.

7. “Aliens and Internment Camps,” *Social Effects 2, World War II Records Library Volume 73*, Military Records Section, New Mexico Records Center and Archives, Santa Fe.

8. Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War*, 47.

addressed was the concern over locating POWs near their work sites. Out of this problem, the concept of branch camps was born. Eventually nearly 600 branch, or side, camps were established.<sup>9</sup>

Finally a system was worked out whereby the War Manpower Commission assumed responsibility for policies and procedures for civilian use of POW labor. Three requirements were established. First, no other source of the type of labor the POWs provided could be available in the area. Second, adequate housing facilities had to be supplied. Third, government contracts had to be signed by the employer for POW labor. Under these contracts, the employer paid POWs the prevailing wage in the local area,<sup>10</sup> with the contractor paying the U.S. Treasury and the prisoner receiving eighty cents from the government for each day worked. The prevailing wage was arrived at through hearings held in each area. In New Mexico the hearings were often attended by angry farmers who did not want to have to pay the same wage rate for prison labor as for nonprison labor.<sup>11</sup>

Within each region, the United States Employment Service (USES) handled industrial workers, and the Agricultural Extension Service handled agricultural labor. Since most POWs in New Mexico worked in agriculture and Bernalillo County was an agricultural county at the time, the Agricultural Extension Service became the most important agency in Albuquerque as well as in the state for POW operations. Therefore, Albuquerque was ideally suited to be included in the program for agricultural labor; on August 29, 1943, an announcement appeared in the *Albuquerque Journal* that a group of congressmen from New Mexico had requested approval for the use of POWs for agricultural labor in the southern part of the state. When U.S. Representative Clinton P. Anderson was interviewed, he referred to the labor shortage in Albuquerque and noted that a camp would also be needed in the Rio Grande Valley.<sup>12</sup>

Albuquerque was swept up in the prison labor movement. On September 6 an officer from the Lordsburg camp inspected the vacant CCC camp in Rio Grande Park and commented that it was "a better location than many where we've sent prisoners." He described the camp as "compact," with an "adequate woven and barbed wire fence

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9. *Ibid.*, 86-88.

10. Spidle, "Axis Invasion," 110.

11. Ira Clark, Las Cruces, telephone conversation with author, December 2, 1987. Clark, an expert on water use, could not recall much about the Rio Grande Park camp except that he had to make several visits to deal with water table problems.

12. *Albuquerque Journal*, August 29, 1943, p. 3.

around it." Its location was just north of the present Rio Grande Zoo. The officer conferred with Representative Clinton Anderson, a committee of farmers, and Cecil Pragnell, the Bernalillo County Extension Agent.<sup>13</sup>

Cecil Pragnell, as county agent, became the primary figure in the POW operations in Albuquerque. Issuing virtually all the local press releases on the POWs in the next three years, he ultimately controlled most of the POW labor. At the same time he had perhaps the more difficult job of explaining the POW labor program to county residents, functioning as the intermediary between the constantly changing operations and a demanding public. The vague, contradictory, and uncertain tone of many of his releases indicate that his job was one of tremendous pressure and frustration.

On Wednesday, September 15, 1943, Pragnell announced that 150 Italian POWs from Lordsburg would be arriving in Albuquerque on Saturday.<sup>14</sup> The article also quoted the secretary of the New Mexico Council of Carpenters, Roland J. Payne, speaking on behalf of eleven local unions, as opposing importing war prisoners as "just another scheme on the part of some persons to bring down the level of agricultural wages." On Sunday Pragnell reported that the POWs had not arrived on Saturday but that he expected them on Monday. He added that the camp was still being readied and was almost finished. The refrigeration was installed, but fence repairs were incomplete.<sup>15</sup>

By the following Wednesday the POWs still had not arrived, but Pragnell was keeping up with the situation through frequent press releases on their status—a practice he eventually stopped, presumably out of sheer frustration. He announced that he had received word from Camp Lordsburg that approval was still being awaited from the army, adding that the day before he and J. L. Phillips, chairman of the county farm labor committee, had telegraphed Representative Clinton Anderson to secure early approval for the prisoners to be sent.<sup>16</sup> On Friday Pragnell announced that he had received word from Anderson that the necessary clearances had been obtained for 150 Italian POWs. He expected the POWs to arrive or to receive word of their arrival that day.<sup>17</sup> The same article gave the local USES manager, Doyle Hayes, the opportunity to announce a "simplified" hiring procedure, designed to

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13. *Ibid.*, September 7, 1943, p. 2.

