

Prisoners of War in North Carolina

"Enemies and Friends"

by Dr. Robert D.
Billinger Jr.
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They were not from the Tar Heel State. They spoke foreign languages and wore different uniforms from those of the American military. They had names that sounded strange to Tar Heel ears. They were among the thousands of prisoners of war (POWs) who spent time in North Carolina during World War II. Farm kids sometimes saw foreign prisoners helping with their fathers' peanut harvests, picking cotton on a neighboring farm, or cutting pulpwood in the woods nearby. Attending a baseball game in [Charlotte](#) or sitting in a restaurant or movie theater in Monroe, North Carolinians might encounter Italian-speaking members of [Italian Service Units](#)—former POWs who had taken an oath of alliance to the new anti-German government in Italy and gotten American uniforms and day passes to see the local sights.

Each had his own interesting story. For example, Heinrich Bollmann—a POW at the camp at [Fort Bragg](#)—was rescued from the U-352 sunk by the U.S. Coast Guard off the North Carolina coast in May 1942. Giuseppe Pagliarulo—a soldier of [Benito Mussolini's](#) army captured in Tunisia, Africa, in May 1943—later trained as a member of an Italian Service Unit at [Camp Sutton](#) in Monroe. Matthias Buschheuer—a POW at Camp Sutton—was a veteran of [Erwin Rommel's Afrika Korps](#), also captured in Tunisia, Africa, in May 1943. Fritz Teichmann was a member of the [German Luftwaffe \(air corps\)](#), captured in Sicily, Italy, in July 1943, and held as a POW at [Camp Butner](#). Max Reiter, a fellow prisoner at Camp Butner, had been a member of the Waffen-SS (the German Nazi

Party's own armed military unit) and was wounded and captured in Normandy, France, in June 1944.

They all came to North Carolina as enemies of the United States, but many later left as long-term friends of Americans and one another. Because of the relative secrecy of the army's POW program, few people—other than the guards who ran the camps and the civilian employers who “leased” the services of POWs from the military—even knew about the POWs in the Tar Heel State. Today many people still are not aware that there were thousands of war prisoners held here.

Some of the first prisoners to arrive in the United States were Italians. By the end of 1943, nearly 50,000 Italian POWs were held in 27 camps in 23 states, including North Carolina. Camp Butner was one of the major barbed-wire-encircled camps, with about 3,000 Italian POWs. After the collapse of Mussolini's regime in September 1943, the new Italian government had allied itself with the United States. The next March, the American army created Italian Service Units (ISUs) of approximately 30,000 Italian POWs who were willing to take an oath of allegiance to the new Italian government and serve as noncombatant auxiliaries to American forces. About 3,500 of these ISU men came to Camp Sutton in Monroe in spring 1944 for special training at the army engineer facility. Other than **Pine Camp** in New York State, Camp Sutton held the largest number of ISU men at that time. While at Camp Sutton, the men received American training and uniforms. They were allowed to leave the base, and one can imagine how their presence aroused local people's interest.

The Italian Service Units in the Monroe area attracted positive attention from the press and the public in ways that the German POW presence throughout the state did not. The Germans, as POWs, were not allowed outside American military camps unless closely supervised on work details approved by the military.

Locations of German POW Camps in North Carolina During World War II

1. Fort Bragg (Fayetteville)
2. Camp Butner (Butner)
3. Camp Mackall (Hoffman)
4. Camp Davis (Holly Ridge)
5. Camp Sutton (Monroe)
6. Wilmington
7. Williamston
8. New Bern
9. Scotland Neck
10. Seymour Johnson Field (Goldsboro)
11. Ahoskie
12. Winston-Salem
13. Hendersonville
14. Moore General Hospital (Swannanoa)
15. Whiteville
16. Greensboro
17. Edenton
18. Roanoke Rapids

WORLD WAR II PRISONER OF WAR CAMP WILLIAMSTON, NC

WORLD WAR II PRISONER OF WAR CAMP

Although at first there were doubts in the minds of some people, many farmers and other employers became quite pleased to have the help of the German prisoners of war located in Williamston during World War II 1942-45.

In 1974, Betty Bryant did research for an English project while she was in W.H.S. The

following information was taken from her paper.

"The prison camp was first established in Windsor. It was moved to Williamston through the efforts of Mr. C.G. Crockett, manager of the fertilizer plant. Because of a shortage of labor in his plant, Mr. Crockett promised to provide a site for the camp if it were moved here.

Since Williamston needed more labor and because it was more centrally located in the area where the prisoners worked, officials agreed to the proposal. The site of the camp, now intersected by the by-pass, was on the river by the fertilizer plant. The property was used free of charge on the condition that the land would be left as it was found. The camp was here for about 3 years, from approximately 1942-1945. When the prisoners were released, the fertilizer plant bought the remaining structures.

