

“They Hired Every Farmer in the Country”



Establishing the Prisoner of War Camp at Tonkawa

By William P. Corbett

“Finally at 1200 of a beautiful but windy Oklahoma day the gates were thrown open to the civilian population of the surrounding towns. The sight was a pretty one. No matter where one looked one saw the lively colors of women’s spring dresses blending with the spring green of newly planted shrubbery—a color combination completely foreign to the olive drab of the Army.” Written by a young army officer obviously distracted by the participants, this description of the open house for a military

TONKAWA POW CAMP

installation may seem somewhat inappropriate. On April 4, 1943, between noon and 5:30 P.M., more than 8,000 civilians toured the facilities at Camp Tonkawa, a prisoner of war camp located near the town of Tonkawa in north central Oklahoma. Within five months 3,000 German prisoners of war and several hundred military personnel would occupy and use the structures examined by curious civilians that April afternoon.¹

During World War II, federal officials authorized construction of dozens of prisoner of war camps. The one at Tonkawa was part of a planned response to the accumulation of large numbers of Axis prisoners. Although perhaps not unique, the circumstances dealing with the location, construction, and early operation of Camp Tonkawa offer insight into the administration of a program new to the army and the reaction by residents of the city of Tonkawa to the facility.

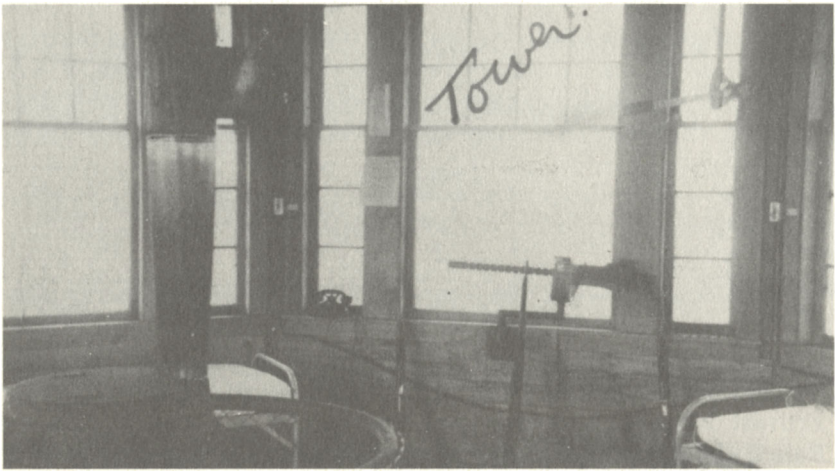
As early as 1937 military officials had examined the problems and responsibilities of handling prisoners of war and enemy alien civilians. The United States Department of War established guidelines for treatment of prisoners of war based directly on the Geneva Convention of 1929. Additionally, plans created on paper a Provost Marshal General Department and a Corps of Military Police with responsibility for enemy aliens and prisoners of war. In 1941 developments necessitated activating the enemy alien/prisoner of war program. Crews of ships interned in the United States and concern by federal authorities that more than 18,000 enemy alien civilians would have to be detained in the event of war prompted President Franklin D. Roosevelt to appoint Major General Allen W. Gullion Provost Marshal General. As part of the organization of this new department, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson established the Corps of Military Police in September.²

Operation of camps for enemy aliens and prisoners of war became a significant responsibility of the Provost Marshal General. The United States Army Corps of Engineers developed standard plans for permanent base camps that adhered scrupulously to provisions of the Geneva Convention. This precaution was taken in an attempt to insure similar treatment for Americans captured or detained during hostilities. Initially three camps were authorized, but after America entered World War II in December of 1941 the program expanded rapidly. Planners decided to locate most of the installations in southern and southwestern parts of the United States. This area encompassed the jurisdiction of the Fourth,

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

Seventh, and Eighth Service Commands, sub-divisions of the army's Service of Supply Command to which the Provost Marshal General's office was assigned in March of 1942.³

Three considerations determined the general location of the camps. First, security was the primary concern. Except for coastal areas, the South and Southwest contained sparsely populated



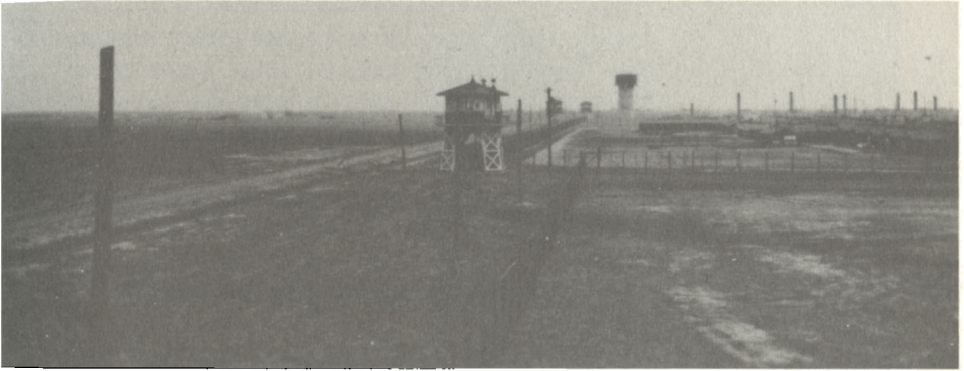
rural areas or vast expanses of land for isolating enemy captives. Second, the mild climate of the region measurably reduced construction and maintenance costs. Finally, provisions of the Geneva Convention permitted the use of prisoners as laborers. Military planners anticipated employing them as agricultural workers to augment portions of the labor force significantly reduced by the manpower requirements of war.⁴