14. *Ibid.*, September 15, 1943, p. 1.

15. *Ibid.*, September 19, 1943, p. 3.

16. *Ibid.*, September 22, 1943, p. 4.

17. *Ibid.*, September 24, 1943, p. 6.

save time for prospective employers. Under the new plan, a prospective employer of industrial labor would apply to the nearest USES office, and employers of farm labor would apply to their county agent.

Then Pragnell was silent for several days. On Friday, October 8, Albuquerque residents were surprised to read that Pragnell's office had received word German POWs would be substituted for Italians because of an army regulation that prisoners must be accepted from the nearest camp. This change meant that the Albuquerque camp would be supplied with prisoners from Camp Roswell, where German POWs were housed.<sup>18</sup> The next day both papers had front page stories on a mass public meeting held Friday evening at Washington Junior High School, revealing that the switch incensed Albuquerque residents. It was an angry meeting, punctuated with sharp outbursts and much shouting, and conducted by Mayor Clyde Tingley—noted for his public displays of temper—who shouted the loudest.<sup>19</sup>

Most of those attending the meeting opposed housing the prisoners at the CCC camp in Rio Grande Park because it was in a residential district. In his opening remarks Tingley asserted, "I don't want them here" and proposed moving the camp outside the city limits. He was undoubtedly prompted by statements earlier in the day from owners W. A. Keleher and A. R. Hebenstreit that they had granted the land to the city to be used only for recreational purposes and that they would take it back if German prisoners were moved there.<sup>20</sup>

Another spokesman, George Taylor, Albuquerque attorney and voice for several governmental agencies, asked Tingley, "The question is do you or don't you want prisoners to gather crops which are ready to be harvested in Bernalillo county?" Tingley countered, "The question is, do we want them down in the park!" Taylor responded that the problem was whether the city would have enough food, adding that the prisoners would be heavily guarded, that the camp was surrounded by electrically charged wire, that the guards had machine guns, and that, most important, it was the only location available meeting the sanitary conditions the army required.<sup>21</sup>

At this point tempers flared. Tingley demanded to know why, if it took one guard for each six German prisoners, they did not bring all those guards up to do the farm work. Then someone revealingly

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18. *Albuquerque Tribune*, October 8, 1943, p. 1.

19. "War Department to Send Italians for Farm Labor," *Albuquerque Journal*, October 9, 1943, pp. 1, 5.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*

shouted, "I wish Mr. Taylor was as interested in getting sanitation and water and sewers in Barelás and Martíneztown as he is for these German prisoners!" Taylor replied that the army set the requirements according to the Geneva Convention and that "the International Red Cross reports American soldiers who are prisoners in Germany are getting good treatment." In his comments, Taylor seemed to be following standard governmental doctrine of the time.<sup>22</sup>

The meeting further degenerated when someone called the German prisoners "murderers." Then a farmer asked other farmers present to walk out, go on strike, and raise only enough food for personal use. On the other hand, one participant, supporting Taylor and sensing his need to gain control, labeled those putting obstacles in the way of bringing in much-needed POWs as "saboteurs." In response Tingley shouted, "These people are not saboteurs! They're good Americans!"<sup>23</sup>

Then, when chaos seemed to be threatening, it was revealed that Italians, not Germans, would be sent after all. Quickly everyone settled down, and a proposal was made and passed to accept the POWs if assurance was made that they would be Italians. Representative Anderson phoned the *Albuquerque Journal* staff that evening with definite assurance that only Italian POWs would be moved to Albuquerque and that if the camp were to be moved to another location—one of the stipulations of the proposal—he would offer a site on his farm south of town.<sup>24</sup>

In retrospect, the reactions expressed at this meeting are understandable. Although American animosity toward German prisoners worsened as the war progressed, the Italians were beginning to be considered friendly. At this time, in late 1943, the liberated Italian government declared war on Germany, and Italian soldiers surrendered by the thousands to the Allies rather than be shot by Germans for refusing to fight with them.<sup>25</sup> That, along with a large Italian community in Albuquerque, paved the way for the acceptance of Italian POWs by Albuquerque residents.

