Barbeque, Farming and Friendship: German Prisoners of War and South Carolinians, 1943-1946

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Publication Info
Published in The Proceedings of the South Carolina Historical Association, 1994, pages 61-74.
http://www.palmettohistory.org/scha/schajournal.htm
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Wolfgang Peter, barely seventeen, was called up by the Führer to defend the beleaguered fatherland in the spring of 1944. By August, when his training was completed in southern France as a Luftwaffe ground soldier, Operation Anvil, the Allied invasion of southern France, was underway. Within days United States armor and mechanized troops overran Peter's unit. Scattered and disorganized the Luftwaffe soldier and his comrades soon surrendered to American forces and the precarious fate of prisoners of war.1

Within a month of his capture Peter left Europe with several hundred other prisoners of war (POWs). After transfer from France to Naples, they were placed on a troop ship that rendezvoused with a convoy off North Africa bound for the United States. The New World became their home for the duration of the war. Wolfgang Peter was just one of nearly 372,000 German soldiers, sailors, and air men who ended the war thousands of miles away from the carnage of war-torn Europe in a land that did not have first-hand experience with the death and destruction of modern war.2

Most German POWs were young men like Peter, between the ages of eighteen and thirty, who knew little about America except what they read in adventure stories or saw in movies while growing up in Germany. To some POWs, "Amerika" was a land of wild-west adventures or urban battles between ruthless gangsters on city streets. Others had more sinister fantasies that Americans would torture and kill them.3

Although their fantasies proved unfounded, POWs like Peter confronted a new world nonetheless. As each ship unloaded its POWs at the ports of Boston or Norfolk, the prisoners

1Wolfgang Repp to author, August 15, 1991; hereinafter cited as Repp transcript, 91; note that until after the war Mr. Repp's last name was Peter. Consequently throughout the remainder of the text I will refer to Mr. Repp as Wolfgang Peter.
2About 50,000 Italians and approximately 5,000 Japanese were also interned in the United States. At its peak in May-June 1945 there was a total of nearly 426,000 POWs in the country, see Harold Krammer, Nazi Prisoners of War in America, New York, 1979, 271-272, hereinafter cited as Krammer, Nazi PW; George G. Lewis and John Mewha, History of Prisoners of War Utilization by the U.S. Army, 1776-1945, New York, 1955, (reprint 1988) 90-91; hereinafter cited as Lewis, POW History.
3Krammer, Nazi PW, 271-272; for first-hand accounts of German perceptions of America see Georg Gaertner, Hitler's Last Soldier in America, (New York, 1985), 19-20; Paul W. Wallace Interview Transcript, January 12, 1991, on file at the South Carolina State Museum, (Wallace was a camp guard at the Hampton sub-camp) hereinafter cited as Wallace transcript; Helmut Reese Journals, part 2, hereinafter cited as Reese Journals, author wishes to thank Judy Wyatt for making these sources available to him.
were put on trains headed south or west where they soon discovered that America was virtually another world. Used to destruction and death, these veterans of battles such as El Alamein, Sicily, and Normandy were astonished at a nation which seemed almost unreal—no bombed-out cities, cars everywhere, and roads and spaces that seemed to have no end. Georg Gärtner, a young soldier formerly from the Afrika Korps remarked, “America was startlingly large, and I . . . shrugged off any serious thoughts of getting back (escaping) to Germany on my own.” In fact, for most POWs the chance to escape the war was more important than going home. Furthermore, there were other material benefits such as the quality and quantity of food and shelter which the German army had not provided since early in the war. Until spring 1945 three meals a day, food variety, and generous commissary privileges were common in POW camps.5

The U.S. Army assigned the administration of prisoners of war to the Provost Marshal General’s Office, a branch of the U.S. Army that was also responsible, among other things, for Military Police and legal matters related to military discipline and conduct. All POWs that came under U.S. authority, whether they were captured by the army, navy or air corps forces, were to be handed over to the authority of the Provost Marshal. However, until spring 1943 the United States had only a few thousand Axis POWs.6

This changed with the successful conclusion of the North African campaign in May 1943. After more than two years of furious battles back and forth across the deserts of Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia between German forces (Afrika Korps) and their Italian allies and British and American armies, more than 300,000 Axis soldiers surrendered in the Tunisian peninsula. It was the largest number of POWs captured by the Allies to that date. Although this was a great military victory it nearly became a dilemma. The British did not have the means to look after the large number of new POWs, but fortunately the vast resources of the United States were now harnessed. By September 115,000 German POWs were sent to the new world.