Headquartered in Dallas, the Eighth Service Command included Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Texas. In cooperation with the Southwestern Division of the Army Corps of Engineers, a survey of sites for enemy alien civilian and prisoner of war camps began. Oklahoma easily met all three general parameters established for detention facilities and became a prime location for alien internment/prisoner of war camps. Early in 1942 the federal government leased the sub-prison at Stringtown, and subsequently contractors constructed camps at McAlester, Alva, and El Reno, while the army agreed to accommodate temporarily 700 enemy aliens at Fort Sill.⁵

TONKAWA POW CAMP

As these facilities received detainees, other places across the state came under consideration by planners in the Provost Marshal General's office for future locations of alien internment/prisoner of war camps. One site was near the rural community of Tonkawa, a town of 3,200 people in northwestern Kay County, approximately ninety miles north of Oklahoma City.

Founded in March, 1894, as a speculative real estate venture by two homesteaders, Tonkawa took its name from the Tonkawa Indians who previously possessed the land on which the townsite was established. The community grew quickly from a ramshackle collection of tents and flimsy frame buildings on the north bank of the Salt Fork of the Arkansas River to a thriving rural commercial center.⁶



Guard towers at Tonkawa Prisoner of War Camp housed spartan living conditions (opposite). Note the gun mounted on window sill. The view of Compound No. 3 (above, right) was taken from guard tower 610 in northwest corner of camp looking east. The camp's water tower is in the center, and stables are in left background (All photos courtesy Tonkawa Historical Society unless noted).

By the turn of the century farming, primarily wheat, cattle, and hogs, dominated the local economy, and Northern Oklahoma Junior College, a state institution founded in 1901, added an important element of stability to the community. In 1921 the discovery of the Three Sands oil field seven miles south of town ushered in a raucous five-year boom. During the Depression Tonkawa and its denizens suffered the rock bottom agricultural prices, foreclosures, and inadequate rainfall that afflicted most of the central plains. However, the community benefited from the largesse of the federal government. In 1939 Northern Oklahoma

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

Junior College became one of five schools in the state, and the only junior college, to participate in a civilian aviation training program in cooperation with the Civil Aeronautics Authority. The next year the National Youth Administration opened its largest facility in the state for boys at Tonkawa.⁷

The historical record provides no specific reason why federal officials selected Tonkawa for an alien internment camp. Perhaps the experience of two other communities in Oklahoma might accurately reflect how Tonkawa was chosen. In November of 1940 Forde Harrison, an employee at the Oklahoma State Penitentiary at McAlester, contacted Congressman Wilburn Cartwright. Cartwright, a Democrat, represented the Third Congressional District which encompassed the southeastern part of the state. Harrison suggested the congressman promote the Oklahoma State Sub-Prison at Stringtown in Atoka County as the site for a major military base. Acquired in the early 1930s, the sub-prison encompassed 8,000 acres and included several recently constructed buildings. Cartwright immediately contacted Robert P. Patterson, an assistant secretary of war, but his reply offered no specific commitment.⁸

Early in 1941 efforts to promote the Stringtown site intensified. Gould Bryan, manager of the McAlester Chamber of Commerce, contacted army officials, and local merchants encouraged Cartwright to press the issue. Ferman Phillips, the state senator from Atoka County, urged him to "take care of our interests in Washington on this matter . . . if you don't, it won't be done." Cartwright approached Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall, and the Oklahoma congressional delegation submitted a petition to Secretary of War Stimson supporting a project at Stringtown. In March Governor Leon C. Phillips officially offered the location to federal authorities. These efforts resulted in an inspection of the site by army officers, but no commitment for use of the sub-prison was obtained.⁹

After the United States declared war on the Axis Powers, developments turned quickly. Businessmen from McAlester, Atoka, and Coalgate pressed Cartwright to secure some sort of war-related installation. He responded by contacting officials of the Army Air Corps and proposed the construction of an air base. In the meantime, representatives of the Oklahoma State Board of Affairs began negotiating with federal officials a lease for the sub-prison as an alien internment camp. This development

surprised Cartwright; he never suggested that use for the site. The congressman later discovered that the district office of the Corps of Engineers had recommended the sub-prison as a detention center. By April, 1942, negotiations were completed and army officers arrived at Stringtown to take charge of the facility.¹⁰

In northwestern Oklahoma somewhat similar events transpired to bring a prisoner of war camp to Alva. In January of 1942 officials of the Alva Chamber of Commerce contacted United States Senator J.W. Elmer Thomas, a Democrat and Oklahoma's senior member of the senate. Prompted by an announcement from the secretary of the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce that cities seeking war-related facilities must act quickly, Alva's business leaders

requested from Thomas information about obtaining a pilot training installation. Without delay the senator supplied them with the name of the agency and the person to contact. He also assured them of his support in seeking a war-related facility for Alva and encouraged them to develop a plan. Government regulations at that time required a commitment of land or money or both from local entities hoping to secure defense projects. Early in May Thomas, a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, notified members of the chamber of commerce that funds would be appropriated for an airfield at Alva.¹¹



