Camp Huntsville: The First World War II POW Camp in Texas

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Camp Huntsville: The First World War II POW Camp in Texas

HISTORICAL OUTLINE

- Origins and Construction
- Prisoners and their Activities
- German Re-education
- Japanese Re-education
- Deactivation: Country Campus
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Origins and Construction

Beginning of World War II – September 1939

Pearl Harbor Attacked – 7 December 1941

POWs in British custody skyrocketed – early 1942

British pressured State Department to take prisoners

German prisoners captured during the Battle of Libya marching to a POW camp, June 1942
US Provost Marshal General called for two 3,000-man POW camps at Huntsville and Roswell New Mexico – 18 January 1942

Studies for five POW sites made – 20 February 1942

Huntsville judged most favorable (cheap land; prison)

PMG ordered camp construction – 18 March 1942

German soldier surrenders to two Allied soldiers near Bardia, Libya, November 1942
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Origins and Construction

Camp located eight miles from Huntsville near Trinity River

837 acres purchased via imminent domain

Construction began in the summer of 1942

Lieutenant Colonel Harry E. Fisher named camp commander

Captain George Leslie Smith quartermaster of camp

Construction completed early September

Camp open house for local residents – September 18, 1942
The camp included over 400 buildings

Four deep water wells, sewage system, & large incinerator

POWs divided into companies of 250 men each.

Each company had 6 barracks for living quarters, 1 each for showers, mess hall, recreation, US personnel.

Canteen and one infirmary for each 4 companies.

American personnel: laundry, bakery, barber shop, post exchange, commissary, cafeteria, officer’s mess hall, officers’ club, gymnasium, guardhouse, fire station, hospital
U.S. ENGINEER OFFICE

WAR DEPARTMENT

HUNTSVILLE ALIEN ENEMY INTERNMENT CAMP - HUNTSVILLE, TEXAS

Looking S.W. at Compound #1 from 5th St. & H.I. Road

Fretz Construction Co.

Contract No. W-359-eng-4273

GALVESTON, TEXAS

July 9, 1942

May 12, 1942

Photo No. 26
U.S. ENGINEER OFFICE

WAR DEPARTMENT

ALIEN ENEMY INTERNMENT CAMP - HUNTSVILLE, TEXAS

Sewage Disposal Plant - Looking Southeast

Fretz Construction Co.

Contract No. W-359-eng-4273

GALVESTON, TEXAS

Aug. 19, 1942

Fretz Construction Co.

Contract No. W-359-eng-4273

May 12, 1942

Photo No. 37
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<th>U.S. ENGINEER OFFICE</th>
<th>WAR DEPARTMENT</th>
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<tr>
<td>ALIEN ENEMY INTERNMENT CAMP - HUNTSVILLE, TEXAS</td>
<td>Sentry Towers, Floodlighting &amp; Fencing - Looking Southwest</td>
<td>Oct. 6, 1942</td>
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<td>Fretz Construction Co.</td>
<td>Contract No. W-359-eng-4273</td>
<td>May 12, 1942</td>
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US began military action in North Africa in May 1942.

Between 1942-43, US and Allies battle Africa Korps

POWs from Afrika Korps arrived in Huntsville in spring 1943

By October 1943, 4,840 prisoners at Camp Huntsville

Other camps in development as well

Sept 1942, PMG called for camps to hold 50,000 POWs

Huntsville became one of 70 camps in Texas
Temporary Holding Camp for German and Italian prisoners, including men from the *Afrika Korps*, after the Allies' takeover of Tunisia in May 1943.
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Prisoners and their Activities
Federal and local law allowed prisoners to work in area fields

150 lbs daily = $1.50 maximum pay

Collectively averaged 80 bails/day

Approximately 60% of Walker County’s wartime crop saved

Accounts from many locals remember POWs with fondness

German descendants wrote to Walker County in thanks

Camp reunions held across Texas
“With shovels instead of guns, they leave the stockade en route to trucks, which will take them to area farms,” *New York Times*, 15 June 1943
“Under the watchful eye of armed guards, the German POWs chop Texas cotton,” *New York Times*, 15 June 1943
In addition to agricultural work, POWs had ample free time.

