



CONSULTANT: Walter Schmid /Hans Rudolph Poethig

DATE OF BIRTH: March 19, 1922 / July 16, 1918 GENDER: Male

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: September 9, 1999, and September 16, 1999

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum

INTERVIEWER: Jane O'Cain

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMF&RHM X OTHER _____

TRANSCRIBED: Yes: May 16, 2000

NUMBER OF TAPES: Four

ABTRACTOR: O'Cain

DATE ABSTRATED: November 8, 2000

QUALITY OF RECORDING (SPECIFY): Good. Mr. Schmid is difficult to understand at times.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Former German prisoners of war who were detained in New Mexico during World War II. Schmid was held at Camp Las Cruces and worked primarily picking cotton. Poethig was held at the Orchard Park prisoner of war camp near Roswell, New Mexico. As a non-commissioned officer, Poethig volunteered as a detail leader of POWs working as agricultural laborers.

DATE RANGE: 1943 - 1946

ABSTRACT (IMPORTANT TOPICS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):

TAPE ONE, SIDE A:

Schmid resides in Sachsenheim, Germany. Poethig lives in Roswell, New Mexico, having immigrated to the United States in 1954. Before entering the armed service in Germany, Poethig was trained as a customer service representative. Schmid was a machinist and worked in a factory that manufactured electric motors.

Both Schmid and Poethig served in the Afrika Corps and became prisoners of war [hereafter POWs] in 1943 when the German army surrendered to the Allied forces in Tunisia. They describe their surrender and transport to the United States. In the U.S. Mr. Poethig was first held in Mexia, Texas. There, because he had learned English in school, he served as an interpreter for the hospital service. Some of his fellow POWs accused him of being a traitor because of his relationship with an American sergeant. For his own protection, Poethig was transferred to Camp Swift, also in Texas. While at Camp Swift, Poethig earned the disfavor of some “fanatic Germans” (POWs) when he interceded with the camp administration over a celebration of Hitler’s birthday. Again, for his protection he was transferred, this time to Orchard Park near Roswell.

Mr. Schmid arrived in New York and was transported by train to Camp Gruber in Oklahoma. While at Camp Gruber he worked as an agricultural laborer, and then after about a year he was transferred, along with approximately four hundred German POWs, to Camp Las Cruces. He states that when he arrived at Camp Las Cruces there was no barbed wire enclosing the barracks. However, after a few days a barbed wire fence and towers were built.

Camp Las Cruces was a satellite camp of Fort Bliss in El Paso, Texas. Camp Orchard was a large camp, built to house four thousand POWs. It was also a processing camp where “most of New Mexico POWs . . . were processed and the personalities were, uh, established . . . [and] their condition.”

The climate and landscape of New Mexico were not as difficult to adjust to as they might have been because both consultants had been serving in the North African desert.

TAPE ONE, SIDE B:

At Camp Orchard the POWs manufactured window fans from small electric motors (stolen from the motor pool) and fan blades cut from tin cans. Poethig relates that the POWs also made schnapps “under the barracks” from the fruit they didn’t eat. Eventually a guard became suspicious of the activity at the barracks, and their liquor was confiscated. As a punishment their library privileges were revoked. The Catholic church sponsored the library at Camp Orchard, and also arranged for the POWs to obtain musical instruments that the POWs purchased with money earned from the sale of handcrafted cuckoo clocks, chessboards, and other souvenirs.

The POW camps were guarded by American Army personnel that, according to Walter Schmid, “were not the best soldiers . . . soldiers second class.” Captain Williams was the Las Cruces Camp administrator. Schmid states that Captain Williams “was only interested in our work . . .”

One day when the POWs did not achieve their quota while picking cotton, Captain Williams “put us in jail . . . nothing to eat, nothing to drink” for “four or five days.” Schmid states that he rarely saw the farmers for whom he worked.

Mr. Poethig states that at Camp Orchard a POW “had generally nothing to worry about as long as we didn’t provoke the Americans. If we provoked them, then we had trouble . . . We hated our own people [POWs] who thought they wanted to win the war from behind barbed wire . . .” Poethig volunteered to be a detail leader; thirty to sixty POWs per detail was “normal.” Some of the farmers in the area “also had to hire the Mexicans and the black people.” The POWs at Camp Orchard were expected to pick 150 pounds of cotton a day. [At Camp Las Cruces the quota was eventually set at 210 pounds per day.] Neither Schmid nor Poethig had previous experience in farm work. Poethig describes how the POWs were designated as farm workers. There was some training done with the POWs; Schmid states that the guards showed them how to pick and chop cotton. On one occasion a farmer accused the POWs from Camp Las Cruces of “sabotage” because they were hoeing so slowly. However, Schmid states they were merely hoeing the way they would have done in Germany (turning the earth all around the plants rather than “chopping” the weeds).

Poethig relates an episode that occurred in Texas with a farmer who had just received notification that his son had been killed in Africa. “It took three guards to keep him from using his rifle” on the POWs. However, once he was told that his son would not be left lying on the battlefield, but would be buried, he apologized for his behavior and then later brought the POWs milk to drink.