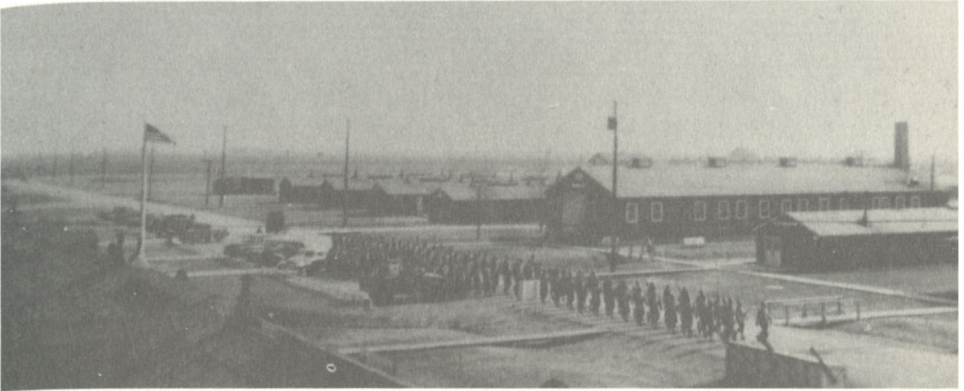
Major Roy W. Cox, quartermaster and interim commander at the Tonkawa camp on several occasions, was eventually transferred to the Pryor Prisoner of War Camp as commanding officer (Courtesy Wilma Parnell Collection).

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

At the same time, Army Corps of Engineers employees arrived in town to investigate the possibility of building an alien internment/prisoner of war camp. George L. Aycock, a state senator from Alva and apparently a personal acquaintance of Thomas, contacted the senator to determine the true status of developments. Thomas replied immediately. He informed Aycock that recent changes in the War and Navy departments' policies regarding the location of military facilities forbade contact with members of Congress, and he was unaware of plans to locate an internment/prisoner of war camp at Alva. City leaders pressed ahead with a bond election to raise funds for land for the airport, but in July rumors surfaced concerning construction of a detention camp at Alva. Senator Thomas reassured them money was available for a pilot training facility but that War Department officials were making decisions about facilities "without respect to the interests or wishes of the members of Congress." Subsequently, no airfield was built at Alva, but the Corps of Engineers constructed a prisoner of war camp that became the maximum security facility for the entire prisoner of war system. At both Stringtown and Alva military authorities made their decisions about specific types of facilities relatively free of political pressure. But local businessmen, state, and federal



Wagons and horses, part of the camp's equipment, enter prisoners' compound (right). The stockade office / tool house is in the center, central guard house left foreground, and base fire station far background.



Soldiers march on the street at Camp Tonkawa. The large building, right center, is the officers' club; smaller buildings in background are officers' quarters, and on far right is the mess hall. The flag pole is in front of the station administration building.

politicians collaborated to promote their communities as sites for war-related installations.¹²

The member of the United States House of Representatives from the Eighth District, which included Alva and Tonkawa, apparently exercised little or no influence in securing projects for those two towns. A Republican from Guymon, Ross J. Rizley defeated incumbent Democrat Phillip C. Ferguson in the election of 1940. Rizley campaigned on a "no pork barrel" platform, and after the election he remarked, "I am convinced people are against wild spending, even in their own district." However, Rizley did not indicate whether or not defense projects fell into the category of "wild spending," and he signed a petition with other members of the Oklahoma congressional delegation endorsing a federal facility for Stringtown. Perhaps his lack of seniority and experience precluded a visible role for him in securing the prisoner of war camp for Tonkawa.¹³

In April, 1942, a team of Corps of Engineers investigators arrived at Tonkawa. Local officials directed them to two adjoining parcels of approximately 820 acres one-half mile north of the city. After a cursory survey of the land, Corps of Engineers personnel found particularly suitable one 640-acre parcel comprising Section 28, Township 26 North, Range 1 West of the Indian Meridian. The soil and topography fell well within corps standards. Additionally, the general location of the site suited their needs. Two railroads

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

served the community and U.S. Highway 60, a major east-west route, passed through the town. The investigative team discussed with city officials the availability of electric, sewer, and water service. Although they regarded the electric and water rates quoted as exorbitant, they deemed the service adequate. Furthermore, sewage disposal proved an attractive feature as untreated effluent could be dumped directly into the Salt Fork of the Arkansas River. As a result of their initial findings, corps investigators forwarded a positive endorsement for an alien internment camp at Tonkawa.¹⁴

Within two months senior officers with the Corps of Engineers and the Provost Marshal General's office acted on the field report. They selected the site at Tonkawa for advanced planning and designated the wheat farm on the southwest quarter-section as the exact location of the camp. Draftsmen rendered drawings for a 3,000 man camp based on the standard plan developed by the Corps of Engineers. On July 27 W.C. Lane and John L. Murtz, civilian employees of the Tulsa office of the Corps of Engineers, arrived in Tonkawa and conferred at length with city officials about utility connections and other construction necessities.¹⁵

