Civilized Captivity: Camp Gruber’s Prisoner of War Camp

By Trent Riley*

On a hot evening in July 1943, a train carrying German prisoners of war slowly came to a stop in the small town of Braggs, Oklahoma. As one of these German prisoners, Kurt Trummer, emerged from the train car, he was surprised at the magnitude of the camp, which, from a distance, resembled a small town. Trummer soon realized, however, that this small city of lights was the United States military training facility at Camp Gruber, not the prisoner of war camp. As Trummer and his fellow prisoners shuffled past the military installation toward their camp, the faint sound of music in the distance grew in volume. When the camp, surrounded by barbed wire, finally came into Trummer’s sight, he was pleased to see a band of German PWs playing tunes at the camp’s gates as a welcome to the compound’s newest occupants. Trummer’s treatment during his trip from Tunisia to the prisoner of war camp at Camp Gruber foreshadowed the superb standard of living that he and fellow prisoners experienced for
the next three years. At Camp Gruber, the treatment of German PWs illustrated that in Oklahoma, civilians and military personnel were committed to upholding the 1929 Geneva Convention to a standard that seemed unfathomable in comparison to other camps in Germany, Japan, Russia, and even the United States during World War II. This study, focused on Camp Gruber, will show what life was like in the camp in an attempt to illustrate how German PWs experienced a civilized captivity that contrasted other forms of internment in the United States and abroad during the war.

The first shipment of German PWs arrived at Camp Gruber in May 1943. With a capacity of six thousand, the camp held nearly five thousand prisoners at the height of German imprisonment in Oklahoma. As a basecamp, Gruber detained both prisoners in transit to other camps throughout the United States and a permanent population that worked in the fields near the camp or in the camp itself. From 1943 to 1946 Camp Gruber became a hub of German imprisonment with occupants captured in Africa, Italy, and Normandy. As one of the largest PW camps in the United States, thousands of prisoners passed through Gruber’s barbed wire confines during World War II.2

Nearly a month after the German prisoners arrived at Camp Gruber, civilians received their first glimpse of what life was like inside the compound. In June 1943 the commanding officer in charge of the PW installation provided local journalists with a tour of the camp.3 During their visit, the journalists recognized the degree to which camp personnel upheld the Geneva Convention relative to prisoners of war. One reporter observed, “As nearly as can be determined by visiting a prisoner stockade for several hours, seeing the prisoners, their living quarters and rations, the government is living up to the letter and spirit of the Geneva convention concerning the treatment of prisoners of war.”4 The commander of the camp explained to reporters that the prisoners in the compound were not criminals, but prisoners of war, and as such the Germans would receive stern yet fair treatment.5 The camp’s policy toward the treatment of German prisoners in its early days displayed the level to which camp personnel were committed to observing the terms of the Geneva Convention.6

The prisoner of war installation at Camp Gruber held only enlisted men of the German army. For privates, the Geneva Convention dictated that they must work to provide for themselves; thus, they had no choice in working during their time at the camp. German prisoners at Camp Gruber who conducted unpaid “normal administrative duties” worked in the fields, offices, and garages of the compound where they contributed to the functionality of the camp.7 Many of the German PWs
in the camp were given jobs that required special skills in administration, electrical work, and masonry. 8 While the Geneva Convention dictated that German privates must work to provide for themselves as unpaid laborers inside the camp, the United States military recognized that they could employ PWs for work outside of the barbed wire fences, where laborers were desperately needed. 9

In spring 1943 the banks of the Arkansas River overflowed into the fields and towns near Camp Gruber. Civilians near the camp who faced damaged infrastructure and crops were in desperate need of laborers to help sort through and clean up the ruined areas of Muskogee County. Following the catastrophic flood, Governor Robert S. Kerr issued a public statement mandating that, upon request, civilians could re-

