

Now & Then in Ripon ... Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society

Camp Ripon housed POWs who helped with harvesting

The Ripon area comes alive during the summer and fall harvest season with vegetables being sent to various processors.

During World War II, harvesting help was needed as local men were serving in the military or working in defense factories.

Because of this, German prisoners of war, then known as PWs, now known as POWs, assisted with the harvest in Wisconsin. These prisoners were held at Camp McCoy and were sent to temporary POW camps around Wisconsin during the harvest season.

Ripon's Prisoner of War Camp, known as "Camp Ripon," was located on the east-side of Douglas Street. It housed 600 prisoners of war, and 200 of these prisoners worked at local canning factories. The American Baptist Assembly (now known as the Green Lake Conference Center) housed 250 German prisoners of war at what was known as "Camp Green Lake."

Robert Tabbert (1928-2022), who grew up in Ripon, wrote about his experience harvesting peas while working alongside the Green Lake POWs prisoners in a book he wrote titled, "The Great Depression & Alaska Fly Fishing."

Tabbert recalled that he and four other Ripon High School students worked alongside the POWs in August 1943. However, Betty Cowley, author of the book "Stalag Wisconsin, Inside WWII Prisoner-of-War Camps," noted that the POWs came to Green Lake June 19, 1944.

Harvesting large acres of peas is often referred to as



THIS PICTURE OF Camp Ripon from June 15, 1945 shows the entrance to the camp, left, and the guard hut and administration building, right. The camp included electric lighting, steam boilers for cooking and hot water showers. POWs were employed at local canneries during harvest seasons.

RCP file photo

a "pea pack" and, in 1944, this was completed when the POWs traveled temporarily from Green Lake to Michigan the last week of July, returning later to harvest corn.

Considering that Tabbert was in his late 80s and early 90s when his book was being written, his memory might not have been clear about the exact dates he worked with the POWs.

Tabbert wrote that his crew was assigned the "Umbreit brothers, who owned the Purina Feed Store in Ripon."

Clarence A. Umbreit (1906-1966), a graduate of Ripon High School, owned the Umbreit Feed Mill and lived at 826 Metomen St. A 1941 receipt from Umbreit's 108 Watson St. store found in the archives at the Ripon Historical Society noted that the business sold poultry, poultry equipment, eggs, seeds and Purina Feeds.

The Umbreit store was located at 108 Watson St. from

1925 until 1962, when it moved to Umbreit's Mill on Fenton Street. His obituary reported he was Ralston Purina's oldest and largest dealer in the Midwest.

Tabbert's book noted that the Camp Green Lake POWs were captured in 1942 after Rommel's North American Africa Corps (German Afrika Korps) were defeated by the Western Allies.

In total, 134,000 German soldiers were taken prisoner from this war area. From their camp in Green Lake they were transported to the fields in school buses and Tabbert noted "they were dressed in olive-tan, desert Africa Corps uniform shorts, heavy boots, knee socks and tan shirts with rolled up sleeves."

Tabbert also added that "communication wasn't an issue. Half of the farmers in the area were of German origin and spoke some form of German language."

Both sets of Tabbert's grandparents who lived in Ripon spoke German, so Tabbert grew up understanding some basic German phrases.

Tabbert wrote about how peas were harvested in the 1940s. Peas were planted in late spring and took approximately 120 days to grow with the crop ready to cut about mid-July.

Their vines reached 12- to 18-inches high and were cut by a tractor or horse-drawn mower, which made a 4-foot swath of vines. This turned the vines into irregular rows on the field. To harvest the vines, every

third and fourth row had to be hand-picked to make a path for a truck.

"The truck then would slowly follow this path through the field, harvesting a total of six rows of peas vines ...," Tabbert wrote. "Pitching the 'doubles' on either side of the truck was hard work. Throwing the 'singles' from further away from the truck required a learned 'snap' of the pitchfork to send smaller rolls of vines sailing up onto the load."

Once the truck was loaded, it was driven to a centrally located pea viner. The vines were then off loaded into a large, perforated, rotating drum which knocked the peas out of their pods. They then dropped through the perforated sides of the drum down a chute into crates. The crates were loaded onto trucks and taken to a nearby canning factory. Empty pea vines were used as cow silage during the winter months.

For the pea harvest that summer, Tabbert's group of workers used two early 1930s-era REO flatbed trucks. The trucks owned by Umbreit's Mill were painted with a red and white checkerboard pattern similar to the current day Ralston Purina logo.

Two large canvas water bags were hung off the front bumper

of the two trucks during the harvest. At lunch time, the trucks were parked on a slight ramp leading up to the main floor of a barn's hayloft near the field being harvested.

"This was a favorite place for the crew to gather, eat lunch and take a nap," Tabbert chronicled.

One day after a morning of pitching pea vines, Tabbert laid down for a nap on the flatbed of one of the trucks at lunch with his legs dangling over the back edge of the truck bed.

"I was rudely awakened and found myself rolling on the ground with a POW," Tabbert wrote.

At first, Tabbert thought that he was being attacked, but soon learned that the clutch on the truck had slipped and it rolled down the hill towards a stone milk house. The POW had jumped up and pushed Tabbert off the truck before his legs were crushed between the truck bed and the milk house.

"I brushed myself off and shook the POW's hand, mumbled a 'Danke' (thank you in German) and we all went back to work," Tabbert wrote. "I owed a lot to that one German POW. Without his quick thinking, all my future football, basketball and track running would have probably ended."

Tabbert's book is not available on the open market, but the Ripon Historical Society has a copy of it that the public may look through and read while visiting at 508 Watson St.

Individuals who have photos or more information about Camp Ripon, or know someone who does, may email the Ripon Historical Society at riponhist-soc@gmail.com or call 920-748-5354.

The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

For more information follow us at [Facebook/riponhistory](https://www.facebook.com/riponhistory) or www.riponhistory.org.



PRISONERS OF WAR (POW) make their way toward their sleeping tents on June 29, 1945. Eight POWs slept in each tent on army cots with blankets.

RCP file photo

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