POWs participated in orchestral and choral groups.
Played soccer and learned horseshoes and baseball.
Built furniture and other woodworking projects.
They spent time sunbathing daily.
Prepared German meals under supervision.
POWs allowed to buy one 3.2% beer every two days.
“Soccer is a favorite sport of the Huntsville Camp’s internees. Most of the prisoners are athletic, and inter-compound track meets, held at night under floodlights, are hotly contested,” Houston Post, 20 June 1943
“This prisoner is working on one of the sets for a play entitled ‘We’re Traveling Through Germany.’ It is only make believe. Travel is verboten for the duration,” *Houston Post*, 20 June 1943
Re-education program considered but dropped – March 1943

Major issue: Geneva Convention prohibited indoctrination

Nazi terror campaign in camps caused outrage – Early 1944

Dorothy Thompson met Eleanor Roosevelt

Maj Maxwell McKnight – Chief, Admin Section POW Operations

War Dept overcame Geneva obstacle by way of a loophole, which stated that POWs needed physical and mental outlets
The re-education program is launched – Summer 1944

Lt. Col. Edward Davison directed the Special Projects Division of the Intellectual Diversion Program – Oct 1944

The IDP was also known as “The Idea Factory”

Consisted of eighty-five dedicated anti-Nazi POWs

They enjoyed relative freedom in their operations

Responsible for almost 380,000 German POWs

At the camp level Assistant Executive Officers- AEO
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“The Idea Factory’s” program included several operations

Produced *Der Ruf* (The Call) – March 1945 - April 1946

Edited camp newspapers and other media for camps

Approved and distributed films, news stories, and media for POWs

Oversaw courses in American History and democracy

Distributed music and literature by Jewish and African Americans

Encouraged theater performances by and for the prisoners

German Re-education
American History courses were taught at many POW camps (National Archives)
Prisoner attendance was required at films showing Nazi atrocities (National Archives)
DAS WACHSTUM DER DEMOKRATIE
IM FRÜHEN AMERIKA

1. Religionsfreiheit
   Erziehungs möglichkeiten

2. 1643
   Neuenland Staatenbund
   Zum Gegenständen Bestand

3. 1754
   Albany Plan
   Einer Union Grundsteinlegung
   zur Verfassung

4. 1774
   Kontinentaler Congress
   Vorläufer des Unabhängigkeitserklärung

5. 1775
   Patrick Henry
   Gibt mir die Freiheit oder den Tod

6. 1776
   Thomas Paine
   Entscheide Menschenverstand

7. 1776
   Unabhängigkeitserklärung

Seventeenth Century 1700 18th Century

1. Die Eingabe um Bestellung der Recht
   Englische Urkunde über die Rechte
Captain Alton Brady -- AEO for Camp Huntsville
Staff Sergeant Henry W. Wilken assisted Brady
Camp Huntsville’s newspaper *Die Fanfare*
Each compound had its own library
Camp Orchestras
Movies in Camp Huntsville- one 16-mm projector
Extensive education program
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VE Day- May 7, 1945

War Department revealed re-education – 28 May 1945

Kearney Experiment Begins with fall of Germany

Similar to earlier program

Trained administrative and law-enforcement personnel in democratic values for positions in post-war Germany

The Kearney Experiment ends- April 5, 1946
Nazi militants opposed the Factory’s publications, until the militants were transferred by the AEOs.

Rapid change in the discourse and feelings of the camps.

Thousands of POWs introduced to American democracy.

Thousands of Germans trained to work in post-war Germany.

The arrogance question -- American government and military.

The hard work and dedication of 85 POWs led to re-education.
Huntsville was the only camp for Japanese re-education

Japanese smallest number of Axis POWs in America

5,000 Japanese incarcerated, most at Camp McCoy

March 1945, talks began about Japanese program

John Emerson (State Dept) and C.W. Hepner (War Info)

April 1945, plan stressed limited and careful selection

July 1945, PMG established program for Japanese
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Japanese Re-education

Col. Boude C. Moore appointed to oversee the project

Huntsville selected, Boude appointed camp commander

During summer 1945, all 5000 Japanese prisoners screened

First POWs arrived at Huntsville on 5 October 1945

Limited to 200 prisoners after decision to repatriate others

Director of Education, Research, Translation, and Evaluation

Organized lectures and assignments
Lectures by SHSTC professors

“The Necessity of a Free Mind in Search of the Truth”

“Contrasts: Pseudo-Freedom in Japan and Real Freedom in US”

“The Main Points of the Declaration of Independence”

“The Objective of Military Government in Japan”

“Fundamental Rights of Man as Set Forth in the Bill of Rights”

Program Discontinued on 15 December 1945 – all repatriated
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Camp Huntsville decommissioned in early 1946.

SHSTC President Harmon Lowman obtained land and facilities for use by the college in 1946

Country Campus: house and educate returning veterans

Barracks became apartments, classrooms, and offices.

Bus service established to main campus in Huntsville.

Country Campus discontinued in early 1960s

Now houses a nine hole golf course and an Observatory.
Entrance to Country Campus, ca. 1950
Lowman Hall at Country Campus, ca. 1950
Student Union at Country Campus, ca. 1950