Photograph of Kurt Trummer taken during an oral history interview at Camp Gruber at Braggs, Oklahoma (H1985.083.002, Oklahoma Historical Society Oral History Collection, OHS Research Division).
ceive work details of up to ten prisoners from Camp Gruber to assist in cleaning up devastated fields and homes.\textsuperscript{10} Despite the announcement, Kerr believed that utilizing German PWs would prove to be ineffective and impractical.\textsuperscript{11} For Governor Kerr, the use of criminals in Oklahoma state prisons seemed more useful, as PW work details required civilians to compensate prisoners for their efforts.\textsuperscript{12} A month after Kerr publicly expressed his lack of confidence in the PW work program, the \textit{Daily Oklahoman} announced that, because of the superb work done by the German prisoners of Camp Gruber following the flood, utilizing PW work details could prove successful for a variety of state projects.\textsuperscript{13} By November 1943 the German prisoners of Camp Gruber had contributed to salvaging what became a record-setting spinach harvest in the eastern part of the state.\textsuperscript{14} The PWs who worked as wage laborers to help clean up Muskogee County following the flood of 1943 displayed that employing German prisoners was worthwhile.

In areas throughout the eastern part of the state, farmers could request a detail of German PWs to help during harvests or planting seasons.\textsuperscript{15} As a result, the prisoners became very popular among local farmers during the war years. Camp personnel and civilians considered the prisoners who worked as agricultural laborers outside of the
camp to be very trustworthy. It was not uncommon for civilians and camp personnel guarding work details to hand over their weapons to the PW in charge before retiring to the shade for an afternoon nap. Such occurrences reveal that civilians and guards did not feel threatened by the German prisoners. While farmers near Camp Gruber appreciated the labor of the PWs, the prisoners themselves enjoyed the compensation they received for their work.

During the camp's operation, US military personnel exposed prisoners to fair work standards that rarely characterized PW labor in the Second World War. The normal day for a PW worker in Camp Gruber consisted of rising early to have a full breakfast before receiving a daily work assignment. Once PWs received their work assignment they labored for eight hours before returning to the camp for showers and leisure time. While not compensated in official currency, prisoners could purchase commodities at their camp's canteen where food, cigarettes, and other supplies were often available. With highly-regulated working conditions and payoffs from conducted labor, the PW work program flourished at Camp Gruber.

As required by the Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, German PWs in Camp Gruber lived under the same standards of their counterparts in the US military. As a result, many German prisoners had privileges that their fellow countrymen throughout the world could only imagine. Their living quarters, barracks typical of any US military installation, contained beds with clean

W. Z. Tyler Farm in Braggs, Oklahoma (20778.AG.AR.32.1437 Edd Roberts Collection, OHS Research Division).
linens, as well as a stove in the middle of the structure for heat. As observed by a civilian journalist who toured the prisoner of war compound, “Close inspection showed the barracks are adequate and comfortable and are similar to those furnished for American Soldiers. At most beds, pictures or keepsakes lined the small shelves against the wall.” The German prisoners also improved the outside of their barracks by planting grass and constructing boardwalks. The German PWs in Camp Gruber lived under the same conditions as their American counterparts at the US military training facility nearby.

Camp personnel provided prisoners with excellent meals during their time at the camp. One prisoner recalled, “In the morning we got coffee, good coffee, milk, sugar, and ham and eggs. Oh, such a plate for a man. We got excellent breakfast, the same, dinner and at the evening, a meal well, well, and good. When we came here to America we had lost much weight, and being here four weeks we got our normal weight again.” Before their capture, many of the German PWs had lost significant weight due to the ration shortages that plagued the German military. Upon their arrival at Gruber, prisoners were shocked at the standard of living within the camp’s confines. Another prisoner recollected, “Everything we saw surprised us. There were no windows...
blacked out at night, everything was open, hundreds of cars were running, and the average American was sitting down to a meal twice what we were used to during the war, we had so much baking powder in the camp that we used it for making the baseball diamond.”23 With an abundance of food and comfortable beds to sleep in, prisoners came to enjoy their accommodations at Camp Gruber.