Additionally, federal officials initiated condemnation proceedings to obtain the entire 640 acres recommended in the field report. Different people held each quarter-section, and federal officials obtained voluntarily options to buy the land from three of the owners. However, Jennie E. McKee, a Tonkawa resident and owner of the northwest quarter, refused to sell. Government agents offered her \$9,976 for land for which she paid \$13,000 in 1935. In order to obtain title to the land quickly, Curtis P. Harris, a special United States attorney, filed a petition against all four owners collectively in federal district court in Oklahoma City to seize the property by eminent domain. Judge Bower Broadus approved the petition, and the federal government took possession of the land at the end of September, 1942. However, Judge Broadus appointed three special commissioners to re-appraise the land. The commissioners returned substantially higher appraisals than authorized by federal officials. As a result, Harris filed a petition objecting to the re-appraisal and demanded a jury trial.¹⁶

This development forced the property owners to seek legal counsel. They retained Felix G. Duvall, a lawyer from Ponca City and a personal acquaintance of some of the respondents. Moreover, Joe A. and Louise Miller, who owned the northeast quarter, Lucy Green

TONKAWA POW CAMP

Geiser, owner of the southeast quarter, and the five heirs of James I. McAninch who shared in the southwest quarter, submitted new purchase prices higher than the commissioners' appraisal. George Fuller, a tenant on McKee's land, filed a claim for compensation for improvements on that quarter. Apparently, federal attorneys wanted to avoid a prolonged jury trial. Duvall began negotiations and by February 15, 1943, reached a settlement. The McAninch heirs received \$19,835, the Millers \$16,850, Lucy Geiser \$17,430, and Jennie McKee \$13,500. Fuller obtained \$410 for his improvements. (Originally, James McAninch paid \$600 for the southwest quarter, Miller \$14,000 for his, and Mrs. Geiser inherited the land from her father.) The total of \$68,025 paid to the land owners reflected an average price of \$106 per acre, a figure slightly above market value. Although substantially more than the \$55,628 initial offer, the amount was considerably less than the \$78,000 cited in the original estimate of Corps of Engineers planners.¹⁷

While land owners and federal attorneys sparred with each other, draftsmen completed revisions of the blueprints and on September 10 federal officials formally authorized construction of the camp. On September 23 community leaders gathered at a special town council meeting at which city fathers unanimously approved a water and sewer contract. This action paved the way for building of the camp.¹⁸

The next day banner headlines on the front page of the local newspaper proclaimed the consummation of final arrangements for the camp—"Large Government Project to be Constructed Near City." The article in the *Tonkawa News* provided the first public and official acknowledgment of the project. However, only for the deaf, ignorant, or newly arrived in Tonkawa did this newspaper story contain any revelations. Since June rumors of a major project by the federal government had run rampant throughout the community and surrounding area. Speculation included a "concentration" camp and an ammunition plant. Moreover, local businessmen enthusiastically supported the project. German French, Jr., banker, mayor, and secretary of the Tonkawa Chamber of Commerce, became the program's most visible and vocal advocate. The presence of a large delegation of local businessmen at the city council meeting reflected further community support. No doubt some residents had misgivings about the project, but patriotism and participation in the war effort stirred enthusiasm. The potential economic impact of the camp also offered a second tangible

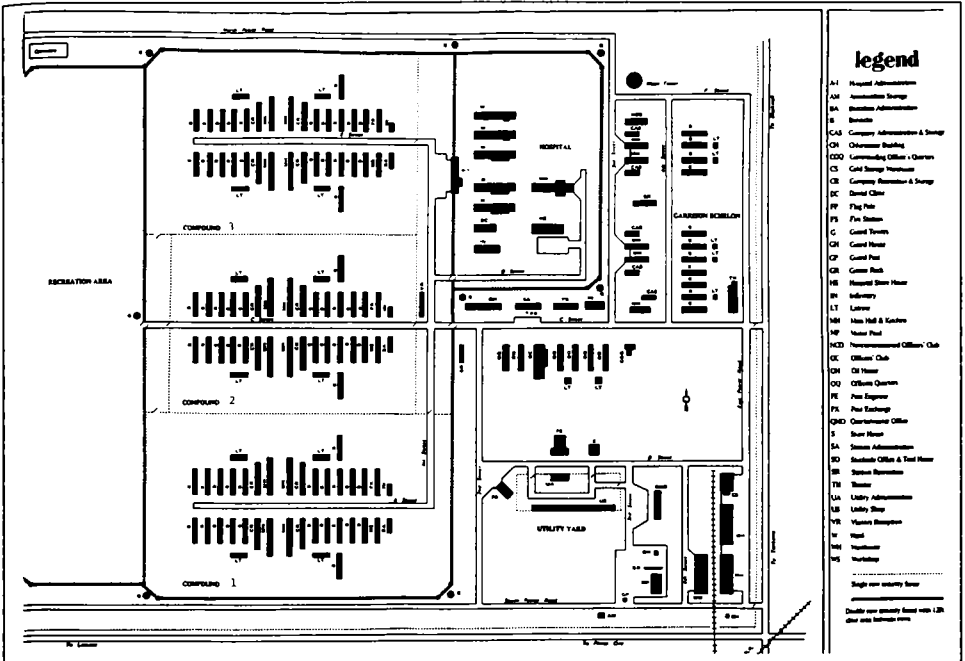
THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

reason for widespread popular approval. Federal authorities predicted construction of the camp would provide employment for at least 600 workers. Contractors would conduct business with local merchants, and, upon completion, the anticipated 500 guard troops, service personnel, and civilian employees would inject money into the local economy for the duration of the war. As one official remarked, "the camp should prove to be of material benefit as a whole" for the area.¹⁹