As German POWs began streaming into the United States the Provost Marshal formulated policies for their administration and care. The 1929 Geneva Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners of War became the basis for such policies. This agreement was signed by thirty-four nations, including the future belligerents of the Second World War. The basic tenet of the Convention was that all prisoners of war required humane treatment by all signatories of the convention. Among its more than one hundred articles, the document clearly stated that captured soldiers were entitled to adequate food, shelter, and health care while interned and, in return, all enlisted POWs were required to work for their captors at a wage comparable to that in the host country. In accordance with military etiquette, non-commissioned officers were only required to supervise work details while officers had no obligation to do anything unless they wished (even so they were still entitled to the wages they received before they were captured). However, the

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4 Gaertner, Hitler’s Last Soldiers, 1985, 20; Reese Journals, part 3, 2.
5 Krammer, Nazi POW, 48-49, 75, 135-136.
6 Although South Carolina was not involved in the initial wave of POWs, the first POWs captured by the U.S. Armed Forces were the crew of a U-Boot seized off the North Carolina coast in May 1942. They were initially brought to Charleston, interrogated, and soon after sent to a camp in the Southwest; the author wishes to thank Col. Samuel Smith, USMC, ret., of Summerville, S.C. for pointing out this story. He he was the Marine Corps officer on duty when this U-boat crew was brought into Charleston, Interview transcript, June 27, 1991, on file at the South Carolina State Museum; for a published account of this first German POW episode in the US see Susan Worsham, “WWII German POWs Return to Charleston,” The Bow Hook, (newspaper of the Charleston Naval Shipyard), Vol XXV, #20, September 20, 1985.
convention prohibited POWs from doing tasks directly related to military purposes. These same provisions were supposed to apply to American POWs held in Germany.7

The American POW program followed the Geneva Convention more closely than that of any other belligerent in World War II, in part because of what was perceived as rules of international law but more so out of concern for American POWs. It was hoped that by treating German POWs humanely the same treatment would be accorded American soldiers held in Germany. Although conditions for American troops were often poor when compared to their German counterparts in America, American POWs in German stalags probably had about the same material comforts as the average German citizen during the last half of the war.8

Before the first large groups of POWs began arriving in America, the U.S. Army had started to build large camps in various parts of the country to secure them. For example, in west Alabama a major installation was built to house 6,000 POWs near the small community of Aliceville. Completed in the fall of 1942 it remained vacant until the following summer.9

During the early stages of organizing the POW program the Provost Marshal was concerned about security risks that the POWs might bring. Fear of mass escapes by POWs who could then sabotage important high-security areas led to the belief that POW camps must be built as far as possible from defense plants and major military installations as well as important transportation lines and government and populations centers. Consequently rural areas of the country, particularly the Southeast, Midwest, and Southwest were earmarked for POW camps. Holding few major war industries and transportation centers, these regions of the country were considered ideal. Several large camps were built in southeastern states, but during the first year of the program South Carolina was not included. However, the neighboring states of North Carolina (such as Camp Butner near Raleigh and Camp Sutton in Monroe) and Georgia (Camp Gordon) had POW camps housing several thousand German and lesser numbers of Italian POWs. Although South Carolina did not become a major location for POWs in 1943, satellite camps of three or four hundred POWs were established. They were built as temporary sub-camps to assist in fall harvests.10

Americans were just as ignorant of the vaunted Nazis. Ever since the U.S. had entered the war the movies, radio, and newspapers had painted the German military and their Führer as warmongers bent on nothing less than world domination with an iron fist. Consequently,
apprehension and fear were the first reactions of many American communities when they learned that enemy soldiers would be interned in their neighborhoods.\(^{11}\)

All POW camps had an army garrison to guard the prisoners and forestall possible escapes. During the first year of large POW concentrations in the United States, these garrisons kept a close eye on the German internees. As the war began to swing more in the Allies' favor, the American vigilance declined to the point that many work details of ten or more went out to work with a single guard; sometimes guards were entirely absent.\(^{12}\)

Fortunately for the communities and farms that employed POWs this lax attitude did not lead to major problems. If it had, there is little to suggest that the POW guards could have prevented a major break-out. Wolfgang Peter's opinion of his American guards at Fort Gordon and the Aiken sub-camp is fairly typical of most. For him they were pleasant, although often naive and poorly educated. Many had drinking problems that were evident on the job. In more than one instance a guard accompanying Peter's work detail disappeared into the woods to drink the day away while the POWs worked. Sometimes Peter and his comrades had to search for their intoxicated guard at the end of the day before they could return to their camp.\(^{13}\)

In spite of the often lax garrisons there were few escapes, only 2,200 were recorded in the entire nation during the Axis POW experience in the United States. However, German POWs thought of escaping as all captured soldiers have. While few escapes lasted more than two or three days, some POWs had fantastic plans. In April 1944 Gerd Gutzat and three other POWs disappeared from a work detail near the Aiken POW camp, stole a car, and headed for Columbia. Gutzat managed to elude American authorities until he was discovered by Columbia railway workers trying to hide in a gondola car filled with sand. Hunger and disorientation seem to have been responsible for Gutzat's recapture. He was found with a beer bottle filled with milk. This was his second try. On his first attempt several months before, Gutzat intended to escape to Columbia, find a plane, and fly it home to Germany.\(^{14}\)