German prisoners were the exception when it came to the consumption of liquor in the state of Oklahoma. Many of the Germans within the compound produced their own liquor by building homemade stills. With a variety of fruits served to the PWs during meals, prisoners often collected grapefruit, apples, and raisins to add to their stills to yield a variety of alcoholic beverages.24 While civilians in Muskogee County could not enjoy a “hard” drink after a long day, prisoners at the PW installation frequently consumed a variety of alcohols from their homemade stills.25

The PWs in Camp Gruber developed various outlets of entertainment that provided their comrades with quality theatrical and musical performances. At Camp Gruber prisoners wrote, conducted, and played in their own operas. Although these productions were far from the theaters of Berlin and Vienna, prisoners managed to organize outstanding performances. Within the confines of the camp, prisoners
constructed three theaters in which they indulged in various forms of live entertainment. Some German PWs were so dedicated to producing excellent performances that they constructed stage lights and curtains to provide a quality theater experience for their fellow prisoners. A true sign of the German ingenuity at Gruber came when prisoners constructed stage lights out of light bulbs and five-pound cans, impressing many of the guards. The community also donated gowns with which German PWs adorned themselves for theatrical representations of women. Additionally, there was a camp orchestra, which consisted of German PWs, who scored operas and performed for their fellow prisoners. With many talented musicians in the camp’s orchestra, German prisoners could enjoy exquisite music in the theaters of Camp Gruber. For example, one prisoner in the camp’s orchestra once had served as the first violinist for the Vienna Symphony before the outbreak of war in Europe. With creative capabilities and talent, the prisoners who performed in plays and concerts provided entertainment that allowed their comrades to relax and escape the realities of being isolated far from home.

Prisoners also could take part in other leisure time activities that alleviated boredom during their evenings and weekends after work.
Camp personnel provided prisoners with a variety of sports equipment such as footballs, baseball gloves, and soccer balls. While the prisoners held little interest in American football, competitive soccer matches took place regularly. The camp also provided German prisoners with educational opportunities. Available courses focused on subjects like English, Latin, and stenography. In fact, so organized were the educational courses offered at the camp that many of the younger German PWs received credit toward associate degrees in art upon their return to Germany. While the barbed wire surrounding the camp reminded prisoners they were captives in a foreign land, the leisure activities inside the compound sought not only to entertain, but also to enrich the prisoners during their time in the United States.

Prisoners also had various ways in which they could communicate with their families and learn about current happenings around the world. One way most prisoners connected with the outside world was by sending letters and postcards to family members back in Germany.
The United States military allowed German prisoners in Camp Gruber to write two letters and two postcards per month. Letters from the German prisoners to their families in Germany sometimes took up to a year or longer to reach their destinations. Besides communicating with family and friends back in Germany, camp personnel supplied German PWs with newspapers. The German Herald was the first newspaper provided to the prisoners at Camp Gruber. Many of the prisoners disliked the paper because of its anti-German bias. Former PW Kurt Trummer remembered of the paper, "They were all against the Germans so it wasn't very good to read the paper. It hurts, you know, to see what they were saying about them." After the prisoners' displeased response to the German Herald, a German company leader began publishing a Camp Gruber newspaper. The Camp Gruber PW paper consisted of extracted and translated articles from American papers compiled to provide prisoners news without a biased perspective toward the Germans. Furthermore, in addition to sending letters and reading newspapers, German PWs in Camp Gruber had access to radios. While the US military did not formally allow radios, prisoners frequently collected electrical parts that they then utilized to build...
makeshift receivers so they could listen to American radio broadcasts. Although physically isolated from the world, prisoners in Camp Gruber could both listen and read about the slow collapse of Hitler's Reich.

Although confined a world away from the borders of Germany, PWs regularly spent their spare time building monuments that added a touch of German culture to the camp. During the camp's operation, prisoners constructed between forty and fifty monuments that depicted various aspects of German culture. PWs often created monuments replicating famous German landmarks like the Brandenburg Gate. One prisoner recalled a popular monument titled Das Völkerschlacht, meaning "the battle of the nations," which memorialized the fiercest battle of the Napoleonic Wars. This monument, like others throughout the camp, replicated the great statues and architecture of Berlin, Vienna, and the Rhineland. Prisoners often entered their monuments into competitions organized by the PW population in the camp. Former German PW Kurt Trummer recalled that:

I made, before my barrack with my comrades, a monument at the left side, the United States, at the right side great Germany at this time, in between a bell from the Olympic Games with the five rings, which I call 'The Youths of the World.' That is what I made with my company, and for this I got the third prize, I remember.