Faced with a December 15 completion date, officials at the Tulsa office of the Corps of Engineers moved quickly. By October 7 they awarded the two major contracts for the installation. The A.G. Sherwood Construction Company of Independence, Kansas, received the contract for grading, drainage, and road work, while the firm of Olson, Assenmacher, and Rokahr from Lincoln, Nebraska, received the \$1.5 million general construction contract. Almost immediately they sublet much of the work to Oklahoma-based firms including the Tonkawa Sand Company. The first major project was laying track for a siding to connect with a branch of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, which ran parallel to the east side of the government reservation. Built to accommodate thirty freight cars, the siding made possible direct delivery to the site of machinery, building materials, and other supplies. Enduring cold, rainy weather, laborers worked round-the-clock shifts. By mid-November a significant portion of the camp's forty-four barracks, nine-building hospital complex, ten guard towers, thirteen mess halls, administrative offices, warehouses, and numerous other structures covered the former wheat field. At the peak of activity, contractors employed 985 workers at the site.²⁰

This beehive of activity immediately affected Tonkawa and the surrounding area. Led by the energetic German French, the chamber of commerce established a housing bureau to accommodate the influx of construction workers and their families. Three weeks after work began, all available furnished apartments and many rooms in the community were rented. Local businesses enjoyed increased patronage. One, Cecil's Lunch, expanded to accommodate two dozen additional customers. To expedite construction of the camp, a branch office of the state employment service opened in Tonkawa, and the Army Corps of Engineers rented space in a downtown building. City coffers swelled modestly as well. Kay Electric, the local Rural Electrification Administration cooperative headquartered in Blackwell eight miles north of Tonkawa, received

TONKAWA POW CAMP



This map shows the general layout of the Tonkawa camp (Courtesy E.E. Vinyard Library, Northern Oklahoma College, Tonkawa, Oklahoma).

the contract to supply electricity for the camp. This decision required construction of three miles of new lines and relocation of a substation. To meet immediate demands for electricity, contractors purchased power from the City of Tonkawa, which operated its own generating plant.²¹

The project also provided temporary employment for area residents. Farmers in the vicinity grew only winter wheat. Between sowing seed in early fall and harvesting crops the following summer, they had time for other pursuits. Adept at operating equipment, many took jobs at the camp. According to J. Walter McAninch, a Tonkawa native who worked as a surveyor on the project, "They hired every farmer in the country that could saw a board or drive a nail. It really perked things up around here." The influx of workers and the flurry of activity came at little cost to the city. Incredibly, through mid-December only three police court cases arose involving project workers.²²



Post Engineer Captain Theodore S. Maffitt, was one of the first Corps of Engineers officers to be involved in the construction of Camp Tonkawa (Courtesy Wilma Parnell Collection).

Near the end of the year, the army prepared to take charge of the camp. In December Lieutenant Colonel Hans B. Eckel, a World War I veteran and cavalry officer, received orders designating him commanding officer of Camp Tonkawa. Prior to his assignment to Tonkawa, Eckel served as Provost Marshal at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, where part of his duty involved supervising Japanese internees. Four other officers preceded his arrival at Tonkawa. Captain Theodore S. Maffitt, Army Corps of Engineers, had been at the site since November, serving as liaison with contractors. Captain Roy W. Cox, First Lieutenant William E. Johnson, both of the Quartermaster Corps, and Second Lieutenant Edgar S. Keefe completed the complement. On January 18, 1943, the commanding officer of the Eighth Service Command officially activated Camp Tonkawa and on January 24 Lieutenant Colonel Eckel assumed command.²³

Immediately Eckel confronted a serious problem that significantly affected the operation of the base. A routine inspection of the water system revealed that the entire supply was contaminated. Because civilian contractors had built the compound, Eckel notified the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Inquiries by government agents revealed that inept construction practices, not sabotage, had befouled the water. The camp's water system operated from a 200,000 gallon redwood tank atop a sixty-foot high poured concrete column. L.S. Fisher Construction Company of Woodward, Oklahoma, had erected the concrete standpipe and

TONKAWA POW CAMP

assembled the tank. When filled with water, it leaked. Familiar with oil field construction practices, Fisher's crew applied a technique commonly used to seal porous oil tanks. They put manure in the tank and refilled it, anticipating the mixture would plug the leaky staves. Rectifying this problem required draining the entire system, thoroughly scrubbing the tank, and purging the plumbing with generous doses of chlorine. Not until March 13 did officials declare the water system safe for human use.²⁴

Despite the absence of potable water, staff for the post arrived on a regular basis. In February of 1943 officials began hiring civilian employees for the base. By March the military component numbered twenty-four officers and sixty-nine enlisted men. Lieutenant Colonel Eckel wasted no time designating responsibilities for all of the officers, most of them receiving multiple assignments. Many of the officers brought their wives and families with them, and they rented houses or apartments in Tonkawa and Blackwell. The water problem rendered the mess hall inoperable,

This monument was probably located in the camp's cemetery which was west of the prisoner's compound in the north-east corner of the adjoining quarter-section.



THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

forcing the commanding officer to authorize enlisted men to eat at local restaurants. Eckel carefully divided the men among three eateries, creating a boom for Cecil's Lunch, Botkin's Coffee Shop, and the Tonkawa Hotel Cafe.²⁵

In mid-March the first discipline problems appeared. Lieutenant Colonel Eckel summarily reduced in rank one enlisted man, and two others appeared before a board of officers. The board found both men "possessed the required degree of adaptability and recommended therefore that they be transferred to a rehabilitation center and subsequently to armored divisions." No specific charges appeared in the records, but just prior to the proceedings the



Looking west from guard tower 602, this view (above) shows the visitor's reception center in the foreground. The other buildings are in prisoners' Compound No. 2. In the photo opposite, the administration/storage building is in foreground with the mess hall on the right. Barracks for the garrison's enlisted men are in the background in front of the base theatre in the large building.

commanding officer issued a general order prohibiting the introduction or consumption of liquor on the base. However, these problems seemed the exception, and many enlisted men received promotions throughout the first months of the camp's operation.²⁶

The commanding officer personally took charge of insuring the efficiency of his officer corps. On February 6 he presided at the first officers' call. He told the men he expected mistakes, particularly since many of them—thirteen of twenty-four officers present—were newly commissioned second lieutenants. He warned them, however, that repeated blunders would not be

TONKAWA POW CAMP

tolerated. Eckel, reflecting his experience, emphasized the importance of good relations with the local civilian population and encouraged the officers to get acquainted in the community. To better inform his officers, he inaugurated a series of eight weekly classes dealing with army procedures.²⁷

Eckel's efforts notwithstanding, circumstances beyond his control influenced operations at the post. Sometime early in 1943 officials at the Provost Marshal General's office in Washington, D.C., redesignated Camp Tonkawa from an enemy alien civilian internment facility to a prisoner of war camp. Anticipating the



arrival of 2,500 prisoners of war with only thirty days notice, Captain Roy Cox, the post quartermaster, obtained uniforms for the detainees. Cox directed Marabelle F. Schatz, a civilian employee in his office, to requisition the appropriate apparel. Without any guidance as to quantity or size, Schatz ordered the specified wool, olive drab, army surplus clothing. When the uniforms arrived, camp employees shipped them to a firm in St. Louis, Missouri, to have them dyed blue. The finished product shocked Cox and Schatz; the dying process had shrunk the uniforms. This development prompted the captain to remark, "I feel like we're fighting pygmies," and he tacked a pair of shrunken trousers to the office bulletin board. Schatz reordered uniforms, all in larger sizes.²⁸

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

In another attempt to prepare for prisoners of war, Lieutenant Colonel Eckel battled army bureaucrats to obtain approval of a pet project. Of the 640 acres of prime agricultural land taken for the government reservation, 435 acres remained unused. Eckel regarded the situation as wasteful. After failing to lease the land, he devised a plan to make the camp as self-sufficient as possible by making prisoners of war farm the excess acreage. Essential to his scheme was obtaining horses for farm work. In April, 1943, Captain Theodore Maffitt, the post engineer, submitted to the Commanding General Eighth Service Command in Dallas blueprints for a tack house, blacksmith shop, corrals, and stables for sixty draft animals. Engineering officers in Dallas returned the plans and recommended no action. They opposed the \$7,400 project because the original plans for the camp did not provide for horses, and they regarded sixty animals as too many. Eckel resubmitted the project, arguing that the condition of the camp's dirt roads, the opportunity to cultivate prime farm land, and the need for mounted guards to supervise prisoners of war outweighed all other considerations. This time the plan received approval. But citing regulations prohibiting prisoner of war camps from having both stables and a motor pool, engineering officers insisted on converting the compound's garage to accommodate horses. Eckel appealed to his superiors, re-emphasizing the productivity of the land and the need for separate facilities for horses. On July 30, 1943, the Corps of Engineers authorized the project, and by the end of August twelve light draft animals munched hay in new stables built on the northeast quarter-section.²⁹

During February and March camp officials expected to receive detainees at any time. In that atmosphere Eckel and his staff made the necessary preparations. But no prisoners arrived. By January, 1943, federal authorities had detained less than 4,000 enemy alien civilians, and by April only 5,000 prisoners of war had arrived in the United States. There existed no immediate need for Camp Tonkawa.³⁰