"The POW Camp in Williamston was a branch of a larger one near Durham at Camp Butner. Personnel and prisoners were usually transferred here from this home base. All workers in the camp were military. There were no civilians. The Williamston branch's Commanding Officer was Capt. Vincent A. Vehar, C.M.P. The Executive Officer was Lt. Joseph B. Borel, J.N.F."

"Living quarters for the prisoners as well as the guards, were tent structures composed of a raised wooden floor, 20' by 20', sides boarded to shoulder-level, and a tent top. Each living unit housed 6 men. All other structures in the camp were also tents, except for the recreational building (now occupied by Tom Crockett Irrigation, Inc.) and the small chapel standing just outside the compound."

"Prisoners from Camp Butner were screened before being transferred here. This was an attempt to provide good workers for the area. Trouble makers and poor workers remained at Butner. The number of prisoners in the camp varied. The greatest number interned at one time was 582.

"Italian prisoners proved unsatisfactory as workers and did not get along with the German prisoners. In May 1944, the Italians were returned to Camp Butner. The Germans cleaned up the camp and soon proved to be good workers. They had been captured in North Africa and were members of an elite branch of the military, the Africa Corps. These men made the labor project successful and also gained the public's respect.

"Farmers were more than satisfied with the results of German POW labor. They willingly provided transportation and followed rules governing use of prison labor.

"A detail of 12 German prisoners worked at (David) Roberson's Slaughterhouse for about a year. Between 80-120 prisoners worked in the Standard Fertilizer Co. plant. These were the first prisoners of war to be used as labor in an American industrial operation.

"The German prisoners were recognized as very talented people (artists, carpenters, engineers). Perhaps the most publicized piece of work was a life-size nativity scene. It was set up each year at the edge of the camp to be enjoyed by the public as well as the prisoners. When the prisoners were released, they left the nativity scene with the Jr. Chamber of Commerce as a gift to the town. This beautiful work of art was enjoyed for many years and was a reminder of the talent and thoughtfulness of the prisoners even after their release. Unfortunately the nativity scene was destroyed when the old city hall burned.

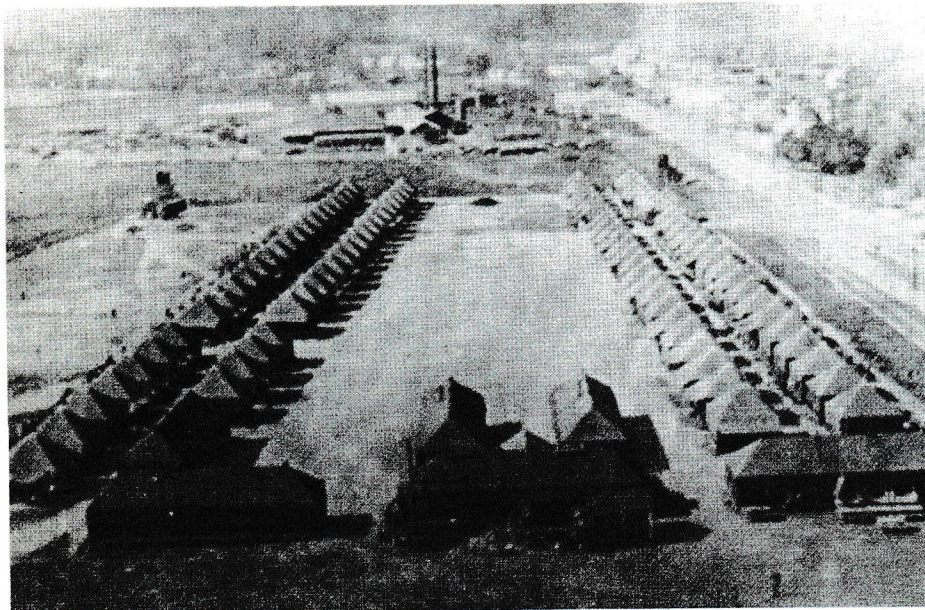
"And so the POW Camp was a success in Martin County. The labor need was met and people of nations at war worked together and even developed friendships. The war brought many problems; yet people from opposing sides managed to work together and solve the labor problem in the county."

— Iris N. Cooke

BY

IRIS N. COOKE
Williamston,
North Carolina

Article taken from
MARTIN COUNTY
HERITAGE BOOK



Prisoner of War Camp near Williamston in World War II

O Little Town of Williamston: A message of peace

By LELA CHESSEON
Correspondent

"She was born two weeks before the bombing," my father often said when someone asked my age. But the bombing of Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, never scarred my childhood years, for I was warmly enveloped in the love and laughter of our little home on Marshall Avenue in the little town of Williamston.