These competitions not only provided prisoners a channel for artistic expression, but also kept them occupied from thinking about home, resistance, or escape. Although many of the monuments deteriorated in the postwar years, a few remain at the site of the former camp today. These lonely relics display to visitors the German resourcefulness that once existed behind the barbed wire fences of Gruber. While the majority of German prisoners occupied their time with various activities like statue building, other PWs in Camp Gruber could not forget that they were prisoners despite the excellent standard of living within the camp.

Like any soldier captured by the enemy during times of war, there were many Germans who refused to become complacent as US prisoners. In July 1944, German prisoners escaped for the first time from the barbed wire fences of Camp Gruber. This group of prisoners scattered across the area near the camp where they hid in fields disguised as US military personnel before their recapture by local citizens and authorities. Few PWs who escaped from Camp Gruber made it out of Muskogee County. Many of the Germans believed it was their duty to escape from the confines of the camp. For instance, one PW was moti-
vated to escape from Camp Gruber because his father was a general in the Wehrmacht. Under Article 50 of the Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War of 1929, the punishment for an escaped prisoner of war could be limited only to disciplinary action.

Therefore, the Germans who escaped from Camp Gruber faced few consequences for their feeble attempts to flee captivity. As a result of the United States’s policy toward escaped prisoners, few PWs feared conspiring with comrades to plot escapes. One prisoner recalled he and his comrades aiding the escape of a PW by making a stuffed doll. Kurt Trummer remembered his company holding the doll, adorned in PW attire, between their ranks during the daily head count in hopes that the guards would count their comrade who had escaped earlier in the day. Unbeknownst to Trummer and his coconspirators, camp personnel had captured their comrade hours before the head count. Trummer’s company realized their plot failed when the guard counted one extra prisoner. Upon the discovery of the doll, the guards, as well as the prisoners, chuckled as they looked upon the improvised figurine. Instances like this display that, for both camp personnel and PWs alike, there was an understanding of what motivated German PWs to escape. Another former prisoner, Walter Bindle, recalled an American officer remarking to him that escapes and escape attempts did not anger camp personnel because US soldiers would do the same.
thing if put behind barbed wire. While few PWs had reason to escape from Camp Gruber, those who did faced little punishment under the civilized nature of the United States's policy toward German prisoners of war.

Civilians often recaptured Germans who escaped from Camp Gruber with little resistance. Farmers and constables regularly apprehended German prisoners hiding in the rural landscape surrounding the camp. Locals took it upon themselves to personally return prisoners to the camp. Former prisoner Heinz Koegler recalled that the civilian population “was the best police we had.” With little resistance amongst recaptured Germans, civilians rarely feared approaching German PWs outside of the prisoner of war camp.

Beyond interactions with escaped PWs, civilians connected with prisoners in a variety of ways during Camp Gruber’s operation. Besides civilians who submitted contracts for laborers and helped recapture escaped PWs, other citizens of Muskogee County came into contact with the German prisoners. Many of the locals who lived near the camp became friends with the detained PWs. Patsy Acers, a local woman who grew up near the camp, remembered her interactions with the prisoners fondly. She reminisced that during the war she and a friend rushed down to the prisoner of war installation on Saturday mornings to trade comic books and perform the jitterbug for the prisoners from outside the fences of the camp. Acers described, “The German POWs were nice to us. We subjected them to jitterbug routines for entertainment and we appreciated their applause. Those are fond memories.”

Some prisoners even found interest in the young women of Oklahoma. One PW remembered, “Some became our friends, I got a care package from a lady, I think she loved me.” Whether loved or in love, gestures like these signified the connection prisoners established with the local population across Muskogee County. These types of exchanges forged lasting friendships between the German prisoners and locals near Camp Gruber. These interactions left such a dramatic impact on the locals that in the postwar era many Oklahomans continued to correspond with the former PWs. While most of the German prisoners detained in the camp became acquainted with the local populous during the war, one German PW reconnected with old friends he had once called neighbors.