Poethig stated that the farmers “were under the impression—many of them—that Hitler was right in many things . . . And I said, ‘No, he was never right in anything . . . He promised me I would, uh, march through the United States of America. I do! I march, but I have to drag a cotton sack behind me.’”

Poethig states that the non-commissioned officers “run the camps”; however, Schmid disagreed with that in the case of Camp Las Cruces, stating that they had only the guards in charge of the camp, but later stated they had a German camp leader and an interpreter.

For Schmid it was a “little bit [of] freedom” to be able to speak with some of the young farm workers with whom he was working. He states that while in the camp he took English-language classes from a fellow POW. He learned and spoke a little Spanish with the Mexican Americans with whom he worked.

TAPE TWO, SIDE A:

Poethig states that due to their status as prisoners the Mexican Americans and African Americans, who were also “suppressed,” felt some “attraction” to them. Sometimes the Mexican American workers would offer them food, and the African American workers would help them meet their cotton-picking quota. Poethig stated that the POWs did not “worry” about the guards who were convalescing. Both Schmid and Poethig agreed that guards who came straight from boot camp were “dangerous” (Schmid) and “made life difficult for us” (Poethig).

Poethig had contact with at least one farm family when he took some paperwork to the house. Schmid did not have any contact with the farmers or the farm families.

Schmid describes the work that he did year around on the farms; Stahmann Farms was most often where he worked. Cotton harvesting could continue until February when they picked the last

partially-opened bolls. Then they cleaned irrigation ditches, followed by clearing the cotton fields, and then harvesting cantaloupes in May. Sometimes they worked at the Nakayama farm earlier in the spring harvesting lettuce. Schmid states that he was paid eighty cents a day. The POWs were anxious to work to earn money.

With the money the POWs earned they could purchase chocolate, soda pop, Indian and Mexican souvenirs, hats, and shirts and pants. They were given scrip to make their purchases at the commissary, but they were also allowed to save money.

When the war in Europe ended, the rules of the Geneva Convention no longer applied to the treatment of the POWs. Schmid stated, "This was very bad, neh," and Poethig said, "This was a big big trouble." At Camp Las Cruces the POWs' quota for pounds of cotton picked was raised to 210 pounds per individual. Schmid relates that one POW wrote a letter of complaint to the Red Cross in Switzerland about the treatment of the POWs; that they were "punished very hard always." Later this man was ordered to the captain's office, and "they hear outside [the office] crying . . ." They never heard from or saw the POW again. Schmid then describes another episode when a man was punished by being locked in a small enclosure outside in the sun for four days. He was not given anything to eat, and his skin was badly blistered. This POW was also taken away in a car and was not heard from again.

Poethig states that at the end of the war when their status changed to Disarmed Enemy Forces, "they could do whatever they wanted . . . Eleanor Roosevelt set us on eight hundred calories [per day] . . ." The farmers objected to the POWs working when they weren't being fed enough. One farmer decided to feed the POWs; it was "mostly milk and watermelons and, uh, cantaloupes . . ." The POWs also made arrangements with the kitchen detail at the airbase in Roswell to get their leftover food, which they took in trash cans back to their own kitchen.

Schmid states that at Camp Las Cruces, at the end of the war the POWs were given nothing to eat for four or five days. The canteen was closed. They did have access to water, and they had some food they had bought in the canteen previous to its closure. When Schmid went to work at Stahmann farms, one of his coworkers, Junior Barela, brought him a tortilla for lunch, as he had no lunch to eat.

Poethig and Schmid describe the typical diet at the camps before the end of the war in Europe. Both state that they had enough to eat. In both Texas and New Mexico the POWs were allowed "two beer coupons" to purchase beer.

TAPE TWO, SIDE B:

Schmid and Poethig discuss mail delivery to the camps. Schmid then states that Red Cross officials visited Camp Las Cruces on two occasions. The POWs were disappointed because they were not allowed to speak to these officials. Poethig relates that the letters they wrote were censored by both American military personnel and German officials.

They discussed again the type of work the POWs performed. Schmid worked on a ranch for a few days, but only repairing buildings and fences. Schmid described working with Mexican national works, most often entire families would come and camp out and pick cotton. Mr. Poethig states that if the POWs were fixing fences, they were sometimes guarded by men on horseback.

It was difficult for the POWs to mount a successful escape attempt because they could not “live off the land here.” According to Schmid, two men made escape attempts from Camp Las Cruces; however, they were recaptured at the United States-Mexican border. The recaptured POWs were made to run ahead of the jeep on their return to the POW camp. These two POWs were taken away from Camp Las Cruces and “nobody knows what became of them.” The other POWs in the camp were not punished because of the escape attempt. Poethig states that a POW in Artesia was killed by a farmer because he was attempting to steal a pickup.

NOTE: TAPE THREE IS A DUPLICATE OF A VIDEO INTERVIEW

TAPE THREE, SIDE A:

Schmid describes the German SS tattoo on his arm and talks about how the German prisoners would raise their arms a certain way to the American guards to show that they did not have a tattoo.

