Alva P.O.W. Camp

(Prison of War Camp in Alva during WW2)

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PRISON OF WAR CAMP IN ALVA DURING WORLD WAR II

The Alva Prison of War (POW) Camp was one of 27 in operation during World War II. The first PW's, as they were called arrived on July 31, 1943, and the Camp was closed on November 15, 1945. It was built on a square mile of land one mile south and west of Alva and eventually had a capacity of about 6,000, but never held more than 4,850.

The people of Alva knew that some type of military post was under construction, and at first believed it would be an air training field. They learned later that they were getting a camp that would hold German Nazis and other hard core prisoners of war from other camps in the United States.

On July 1, 1942, the Alva Camp announced that it could hold 3,000 men. A newspaper article in September, 1943, reported that the camp was to be enlarged to hold 4,000 men, but on April 1, 1945, it was reported to have a capacity of 5,800 men.

Town people made room for construction workers and their families and speculated on the eventual size of the rapidly growing establishment.

On July 29, 1942, the City Council of Alva agreed to build a modern disposal plant to accommodate the camp and the project was completed in November, 1942.

In December, 1942, the PW plant held an open house and about 1,000 people braved one of the bitterest days of the Winter to tramp through the slushy grounds and view the unfinished buildings.
In succeeding months the buildings were completely finished and the headquarters was moved to a permanent location and trees and grass were planted.

The first 19 German prisoners of war arrived on July 11, 1943, and this small group was probably trucked to the camp. When the prisoners of war started to arrive by the train load, they were marched to the Camp. A regular march route was set up which they followed. The Alva paper reported long columns of PW's marching in complete silence, looking neither to the right or left with each man carrying his personal belongings in a small bag. The only sounds made came from their boots and from commands to turn when reaching a corner. Some of the men had their feet wrapped in burlap. The streets were lined with armed guards and anxious people who stared at the so-called "master race."

The number of prisoners of war arriving was at a small pace but steadily increased.

The camp contained four compounds. The first three was for non-commissioned officers and enlisted men and the fourth compound was built later and was only for officers. Each of the three original compounds were identical and contained one story barracks plus mess halls and other buildings. Each of the barracks could hold 50 men. The first three compounds were 680 feet by 1025 feet. Each barracks was 20 feet by 120 feet and they were faced by sheet rock covered with tar paper.

Each compound had a sport field which included highly organized recreation programs.
Canteens were available where prisoners could buy paper, pencils, tobacco, and toilet articles.

A fully equipped hospital was available including x-ray equipment, operating rooms, and dental facilities. By September, 1945, each camp had three American medical officers and a dentist.

There were no German doctors in the camp although 13 German enlisted men worked as orderlies in the hospital. By April, 1945, there were four German prisoner doctors working in the hospital and four others working in the compound infirmaries.

Prisoners generally considered the food to be satisfactory although they expressed a desire for more potatoes and bread.

There were 100 buildings in the officers compounds to only 52 in the other compounds. The Alva Camp contained a total of 256 buildings. The original three compounds were surrounded by two
eight foot high fences and were separated from each other by a single eight foot fence. The officers compound was surrounded by two eight foot high fences and 13 guard towers were arranged along the fences.

**THIS IS THE NUMBER ONE Guard Tower of the Prisoner of War Compound.**

All buildings were of temporary construction of wood and were later sold to the general public starting in January and February, 1947. Only one building now survives and is in use by the VFW. The concrete water tower was actually the base
for a larger wooden tank and the chimney at the site was
believed to have been on the bakery. The prison motor equipment
repair shop now serves as the Woods County Fair Grounds Merchants
building. The land which had originally been purchased by the
U. S. Government from the Wiebener and Peterman families was given
to the city of Alva.

Leo Meyers, an Alva native said that most of the prisoners were
SS troops who were Hitler's best men. Meyers said that the officers
never smiled and thought it was a waste of time to do so. These
men were from Field Marshall Rommel's Africa Korps and fought in
North Africa. The Alva Camp was best known to POW's in other
Oklahoma camps as "Devils Island" or the Alcatraz of prisoners of
war systems in the U. S.

Richard Kirkham, another guard who married an Alva girl said
that the Germans were known as the "Master Race" and were Hitler's
men who were good athletes and were tall and well muscled.

An Alva physisian, Dr. Traverse, who worked in the camp said
that he was always closely watched by German doctors when he
performed surgeries.

A total of five prisoners died while in the Alva Prisoner
of War Camp and one man was killed trying to escape. The pw's who
died were buried in the post cemetery at Ft. Reno, Oklahoma.

There were more escapes from the Alva Camp than at any of
the 27 camps in Oklahoma. State newspapers carried stories of 21
escapes from the Alva Camp although it was thought that there may
have been more. None of the pw's were free for long, but some
made it as far as New Mexico and the Rio Grande, and to Emporia and Kansas City.

Two men who were believed to have escaped were missing for about two years, but shortly before the camp was closed it was discovered that the men had built a trap door under a bed in their barracks and had nearly completed a tunnel under the two wire fences that surrounded the compound. Guard Richard Kirkham said that as they dug the dirt from the tunnel that they would flush a little at a time down the toilet stool. The tunnel was discovered during a surprise inspection of the prison barracks. There was no time for the prisoners to get rid of the surplus dirt according to Guard Leo Meyer.

Unlike other Oklahoma prison of war camps, the Alva Camp did not contract out their prisoners of war to local farmers. There was one exception, however, where PW's from the Alva Camp worked outside the Camp. Some were taken daily to Waynoka to ice Santa Fe trains. Later, a small branch camp was set up near the ice plant.

Some of the prisoners were artists and painted pictures for a pastime. It was believed that the paintings were the work of a homesick soldier.

When the buildings were sold following the end of the war some were moved to Waynoka. Two of the buildings were bought by Monte and Rosalind Lopshire and when they started remodeling they discovered a number of paintings dotted in between the studs of the building. The paintings measured about 19 by 34 inches and had been painted directly on the masonite or cellotex between the wall studs. The artist had done wonders with three colors
of oil: burnt sienna, cobalt blue, and white. At least 14 of the murals were uncovered and some of them are located in the Waynoka and Alva museums.

A massive Wooden Swastika Eagle is also located in the Alva museum. Leo Meyer remembered the day when he saw this carving in
the German officer quarters. The statue was handcarved from wood scraps and glued together by SS troops imprisoned in the Woods County prisoner of war camp. The miniature castle shown below was also built by POW's and is located in the Alva Museum.

The POW's were sent home after the war although many wanted to stay. Years later in April, 1989, eight returned to Alva meeting several of the men who were their guards at the camp for the first time since the war ended.

After the camp was vacated and the buildings were declared surplus, the buildings were sold and there are still some which are located in Alva as shown on the page which follows.