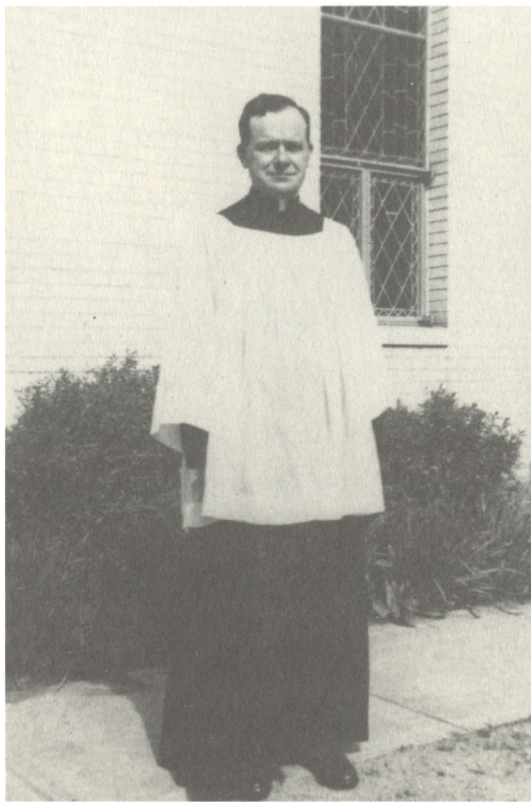
As a result of these developments, camp activity became mundane and routine. The post operated on an eight-to-five schedule, Monday through Saturday. Officers' drill at 0800 hours consisted of only one-half hour of close order marching and calisthenics. Enlisted men followed the prescribed military routine as well. Starting a post exchange, practicing fire drills, reading the camp newsletter, and opening the mess hall provided some diversions.



One of the few masonry buildings at Camp Tonkawa was this brick ammunition storage building on the north side (Courtesy Wilma Parnell Collection).

On March 5 Brigadier General L.F. Guerre, Director of Internal Security for the Eighth Service Command, visited the camp. His major criticism concerned the unkept appearance of the grounds. Instigated by the commanding officer and probably related to General Guerre's report, a camp beautification program commenced. Soldiers planted golden arbor vitae, spirea, Chinese elm trees, and hoopa donated by the City of Blackwell and by veterans organizations in Ponca City, a community of about 16,000 people fifteen miles east of Tonkawa. Construction of a prisoners' guardhouse and an enlisted men's recreation building occupied the post engineer.³¹

Aside from managing the camp, Lieutenant Colonel Eckel promoted a positive relationship with the civilian community and area residents reciprocated. Early in February of 1943 the Tonkawa Chamber of Commerce hosted a reception for all officers and their wives. Soon thereafter, the town's American Legion post invited all enlisted men to dinner and movies. Throughout the spring and summer of 1943 officers of Camp Tonkawa attended numerous community functions and served as featured speakers for civic clubs. Additionally, church leaders responded to the



The Tonkawa Prisoner of War Camp enjoyed particularly good relations with the local community, thanks in large part to the efforts of Father Stephen Leven, who served at St. Joseph's Catholic Church from 1938 to 1948 (Courtesy Catholic Archives, San Antonio, Texas).

religious needs of the soldiers. Bishop John F. O'Hara, representative of the Military Ordinate of the United States, appointed Father Stephen A. Leven, priest at the local Catholic Church, civilian Catholic chaplain for the camp. The pastor of the First Baptist Church in Tonkawa, Reverend Floyd Looney, made available tracts and testaments for the troops. In a rare display of ecumenism, Reverend Looney encouraged military personnel to attend the church of their choice. A unique cultural impact of the camp involved troops of the Jewish faith. In August soldiers joined forty civilians from Blackwell and Ponca City to hold—according to the local newspaper—the first ever Jewish Sabbath services in Tonkawa. Led by Private Phillip Feld, a rabbi from New York City, they met Friday evenings in the Methodist Church.³²

Community involvement with the camp's complement extended beyond Tonkawa. Lieutenant Robert E. Seaver, the post's public

TONKAWA POW CAMP

relations officer and a professional performer, organized a musical revue at Blackwell. In cooperation with the Blackwell Jaycees, he recruited fifty military and civilian performers. On the evening of August 2, 1943, after three weeks of rehearsals, the show opened a two night stand in sweltering 106 degree heat at the Blackwell High School auditorium. Billed as the "Blackwell Blackouts of 1943," the program included comedy skits and music including the song "Don't Make Cracks about the WACs," written by Seaver. The Jaycees donated half of the proceeds to improve recreational facilities for enlisted men at the camp.³³

Establishing a United Services Organization, or U.S.O., unit in Tonkawa became the most ambitious community project sparked by the presence of the camp's garrison. Early in March of 1943 Father Leven contacted officials of the U.S.O. who sent E. Ward Cale, the regional representative, to Tonkawa. He met with local dignitaries including Father Leven, Mayor French, Lieutenant Colonel Eckel, and Dr. Loren N. Brown, president of Northern Oklahoma Junior College. They explained to Ward the need for a U.S.O. because of limited recreational facilities in town, the increasing enrollment of cadets in the college's military pilot training program, and the anticipated arrival of several hundred troops at the camp. He apparently encouraged them to apply for funding.³⁴