On Friday, October 15, 165 Italian POWs, guarded by thirty-six military police, arrived by train at 7 P.M. from the Hereford, Texas POW camp and were transported by trucks to the camp in the park. A crowd waited at the station to watch their arrival. The newspaper reported

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22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*

25. Betty Woods, "'Commando' Cowboys," *New Mexico Magazine* 22 (March 1944),

that most of the POWs seemed cheerful, and one "smiling blond lad" answered questions in heavily accented, but understandable, English. His father had lived in New York City for twenty-four years, but he had remained in Italy with his mother.<sup>26</sup> Because of his friendliness and appearance, he apparently did not seem out of place in Albuquerque, nor did he appear to be an enemy.

The prisoners began work the following Tuesday, in groups of fifteen, with a guard for each group. Pragnell reported that "the prisoners seemed happy, as they were singing loudly as they were driven to work in trucks today."<sup>27</sup> He also announced the names of the farmers who employed the first POWs. Prominent on the list were Representative Anderson, who was assigned fifteen for his Lazy V-Cross farm, and Albert Simms (chairman of the Board of Commissioners of the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District), who was assigned fifteen for his Los Poblanos estate on Rio Grande Boulevard.<sup>28</sup> By the next day, 150 POWs were doing agricultural work throughout the county, with the remaining fifteen assigned cleanup and cooking duties in camp. Since frost was beginning to hit the area, the POWs unquestionably saved crops all over New Mexico that season. In the Albuquerque area, harvesting dairy feed was a priority, but after corn and alfalfa, POWs harvested apples and other crops.

In addition to filling the farm labor shortage, POWs contributed in another important, related area. They were employed by the Rio Grande Conservancy District to clean the hundreds of miles of irrigation ditches in the county. Minutes of the district board reveal that from October 1943 to March 1944 the district paid the U.S. government \$6,672.77 for POW labor.<sup>29</sup> Although the district was paying the POWs twenty-five cents an hour, the same rate that farmers paid, other ditch laborers were paid fifty cents an hour.

Over all, things seemed to go smoothly for Pragnell once the prisoners were working. Although the prisoners were no longer front page news, a notice appeared in the *Albuquerque Journal* in which Pragnell asked for donations to pay the bills for renovating the POW camp at Rio Grande Park. He needed \$1,000 and had appointed a committee to raise the funds.<sup>30</sup> It was a strange request in light of the daily front page appeals for donations to the patriotic War Chest. On December

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26. *Albuquerque Journal*, October 16, 1943, p. 1.

27. *Albuquerque Tribune*, October 19, 1943, p. 1.

28. *Albuquerque Journal*, October 20, 1943, p. 5.

29. Rio Grande Conservancy District, *Minutes of the Board of Commissioners*, Vol. 11.

30. *Albuquerque Journal*, November 7, 1943, p. 7.

8 it was announced that Pragnell was elected president of the Garden Club of Albuquerque, an indication of the range of his involvement in the community. The club would concentrate on Victory Gardens as an alternate solution to the food shortage.<sup>31</sup>

An ongoing problem with POWs throughout the country was that some, if not many, were bent upon escaping. A few even spent considerable time and energy in trying to escape. At least three long tunnels were dug under camps, and newspapers were filled with stories of escapes and captures of POWs. Although nearly 1,800 had escaped by the end of the war, all but a handful were recaptured, most within days. Some escapes had tragic results, as when two prisoners were shot and killed while trying to escape from Camp Roswell.<sup>32</sup> Although some escapees were fanatic Nazis, for whom escape was the means to prove Americans stupid and enable them to return to Germany, the majority seemed driven by boredom or the desire for adventure.<sup>33</sup>