I was aware there was a war, of course. I knew there was a "bad man" across the ocean and that his name was Hitler. I knew some "mean Germans" had killed an American soldier whose grieving mother lived two blocks away.

I remember how my brother Herbert, eight years older, spent his backyard hours pouring melted lead into molds to make his person-

al army of silvery hard soldiers. Regretfully, I remember, too, how Jeanne and I, more than once, terrorized our dear younger friend, Mary Emma, by running and shouting "The Germans are coming" whenever a loud plane flew over the vacant field of four-leaf clovers where we played.

My most meaningful memory from those war years, however, will forever be the life-sized nativity scene erected each December beside the Presbyterian Church on Main Street. Daddy drove me to that grassy knoll many evenings. It was my favorite place to be during the Christmas season, and he always delighted in making me happy. I can still feel his hand in mine, guiding me right up to the thick rope where I could stand as close as

possible to the "soft lamb" in the big stable. I didn't know that little white lamb was a cut-out of hard wood, its cottony paint a bold contrast to the tranquil blue hues of the other larger figures.

Years later, when I was a teen, the "manger scene" was destroyed by fire. My daddy, Julian, was one of the volunteer firemen who fought our local flames. If he was home when the sirens sounded, Mrs. Peele, our good neighbor across the street, would stand on her porch to witness his dramatic exits from our driveway. I always watched, too, as he fiercely gunned our green Ford "Lizard" into reverse, and then scooted down the street. Immediately, I would run to climb the old, large sycamore tree on Leggett's Lane. If I climbed high enough, I

could spot any area of smoke. One day, for many hours, I saw billows of gray spiral high from the clock tower of City Hall on Main Street. All of us were deeply distressed when our beautiful public landmark burned. Sadly, the nativity figures, stored there during the non-December months, were demolished.

City Hall was also where our fire department was housed. "She's from Williamston," my college roommates would later say whenever they introduced me. "She's from Williamston – the town where the fire department burned down."

It was many years later, while reading an article by Martin County historian Elizabeth Roberson, that I learned what I didn't know about that manger scene and my World War II childhood years. I

didn't know that in 1944 German prisoners of war were placed in a Williamston camp to work for the farmers of Martin County.

I didn't know those German soldiers painted that beloved nativity scene. I didn't know they presented their beautiful work of art to our town in appreciation of the kind treatment they received from the people of our county.

Now I know why that wondrous gift was given. Now I understand how that Main Street message of love and peace from those German prisoners of war profoundly touched the life of a little girl "born two weeks before the bombing."

Lela Chesson, co-author of "A Pictorial History of Rocky Mount," can be reached at lchesson@aol.com.

POW'S MADE GIFT OF APPRECIATION

for residents of Williamston, North Carolina

"Nativity Scene"

This nativity scene, painted by the German POW's, was given to the people of Williamston in gratitude for the kind treatment given them at the Williamston camp. (16 figures required a 32 foot long stable)

THE STATE Magazine, August 1984



This nativity scene, painted by the German POW'S, was given to the people of Williamston in gratitude for the kind treatment given them at the Williamston camp.

THE STATE, AUGUST 1984

WWII PRISONER OF WAR CAMP

WILLIAMSTON, NORTH CAROLINA



View of the barracks at the World War II prisoner of war camp in Williamston, N.C. Photograph possibly taken by Eugene Rice.
Date approximated. **Date:** 1943 - 1945

WWII PRISONER OF WAR CAMP

WILLIAMSTON, NORTH CAROLINA



View of barracks and water tower at the World War II p Date: 1943 -
1945risoner of war camp in Williamston, N.C. Photograph possibly
taken by Eugene Rice. Date approximated. Date: 1943 - 1945

WWII PRISONER OF WAR CAMP

WILLIAMSTON, NORTH CAROLINA



Close-up shot of the yard in front of the barracks at the World War II prisoner of war camp in Williamston, N.C. Photograph possibly taken by Eugene Rice. Date approximated. **Date:** 1943 - 1945

WWII PRISONER OF WAR CAMP

WILLIAMSTON, NORTH CAROLINA



Solicitor (Tugboat), thought to be at the World War II prisoner of war camp in Williamston, N.C. Photograph possibly taken by Eugene Rice. Date approximated. **Date:** 1943 - 1945

WWII PRISONER OF WAR CAMP

WILLIAMSTON, NORTH CAROLINA



View of buildings and cars at the World War II prisoner of war camp in Williamston, N.C. Photograph possibly taken by Eugene Rice. Date approximated. **Date:** 1943 - 1945











