

POWs in Martin County

When we think of POWs, what most likely comes to mind is our soldiers being held in a POW camp in some foreign country. However, Martin County was at one time the site of a POW camp which, in turn, provided a fairly colorful picture of local history during the WW II era.

A notice sent to the Fairmont newspaper on Sept. 5, 1944 stated the following: "Faced with a critical labor shortage, Fairmont Canning Company and the United States Army have brought in a group of German war prisoners to work in the Fairmont factory." Thus, the beginning of Fairmont's POW camp began to take shape, initially with approximately 50 German prisoners, guards, and equipment moved to Fairmont from the camp at Algona, Iowa. The Fairmont camp was officially known as Algona Branch Camp No. 2.

The original group arrived in 1944 and was housed in the 4-H building at the Martin County Fairgrounds. This group included approximately 50 POWs which were part of German Field Marshal Eric Rommel's Africa Korps. Some prisoners were also housed at Interlaken Park, using both the cottages and the Interlaken Inn. The Inn and cottages were surrounded by a barbed wire enclosure, and the public was warned to stay away from the compound.

Most of the prisoners of war were employed by the Fairmont Canning Company and worked in the factory and on the viners in the fields. They were permitted employment on farms in the area during what was called the "in-between" season at the canning company. A special barracks was also erected on the canning company site for the POWs, and they were allowed twelve hours away from the camp to work. They were required to return at night. Newspaper accounts of that time indicate that there were requests from Windom, Storden, Okabena, and Brewster for prisoners to work on farms. Some of the POWs also worked at the Pioneer and DeKalb seed companies. Accounts indicated that they were considered very good workers by those in the area that employed their services.

The prisoners were paid seventy cents per hour which was turned over by the canning company to the United States government, and they also received directly ten cents per hour which they could spend on items of their

choice. They had access to a camp exchange to purchase these items, such as candy or tobacco.

It was made quite clear that the POWs were used only because there was a labor shortage due to the war, and that they would not be used when American labor returned.

Further newspaper accounts indicate that the prisoners appeared quite docile, seemingly glad to be out of the war. They were initially accompanied by several guards when moved from one location to another. However, as time passed and they were assigned to individual farms for farm work, they were simply entrusted to the farmer hiring them who was in turn responsible for their return to camp.

In addition, they had their own mess hall and cooks, and it was said that their selection of food was quite good. Under no circumstances, however, were they to be allowed leave or liberty.

Strict orders accompanied the POWs from the U.S. Government regarding how they should be treated by local people. The government information indicated quite clearly that the POWs were enemies of the United States and that it would be a high crime for any civilian to converse, pass written messages, or receive gifts from them. Anyone giving aid to the enemy would be considered guilty of treason.

Although quite clearly stated that local citizens should refrain from visiting the prisoners, the June 15, 1944, *Sentinel* states, "And giddy females who have been trying to carry on a flirtation with the Nazis through the fence are also due for summary discipline." "These prisoners like it here and haven't given us any trouble," said Lt. Orff, in charge of the guards. "But the other day we had to throw two females out who crawled through the fence to get to them."

There were approximately 600 POWs housed in Fairmont between 1944 and 1945. They provided what was a rather interesting and unique bit of local history before the camp closed its doors in December of 1945.