On a fall day in September 1944, a resident of Braggs passed a prisoner of war detail working on the roadside near town. The local was astonished when one of the Germans working hailed the man by his first and last name. The PW identified himself as Homer Bell, the son of Lee Bell, a former resident of Braggs. As an American World War I
veteran, Lee Bell married a German woman with whom he returned to the United States following the war. Upon his return, Lee Bell and his wife had a son and daughter they raised near the small town of Braggs. When the effects of the Great Depression began in Oklahoma Lee Bell left his family to work for the railroad. Meanwhile, Mrs. Bell learned that her parents had passed away in Germany and left her with a portion of their estate. As a single mother without any assistance, Mrs. Bell took her son Homer back to Germany where he enlisted in the German military upon reaching adulthood.

The man approached by the German stated, “He spoke good English with only a slightly foreign accent. He was about ten or eleven when I last saw him and I feel sure it was Homer Bell.” The German prisoner claiming to be a former resident of the town also approached another local. The local man shared that Bell had told him he once attended the red brick school when he lived in Braggs, not the new WPA school constructed after the Bell family had moved to Germany. Thus, for those in the town there was no doubt that one of their former neighbors now called the prisoner of war camp his home. As the story of the Bell son began to spread throughout Braggs, locals pieced together their memories of the Bell family that had left Braggs in the early thirties. This incident demonstrated to the local population that those held within the confines of Camp Gruber were not much different than the residents who lived outside the camp’s barbed wire fences. The war against Hitler’s regime had arrived in the Cookson Hills, and to the surprise of many Oklahomans the German prisoners seemed to become less foreign over time.

As it became obvious to US military officials that the war in Europe would soon end, Camp Gruber personnel implemented a new strategy to help PWs survive the grim conditions they would face upon their return home. During their tenure as prisoners of war at Camp Gruber, the PWs experienced a standard of living that their fellow countrymen throughout Europe never could have imagined. The most important step in conditioning German prisoners to survive postwar Europe was adjusting their diets. One prisoners recalled, “One year before we were discharged the food became smaller and smaller.” As the war ended the US military began to send German prisoners in Camp Gruber back to Europe. When the prisoners arrived in Europe, British and French forces coerced many to aid in war cleanup. The German prisoners’ diets in Camp Gruber enabled them to endure time as PW laborers in England and in France where their standard of living was below the American standard to which they had become accustomed. In fact, in the postwar years, some PWs once held in Camp Gruber believed
that the United States should have been a little harder on them. A number of Gruber’s PWs served time as slave laborers in England and France before their repatriation in 1947. When many of the Germans held at Camp Gruber returned home, they began to realize and appreciate the superb treatment they received in Oklahoma.

In the years after returning home to Germany, former prisoners of Camp Gruber continued to boast of the excellent treatment they received in Oklahoma. Former PWs were thankful for their time in Camp Gruber for a variety of reasons. For some prisoners, internment in Gruber provided an escape from the realities of being a German soldier. Former PW Heinrich Routhauge recalled the effect his time as a PW had on his survival of the war. As a native German raised in South Africa, Routhauge's parents sent him to trade school in Germany in the mid-1930s. When he completed trade school he began his journey back home to South Africa in September 1939. However, halfway to Africa the ship turned around because Germany had invaded Poland. Upon the return of the ship to Germany, the army conscripted Routhauge to fight for the Wehrmacht. For him, imprisonment in the United States was an escape from fighting for a cause for which he cared little. Other soldiers were thankful for their time as PWs at Camp Gruber because it allowed their parents to have a son return home after the war. Alfred Reichling from Zeiskam, Germany, was the only one of three brothers who lived to see the war end. One of his brothers had died in combat and the other brother, as of 1986, was still missing in action. Many of the Germans detained behind barbed wire in Camp Gruber were thankful for their lives as many of their fellow soldiers never saw home or their families again. The German prisoners who resided in the camp lived more secure lives during the war years compared to their fellow countrymen in Europe.