Fortunately, Albuquerque was not plagued by escape problems, even though at least two escapes occurred. In one, Michele Di Giacomo broke loose from a work detail on a farm south of Albuquerque, but he was found twenty-four hours later about a mile from where he escaped. He had "survived" on fallen apples, and it must have been a comical scene when two sheriff officers and some FBI special agents "closed in" on him.<sup>34</sup> Early in 1944, Pasquale Maculli escaped from a work detail five miles south of Albuquerque, only to be recaptured a few hours later by a camp guard, who returned him to camp in a taxi.<sup>35</sup>

On March 5, 1944, reports of the possible recall of the Italian POWs from the Albuquerque internment camp appeared in the *Albuquerque Journal*. The reports were uncertain, however, since officials were awaiting clarification from Washington. The first report, from the state Extension Service, was that all POWs would be removed from New Mexico, even though Eighth Service Command officials said they knew nothing of any camp closings. Pragnell declared that the Bernalillo County farm labor situation would be "a whale of a mess" if the POWs were recalled, noting that POW workers the preceding fall harvested many crops that would have gone unharvested.<sup>36</sup>

On March 9, Representative Anderson announced in Washington

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31. *Ibid.*, December 8, 1943, p. 2.

32. Spidle, "Axis Invasion," 106-7.

33. *Ibid.*, 107-8.

34. *Albuquerque Journal*, December 18, 1943, p. 1.

35. *Ibid.*, January 7, 1944.

36. *Ibid.*, March 5, 1944, p. 4.

that Germans would replace the Italians at Camp Lordsburg, but that all the state's POW camps would remain in operation. Reminding readers that the Albuquerque camp was under the Lordsburg camp, the news release also expressed fear that Germans might replace Italians in Albuquerque. Pragnell responded quickly, by announcing that a meeting of farmers would be held the next day in his office in the courthouse.<sup>37</sup> In an action typical of bureaucratic delay, Pragnell was notified later in the day of the press release that all Italian POWs were being withdrawn from Albuquerque and that the next day would be their last day of work. Pragnell was apparently being kept completely in the dark. He told the press that he was unable to verify Anderson's statement that Germans would be sent as replacements. The next day, county farm labor chairman J. L. Phillips declared that the agricultural situation would be in a critical condition without POW labor.<sup>38</sup>

No replacements were sent after the POWs were withdrawn. In mid-March, Pragnell announced plans to move the POW camp to a site offered by the Schwartzman Packing Company, with a lease for the duration of the war. No rent would be charged, but the government had to pay taxes, electricity, and the cost of fencing and other improvements. The eight-acre site was located adjacent to the Schwartzman meat packing plant, about two miles south of town, in the 3100 block of South Second Street. The buildings at the CCC camp in Rio Grande Park were to be moved to the new site.<sup>39</sup>

A few days later Pragnell revealed that he was asking for bids to move the buildings.<sup>40</sup> The army guards who had remained at the camp were withdrawn March 23, and a caretaker was hired for the camp.<sup>41</sup> In mid-April Pragnell issued a release that he was still awaiting army inspection of the new camp site.<sup>42</sup> Throughout the spring Pragnell made periodic announcements about the uncertainty of whether any POWs would be sent.<sup>43</sup> State Extension Service officials seemed to be equally frustrated. State Extension Director A. B. Fite indicated that the War Department promised only 2,000 POWs for New Mexico, even though his office had received 6,500 requests for farm labor.<sup>44</sup>

Meanwhile, the number of POWs shipped to America dramatically

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37. *Ibid.*, March 9, 1944, p. 1.

38. *Ibid.*, March 10, 1944, p. 1.

39. *Ibid.*, March 14, 1944, p. 1.

40. *Ibid.*, March 21, 1944, p. 4.

41. *Ibid.*, March 24, 1944, p. 2.

42. *Ibid.*, April 16, 1944, p. 9.

43. *Ibid.*, March 17, 1944, p. 1; April 19, 1944, p. 9; May 11, 1944, p. 2.

