

"German POWs In Westminster"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

During the summer of 1944, Carroll's canneries found an unusual ally in harvesting the pea crop. German prisoners of war began working in nine local canneries that were shorthanded due to the war. The prisoner's arrival was noted in the local press; the Democratic Advocate ran a front-page story under the headline "German Prisoners Harvesting Pea Crop" in the June 30, 1944 issue:

"More than 200 bronzed Nazi prisoners of war this week appeared in the fields of Carroll county, where under guard, they are harvesting crops for packing in the canneries around Westminster. Their presence here has caused comment. Although small boys hovered about one packed truckload to get a close-up view of former Nazi troops, and some girls looked them over from a distance, there has been some concern on the part of some adults over the presence of the aliens. This has been admitted even by men who are responsible for bringing the captive laborers here to relieve the farm manpower shortage.

Despite stories revolving around the possibility that the Nazis might escape from their guards, that they might spoil the crops which they handle, or cast "spells" or "hex" little children or farm animals, nothing has occurred to disturb the program of using captive labor to help the production of food.

According to G. F. Fowler, chairman of the Carroll County Canner's Association committee which, arranged for the coming of the Nazis, much of the county pea crop will be saved from waste because of the work of the prisoners of war.

Besides the 200 Germans who are in the fields-and none is to be allowed to work inside the canneries-there are others already in the woods, operating a pulpwood-cutting project.

Later, all the prisoners may be used to handle grain crops, as well as other packing-house crops, such as tomatoes, corn and spinach. After that, should their use in agriculture prove satisfactory, it is reported they may be hired out to do all kinds of utility jobs on farms.

Capt. Dewey Taylor, commandant of the prison camp, is a mild-mannered Kentuckian, who has served 15 years in the regular army. After the First World War, he was a member of the Army of Occupation in Germany, where he said, he learned a great deal about the character of the Teuton peoples.

He praised the cooperation of his charges, and the manner in which they had conducted themselves, at their labors and in the stockade. They have shown a desire to carry out orders under their own interpretation, however he said, but were amenable of discipline.

At their work in the fields, they held together in their own groups, laughing now and then among themselves. Most of them at the Carroll county camp are registered as experienced farmhands, according to Captain Taylor, and the way they handle farm implements, illustrates their agricultural skill.

Most of their work has consisted of loading the cut-pea vines onto trucks or wagons, driven by American farmhands, or unloading the vehicles at the county's nine canneries using prisoner help.

The prisoners receive 80 cents a day, in accordance with the terms of the Geneva conference on war prisoners. The farmers pay the Government the prevailing wage for farm help."

Despite the concerns that the prisoners might be dangerous, their stay in Carroll County was without incident. In fact, some local farmers made friends with the workers and at least one still corresponds with the former POWs. Given their agrarian backgrounds is not surprising that they found enough in common to establish friendships amid wartime.

Photo caption: Cannery workers stack cannery by-product for winter cattle feed in this pre-World War II photograph. German prisoners of war began working in the local canneries during the summer of 1944. Historical Society of Carroll County, Legacy of the Land Collection, 1983.