Every decade since their repatriation, former prisoners have traveled to Camp Gruber to reminisce about their time in Oklahoma. PWs who returned often expressed their gratitude for the treatment they received during their time at the camp. When asked why he cared to return to the site of his imprisonment, former PW Emil Fehrentz explained, “Like when you love a most beautiful girl, and you get away from her, you want to someday go back and see her.” These feelings expressed by Fehrentz characterized how former PWs felt about their treatment in Camp Gruber. The humanity of Camp Gruber’s German prisoner of war camp led to memories that contested the bitterness and hatred that drove other forms of internment during the war. The people of Muskogee County came to know these prisoners as human beings, not as representatives of the fanatical government for whom
they fought. As a result, Camp Gruber's PW camp served as an island of humanity in the sea of turmoil and hardship that was the Second World War.
Trent Riley is currently completing his graduate degree in public history at Oklahoma State University. Throughout his sustained career in history, Riley has worked as an archival aid, guest curator, interpreter, teaching assistant, and currently works with members at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum. Riley’s primary interest as a scholar is historical memory with a focus on how memorialization and commemoration shape our modern understanding of the past. He currently resides in Oklahoma City where he plans to continue uncovering and telling the bizarre and beautiful stories of yesteryear. He would like to thank his family JA Pryse at the Oklahoma Historical Society, Mike Beckett and Mike Gonzales at the 45th Infantry Division Museum, Oklahoma State University’s History Department faculty, and numerous others for their encouragement and assistance in making this article a reality.

1 Kurt Trummer, interview by Alice Kauble, 1986, Oklahoma Historical Society Oral History Collection, Research Division, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, OK (hereafter cited as OHS Oral History Collection). The initialism “PW” is commonly used in literature on prisoner of war camps in the United States during World War II.


3 “Beaten Africa Corps Veterans Ready to Sing at Camp Gruber,” Daily Oklahoman (Oklahoma City, OK), June 16, 1943, 1.

4 ibid.

5 ibid.

6 Agreed upon in July 1929, the Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War set precedents for the treatment of prisoners during World War II. Later replaced by the Third Geneva Convention in 1949, the Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War required that combatants offer superb care to foreign soldiers captured in battle.


8 Heinrich Routhauge, interview by Joe L. Todd, September 5, 1986, OHS Oral History Collection.

9 ibid.

10 ibid.

11 “State Prisoners to Aid Farms,” Daily Oklahoman, July 18, 1943, 1.

12 “Spinach Makes Flood Region Healthy Again,” Daily Oklahoman, November 19, 1943, 1.


14 Trummer interview OHS Oral History Collection.

15 ibid.


17 ibid.

18 ibid.

19 ibid.

20 ibid.

21 ibid.

22 Trummer interview OHS Oral History Collection.


24 ibid.

25 While laws outlawed the sale of liquor in the state of Oklahoma during the Second World War, beer was legally sold as per state law. Following the legalization of beer
sales in the 1930s, “dry” groups fought to prohibit the legalization of liquor in Oklahoma, which did not occur until April 1959 when the state legislature voted in favor of legalizing the packaged sale of liquor that included a local-option amendment designed to limit the distribution of alcohol.

28 Kloppe interview, OHS Oral History Collection.
29 Ibid.
30 Trummer interview, OHS Oral History Collection.
31 Ibid.
33 Trummer interview, OHS Oral History Collection.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., Alfred Reichling, interview by Joe L. Todd and Renata Bobo, 1986, OHS Oral History Collection; the name of the PW-produced newspaper was Die Welt Hinter Stacheldraht, which translated means The World Behind Barbed Wire.
39 Trummer interview, OHS Oral History Collection.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
45 Trummer interview, OHS Oral History Collection.
47 Trummer interview, OHS Oral History Collection.
48 Ibid.
49 Bindle interview, OHS Oral History Collection.
50 Heinz Koegler, interview by Joe L. Todd, April 30, 1985, OHS Oral History Collection.
52 Ibid.
53 Trummer interview, OHS Oral History Collection.
54 “Braggs Native Son Home As Captured Nazi,” Daily Oklahoman, September 2, 1944.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Trummer interview, OHS Oral History Collection.
60 “750,000 Nazi Soldiers Work in France Now,” Daily Oklahoman, April 3, 1946, 30.
62 Trummer interview, OHS Oral History Collection.
63 Routhauge interview, OHS Oral History Collection.
64 Ibid.
65 Reichling interview, OHS Oral History Collection.