Schmid travels with Pat Beckett to the site of the old POW camp administrative office. Schmid travels to Stahmann Farms to tour with Sally Stahmann. Schmid and Poethig travel to the Nakayama Farm.

The cruelty of certain camp commanders, Japanese persecution, and the Trinity Site bomb are discussed.

TAPE THREE, SIDE B: Blank

TAPE FOUR, SIDE A:

The interview on September 16, 1999, is conducted with Walter Schmid only.

Schmid is unsure how the four hundred POWs were selected from Camp Gruber in Oklahoma to be transferred to Camp Las Cruces. He believes they were selected randomly.

In Camp Gruber, Oklahoma, there was more political unrest among the POWs because there were a larger number of POWs (three thousand) at Camp Gruber, and because at Camp Las Cruces there was a strong emphasis placed on work. Another reason was that by the time the POWs arrived in Las Cruces they were no longer “so sure to win the war.” In “1944 we saw we [Germany] cannot win the war . . . Because we saw [on their transport to Las Cruces] how much munition, tank, and airplanes you have in America, neh, and we were poor.”

In Oklahoma the POWs had resisted working on the farms, “German soldiers don’t pick beans . . .” The POWs called a strike, Schmid says, “maybe that was also a reason why I came here to Las Cruces, neh.” He states, “We were afraid of our own men.” Some of the POWs threatened that if any POW cooperated with the “Americans,” they would inform on the cooperators when they returned to Germany. The consultant says, “We were quiet and still, neh?” In Camp Gruber a German POW was killed by other POWs because they thought he was a communist.

It was clarified with Schmid that there was a separate area at Camp Las Cruces where POWs were kept when they were being punished. He stated that this building was “outside the fence” surrounding the camp. He describes one episode of punishment when his detail was kept in “jail” for failure to meet their cotton-picking quota. That punishment ended when their captain went

and inspected the cotton field which the POWs felt was too poor to allow them to meet the quotas.

He again describes the imprisonment of a POW who was kept in the sun and heat for approximately five days. Red Cross officials, to the best of his knowledge, did not visit the camp after the war ended.

After March 22, 1945, Camp Las Cruces was declared a “Nazi” camp. This designation was made because none of the POWs responded to the captain’s request for a letter stating that the German POW was not a Nazi. Schmid states that they didn’t write the letter because “Nazi” was not a term used in Germany. They were “German soldiers in prison.”

Schmid took an English language course while in Camp Las Cruces. He was examined for fluency and presented a certificate; however, the certificate was not recognized after the war in Germany. The POWs received instruction in American democracy and government. Walter Schmid kept the textbook he was given; it was written in English and German. [This book was donated to the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum.]

The POWs watched films made in America. The films were shown outdoors, five shown each week, three one evening and two another. They also watched the newsreels; however, they were not sure whether they were censored. He did not have access to a German-language newspaper, and did not make an effort to get a local newspaper because of the level of propaganda. At the end of the war the POWs were required to watch newsreels filmed at the concentration camps in Germany and Eastern Europe as the camps were being liberated. He states, “This was terrible! We didn’t know . . . that the Germans, that such things happened, neh?”

TAPE FOUR, SIDE B:

Depending on how much cotton the POWs picked they could earn more money than the normal rate of pay (\$.80 per day). The POWs were allowed to keep the additional monies they earned. In addition, while the war was being waged the POWs received \$3.00 per month from the German government. The first year Schmid was imprisoned he received a “*tannenzweig*,” a twig from a pine tree, from the “Führer.”

When he was being released from the camp, Schmid spent the scrip he had in the canteen and purchased, among other things, coffee, sugar and those items that might be needed in Germany. Unfortunately, the items he purchased were all confiscated when he went through customs on his way to Europe.

For work clothes all of the workers (Mexican Americans, farmers, and POWs) wore denim dungarees and work shirts. The POWs had to have “PW” marked on their clothes.

Schmid describes an incident that occurred in Oklahoma where the POWs planted onions upside down. They did so because, “we are not afraid of you . . . wait until we have, uh, won the war . . . But here in Las Cruces we are afraid of Americans, no?”

On some occasions the POWs realized they could not meet their 210 pound quota of cotton, so they put sand in their sacks. On one occasion, however, Mr. Stahmann noticed the sand on the cotton trailer; Schmid states that they hadn’t realized until this point that sand would damage the cotton gin.

Schmid discusses the noon lunch the POWs received. The guards ate separately. When they harvested cantaloupes the POWs could eat as many cantaloupes as they wanted in the field. They were “forbidden” to bring cantaloupes back to the other POWs in the camp; however, they found ways—in the water container or the sleeves of their raincoat—to smuggle the cantaloupe into the camp.

The consultant states there were two POW camps in Las Cruces; however, they “had no connection” with the second camp outside of a football match they played one day.

Schmid has the letters that he mailed to his family and girl friend in Germany while he was a POW at Camp Las Cruces. A photographer came to Camp Las Cruces and took photographs of the POWs. Walter sent photographs of himself to his family in Germany.