44. *Ibid.*, May 26, 1944, pp. 1, 7.

increased after the Normandy Invasion on June 6, 1944. More than 100,000 POWs were shipped by November, with an additional 65,000 by May 1945. Uncertainty in Albuquerque ended on July 18 when the first group of fifteen German POWs from Camp Roswell arrived at the South Second Street camp. The first prisoners would complete construction of the camp, with the remainder arriving after repairs were completed. Although only seventy-five more prisoners were promised,<sup>45</sup> the camp eventually housed 125 German POWs.<sup>46</sup>

The rest of the prisoners arrived, but other than a mention in September by Pragnell that twenty-five more had arrived, newspapers, in contrast to frequent reports on the Italian POWs, were silent on the Germans.<sup>47</sup> Even when the German POWs appeared and began working, lists of work locations were unavailable. Later references to the location of the camp were fleeting, eluding to a "prison camp south of Albuquerque." The decreased number and vague nature of reports on the German POWs suggests that the press deliberately understated their presence. Perhaps these brief references followed a national practice; the security of the German prisoners was obviously a major concern to government officials.

From late 1944 until the fall of Berlin in April 1945, Americans were intensely aware, through the media, of the fanatic will of the German fighting forces. Since they were to blame for Americans being killed in Europe, well cared-for German POWs could become easy targets for revenge if someone losing a loved one were to decide to personalize the war. In Utah, for example, a soldier machine-gunned a group of German POWs, killing eight, simply because he hated Germans. But reports of poor conditions and treatment of Americans in German POW camps were also beginning to surface. With the final push into Germany, atrocity stories were front-page news.

Still, the experiences of German POWs in Albuquerque may have been unusual. J. C. Schwartzman says that, although both Italian and German POWs worked in his father's meat packing plant, his family, being German, had particularly cordial relations with the German prisoners in the camp just north of their plant. He remembers that POWs working in the plant were given bread, meat, and big jars of mustard for their lunch sandwiches. He worked with a crew of Germans putting up a barbed wire fence for the Schwartzman cattle; parts of the fence

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45. *Ibid.*, July 19, 1944, p. 1.

46. J. C. Schwartzman, Albuquerque, telephone conversation with author, November 30, 1987.

47. *Albuquerque Journal*, September 9, 1944, p. 6.

are still visible. The Schwartzmans even gave the German POWs a farewell party when they were to be shipped out, with beer and sausage and much singing.<sup>48</sup>

In spite of this silent treatment by the press, German POWs in Albuquerque were worked hard but reportedly were content with their situation. Conservancy District board minutes show that the U.S. Treasury was paid \$9,728.14 from November 1944 to April 1945 for POW labor.<sup>49</sup> In one of the few reports on the location of the POWs, Leon Harms, the New Mexico State Fair secretary-manager, announced in April that a crew of ten German prisoners helped repair buildings and plant shrubs at the fairgrounds. He minimized their presence, instead playing up preparations for the September State Fair.<sup>50</sup> The POWs worked there only a few weeks and were probably gone by June 30 when Harms also announced that the State Fair had been cancelled for that year.<sup>51</sup>

In May, Kirtland Field commander Colonel Frank Kurtz announced that a new POW branch camp was now located at the base and that two others had been recently established at Fort Sumner and Clovis. He emphasized that the POW workers would not come into contact with vital air field activities, instead would merely replace American enlisted personnel on peripheral jobs to free the latter for more essential work.<sup>52</sup> One observer, Bill Laskar, an aircraft mechanic on the base at that time, recalls their presence. He often saw the Germans wearing their distinctive Afrika Corps faded khaki caps, cleaning the flight line. Once when his tool box slipped from his stand as he was working on an engine, he jumped down and began picking up the scattered tools. A German from a nearby crew appeared and silently began helping him. Laskar remembers "that lasted about two seconds." To his astonishment, the guard was right behind the prisoner and criticized Bill for fraternizing.<sup>53</sup>

On other occasions, Laskar and his wife saw truckloads of POWs on Central Avenue, returning to camp at the end of the day. The POWs were invariably smiling and waving, sometimes singing, and whistling at his wife and other young women. German POWs also worked in the kitchen of the Officers' Club the entire time they were at Kirtland.