Although a U.S.O. committee of community leaders was subsequently formed, Father Leven remained the driving force behind the project. He completed an application to the national organization for funding and recruited Mrs. Horace W. Threlkeld, widow of a former dean of the local college, to serve as director. Finally, the energetic, popular priest secured at no charge the basement of the Tonkawa Masonic Temple for the U.S.O. center. City councilmen supported his effort by authorizing free electricity. During the first week of July Father Leven received confirmation from the national U.S.O. of a \$500 monthly stipend. Townspeople and soldiers volunteered to refurbish the hall and on Sunday, August 8, 1943, military personnel and civilians gathered at the Masonic Hall to officially open the U.S.O.³⁵

Other developments affecting the camp and community quickly overshadowed completion of the U.S.O. During the U.S.O.'s opening ceremonies, Lieutenant Colonel Eckel introduced his successor, Major Edward I. Polsley. A World War I veteran and officer in the Texas National Guard, Polsley had returned to active duty in 1939. On August 9, 1943, he relieved Eckel, who departed for

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

Camp Walters, Texas. Six days later two companies of military police escort guards arrived by train from Fort Custer, Michigan. These officers and men overnight increased the size of the garrison to approximately 400 troops. Within days the camp commander received word of the impending arrival of prisoners of war. On August 30 a special Santa Fe train pulled onto the siding at the camp. One thousand German prisoners of war, all veterans of the Afrika Korps, warily stepped from the coaches. A new phase in the operation of Camp Tonkawa had begun.³⁶

Examining the establishment of the prisoner of war camp at Tonkawa affords several observations. First, the project became a classic case of "hurry up and wait" as eight months passed between completion of construction and the arrival of prisoners of war. Second, the local community responded positively to the post. Officials, businessmen, and other community leaders openly welcomed the soldiers to their town. They included them in important civic and social functions as well as accommodating their religious needs. Third, individual initiative spawned the cooperative spirit that existed between the civilian and military communities. Mayor French and Father Leven contributed more than any other community leaders to a smooth relationship with the camp. Lieutenant Colonel Eckel conscientiously worked to the same end. Fourth, the post produced multiple positive economic effects. Employing local residents and patronizing area businesses made noticeable contributions to the local economy. Finally, developments at Tonkawa offer insights into the internal functions of a small, locally significant military base. As a result, after eight months of preparing and waiting, Camp Tonkawa, its staff, and area residents became part of an important home front responsibility.

ENDNOTES

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TONKAWA POW CAMP

³ *Ibid.*, 73, 79–89; Arnold Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America* (New York: Stein and Day, 1979), 26–28, 36.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 27; Charles I. Bevans, comp., *Treaties and Other International Agreements of the United States of America, 1776–1949* (12 vols., Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1969), 2: 938–946; Frederick J. Doyle, “German Prisoners of War in the Southwest United States During World War II: A Oral History,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Denver), 6; Lewis and Mewha, *History*, 77, 83, 86–88.

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¹⁰ Robert J. Bell to Wilburn Cartwright, January 6, 1942, Wilburn Cartwright to Walter J. Reed, January 17, 1942, C.C. Stephens to Wilburn Cartwright, January 30, 1942, Wilburn Cartwright to Bob Bell, February 2, 1942, Carl L. Portman to Wilburn Cartwright, February 13, 1942, Wilburn Cartwright to Alma Burba, March 24, 1942, Cartwright Collection; *Atoka Indian Citizen Democrat* (Atoka, Oklahoma), February 5, 1942, April 2, 1942.

¹¹ Alva Chamber of Commerce to Elmer Thomas, January 18, 1942, Elmer Thomas to Alva Chamber of Commerce, January 20, 1942, Elmer Thomas to George Aycock, February 6, 1942, Elmer Thomas to A.L. Loyatly, May 9, 1942, Elmer Thomas Collection, Carl Albert Center Archives, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma (hereafter cited as Thomas Collection).

¹² George Aycock to Elmer Thomas, May 12, 1942, Elmer Thomas to George Aycock, May 15, 1942, W.L. Woodward to Elmer Thomas, July 1, 1942, Elmer Thomas to W.L. Woodward, July 10, 1942, J.A. Renfrew to Elmer Thomas, July 10, 1942, Elmer Thomas to J.A. Renfrew, July 14, 1942, Thomas Collection.

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

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¹⁵ *Ibid.*; Thomas M. Robinson to Provost Marshal General, June 20, 1942, B.M. Bryan to Chief of Engineers, June 30, 1942, D.P. Grosshans to Chief of Engineers, August 1, 1942, PMG, RG 389; *Blackwell Journal-Tribune* (Blackwell, Oklahoma), August 6, 1942.

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²⁰ *Ibid.*, September 23, 1942, September 24, 1942, October 5, 1942; "History of the Tonkawa Internment Camp," 1, USAC, RG 338; B.M. Bryan Memo, November 12, 1942, PMG, RG 389; Prisoner of War Camp, Tonkawa, Oklahoma, Revised Layout,

TONKAWA POW CAMP

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³⁵ *Ibid.*, May 27, 1943, June 10, 1943, July 12, 1943, July 26, 1943, August 5, 1943, August 9, 1943; City of Tonkawa Minute Book, Volume 7: 413; Interview with Jim Schatz, Chelsea, Oklahoma, September 26, 1991; Stephen A. Leven, *Go Tell It In The Streets* (Edmond, Oklahoma: Marvin Leven, 1984), 66-67.

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