

IMAGES

...THEN AND NOW

From the Indian Hill Historical Society



**Buckingham Lodge
1861**

Remembering Howard Williamson – One of the “Greatest Generation”

An Indian Hill native, Howard Stanley Williamson was born in 1923 and raised in the Village of a bygone era. His early years were typical for a boy in a rural locale, but his experiences in World War II, particularly as a prisoner of war, were pivotal events of his life.



Howard Williamson

A descendant of the Armstrong family (among the earliest settlers of Indian Hill), Williamson grew up in a modest home at 5280 Miami Road. He attended Jefferson School for 8 years, which he walked to daily. There were 9 people in his class. His nickname was *Red* – because he had red hair. Like many of their neighbors, the Williamsons were farmers. Howard’s father died during the Depression, and his mother raised 4 children alone, “on her hands and knees”, by cleaning houses for others and “making do”. Howard bartered his labor with other nearby folks. The family had a cow for milk, and raised their own produce, which they supplemented with staples from Frankenhoff’s grocery store on Indian Hill Road. Howard “ate an awful lot of mush and milk” in the 1930s.

With his classmates and siblings, Howard was active in the 4-H Club. He attended Armstrong Chapel and was a member of the Epworth League. He fished in the pond on DeMar Road, and he and a friend took their guns to school, hid them there, and hunted rabbits, squirrel, and “coon” (raccoon) on the way home. They ate that meat. He played baseball for the Jefferson School team. In winter, he and his friends went sledding on the big dip of Indian Hill Road. Highlights of his year were a trip to Coney Island, the annual Labor Day reunion picnic at school, and Halloween. Howard graduated from Madeira High School in 1941.

When he was 20 years old in 1943, Howard was drafted. Already proficient in the use of firearms, he did not need rifle training. After basic training, he was assigned to a ship that was part of a large convoy which zigzagged across the Atlantic Ocean to Africa. They were stationed there for a month before being transferred to Italy. Howard was a Private, 1st Class, 45th Division of Company L of the 179th Infantry. He acted as a scout for a 6-man patrol team in Naples. While fighting up a mountainside, two men in his group were killed while doing reconnaissance, which he acknowledged as “still my loss” after many decades. His next experience was at the Battle of Anzio in 1944.

While laying razor wire for defensive purposes, Howard and about 10 other Americans were captured. They were moved to Rome, then Laterina, where about 200 other prisoners were detained. Their main food was cabbage leaves and soup, and what they called “sawdust bread.” The captives worked on an escape tunnel, but the Germans discovered it before it was completed. They were transported to Munich by train, where they were deloused and given new clothes, as their old uniforms had rotted. Howard was sent to Memmingen and then Augsburg, Germany. Conditions were stressful. Barbed wire enclosed the POWs; guard towers were on the perimeter; and attack Shepherd dogs were omnipresent at the forced labor camp.

A turning point occurred when the Germans asked if any prisoners knew how to milk cows. Williamson said he did and volunteered to go to the small town of Riecholzreid. About a dozen other POWs were also selected and sent to assist farmers in the towns amongst the Alps. Their barracks were under barns and each man was assigned to a farmer. Howard worked for a family of 5. The father had lost his fingers in an accident. Howard was responsible for milking 40 cows, tending them, harvesting and turning their hay, managing the sheep, and dealing with the manure of the livestock. These were very primitive conditions. After an extremely cold winter, he and two other soldiers tried to getaway unsuccessfully. They were sent back to the base camp at Memmingen where they lived for 2 months before being freed by the Allies in Spring 1945. A Liberty ship brought him back to the USA. Howard had lost 30 pounds and endured a lot during those 16 months. He stated, “It was mental torture, and I still have that mental torture today.” But he survived.

Howard returned to Ohio and started a family. His firstborn son was named for a friend who had died during the war. He spent his career in Norwood at the General Motors assembly plant. Later in life he became commander of the American Ex-Prisoner of War Association, OKI Chapter. Howard Williamson died in 2009, but his tale still resonates. He did his duty; his early years in Indian Hill proved valuable; and he was one of the many who helped the Allied cause prevail.