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48. Schwartzman conversation.

49. Rio Grande Conservancy, *Minutes*, Vol. 12.

50. *Albuquerque Journal*, April 3, 1945, p. 3.

51. *Ibid.*, June 30, 1945, p. 7.

52. *Ibid.*, May 25, 1945, p. 1.

53. Bill Laskar, Albuquerque, interview with author, November 22, 1987.

One of Laskar's former neighbors, a German-American, was the POWs' supervisor in the kitchen. Laskar recalls this neighbor often talked about the friendly relations he had with the POWs and about the gifts they made for him when they left.<sup>54</sup>

All through the summer of 1945 newspapers were silent about the locations of the POWs. A couple of announcements indicated, however, that POW allotments to New Mexico for the harvest season were being considered and would probably be adequate through December. Yet Pragnell announced in July that the farm labor shortage was worse in the county than at any time since the war started. All POWs in Albuquerque, the only available labor force, were contracted through September. Then Pragnell repeated his litany that women or high school students were not responding to his call for farm laborers because of low wages, adding discharged servicemen were not applying either, for the same reason.<sup>55</sup>

After the war ended in August 1945, repatriation of the POWs was a controversial issue. Although a large number of Americans, including organized labor leaders, demanded the immediate deportation of the POWs, an equal number were vociferously opposed to such actions. In fact, the American military government in Germany was not equipped to handle the return of several hundred thousand well-fed pro-Nazi Germans to their devastated homeland. Also, those benefitting from this bonanza labor force were not about to give it up easily. The shortage of farm labor was still a critical issue, and the sudden withdrawal of those already under contract threatened to cause farmers tremendous financial hardship. Ultimately, President Harry S Truman was forced to enter the fray, and on January 25, 1946, he announced a sixty-day delay in the repatriation of POWs working in critical segments of the economy—which included most of the POWs.<sup>56</sup>

The German POWs continued working in Albuquerque throughout the winter and into the spring of 1946, as if no national controversy existed concerning their presence. The Conservancy District board minutes show that the U.S. Treasury was paid \$6,810.25 from November 1945 to March 1946 for POW labor.<sup>57</sup> Then, true to form, Pragnell made the sudden announcement that the German POWs were to be removed from the camp south of Albuquerque that same day.<sup>58</sup> The POWs were

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54. *Ibid.*

55. *Albuquerque Journal*, July 25, 1945, p. 2.

56. Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War*, 236–38.

57. Rio Grande Conservancy, *Minutes*, Vol. 13.

58. *Albuquerque Journal*, March 31, 1946, p. 5.

gone as suddenly as they appeared, leaving little direct evidence of their presence in Albuquerque. More than \$23,000 was paid for their three years' work on the Conservancy ditches, but that amount is only a fraction of the total spent for POW labor in the county.

In New Mexico, the U.S. government developed a remarkably efficient and profitable POW system. Clearly, careful attention was given to POW welfare and protection by the government. Although POWs were used, they were not exploited. They were kept healthy and occupied. Perhaps they remained too long, until they became an embarrassment, yet all were returned to their native countries by July 1946. In contrast, Britain, France, and the Soviet Union kept their POWs for three years after the war. Perhaps the humane treatment they received in America was the major reason that a considerable number of former POWs returned after the war.<sup>59</sup> As a German POW who returned to Texas advised: "If there is ever another war, get on the side that America ain't, then get captured by the Americans—you'll have it made."<sup>60</sup>

The POW camps, then, brought World War II to Albuquerque. While American propaganda was proclaiming "support our fighting men," former enemy soldiers were working in the community, relieving American workers and allowing soldiers to fight. The POWs' presence affected Albuquerque residents and the city in less tangible ways as well. In a small, quiet way Albuquerque had become an integral part of the war.

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59. Spidle, "Axis Prisoners of War," 64.

60. Krammer, "German Prisoners of War in the United States," *Military Affairs* 40 (April 1976), 72.