Although it was, and still is, the duty of every captured soldier to try to escape, German POWs did more thinking than implementing escape plans. The United States proved too large and unfamiliar to POWs used to the small dimensions of Europe. Peter and many others considered the escape possibilities, but the likelihood of success was so remote that the effort to most was not worth the trouble. In addition, as the fortunes of the German military machine grew dimmer, ideas for escape virtually disappeared.\(^{15}\)

For many German POWs the idea of leaving the commodious surroundings in which most lived probably was another deterrent to escape. POW camp construction was fairly standard across the nation. Regardless of its size the camp consisted of a square or rectangle, with barbed-wire fences and a guard tower at each of the four corners. At night the compounds were illuminated by

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\(^{11}\)Alvin Weeks, Jr. Interview Transcript, October 7, 1990 on file at the SC State Museum; Krammer, Nazi POW, 44-46.


\(^{13}\)Repp transcript; for other examples see Ritter transcript; see Reese Journal No. 3, 4, in which he describes an incident where an American NCO guard ordered Reese to steal one hundred pairs of shoes from the U.S. Army supply depot at Fort Jackson in which Reese worked.

\(^{14}\)The State, April 24, 1944; also see John Hammond Moore, "Nazi Troopers in South Carolina," SC Historical Magazine, Vol. 81, 1980, 308-309 hereinafter cited as Moore, Nazis in SC.

\(^{15}\)Repp transcript; Gaertner, Hitler's Last Soldier, 20-21.
large electric lights all around the fenced-in perimeter with a twenty-four hour guard. Some of the camps were situated in former air fields or Civilian Conservation Corps camps from the New Deal era. Others were located near working military installations such as those built at Fort Jackson or Camp Croft in 1944. In these situations the POWs were usually housed in the old barracks or new ones built for their purpose. Most of the small sub-camps that were built in rural areas to assist in agriculture or timber work were tent compounds with wooden floors and sides. If the camps were inhabited for more than a few months, recreational facilities were built including football (soccer) fields and volley ball courts. The large camps that were long-term, such as Fort Jackson and Camp Croft, allowed the prisoners to build stage sets where they produced their own plays. In addition, weekly musical performances were held by POW artists. The gardeners in the camps often made formal kinds of flower gardens that were sometimes made into geometric shapes. Camp newspapers were produced by the POWs under American censorship at the larger camps, giving news about the war and activities going on within the compound. Evening classes were taught by POWs from German universities where prisoners could earn credits in such subjects as English, history, and mathematics. Although the lot of a POW was not necessarily a happy one, he certainly had the means to occupy his free time.\textsuperscript{16}

Although Americans provided the POWs with adequate supplies of food until the spring of 1945, the Army realized that its preparation was just as important. Consequently POWs had their own cooks within their ranks to prepare meals that fit the German palate. Another privilege not shared by most POWs in other areas of the world was a prison PX or commissary. Usually run by POWs, prison stores sold small articles such as razors, hand-lotion, beer, candy and cigarettes to comrades who purchased them with tickets or chits. The profits accrued were used to purchase items desired by their comrades such as sporting goods or craft supplies.\textsuperscript{17}

Although these accommodations and recreational facilities helped a POW pass the time as he waited for the war to end, some camps were better than others. When Peter arrived at the Aiken sub-camp in late 1944, the living conditions were "miserable." POWs were housed in tents that had as many as five in each, but there were not enough showers and outdoor latrines for the more than 400 Germans interned. The problems with this camp were affirmed in a confidential memorandum to the Provost Marshal in April 1945. The inspector reported that the sanitation of the camp was bad and that if not remedied a major epidemic might ensue.\textsuperscript{18}

Other POW camps had problems also. In August 1944 Camp Croft was inspected and Army investigators reported that many of the tents in which the POWs were housed leaked. They also observed that the Germans needed to improve their sanitation, "... German prisoners (must) maintain a much higher standard of cleanliness and orderliness throughout the entire stockade."\textsuperscript{19}

Although problems existed in POW camps, these were kept from the public. Instead Americans often felt that interned enemy soldiers were living as well or better than they. Whether true or not, many Americans in South Carolina were only interested in the work the POWs could

\textsuperscript{16} Annual Agricultural Report for Bamberg County, 1943, 15, from the files of the Bamberg County Extension Office, Bamberg, SC; the author wishes to thank F.0. McAlbany, Bamberg County Extension Director, for providing a copy of this report, hereinafter cited as Bamberg Extension Annual Report; Rogers transcript; Ritter transcript.

\textsuperscript{17} The State, October 14, 1943; Wyatt, "US Policy Toward POWs," 48, 50.

\textsuperscript{18} Repp Transcript; Aiken sub-camp, Fort Gordon folder, Inspection and Field Reports, Provost Marshal General's Papers, April 2, 1945, Box 265, Record Group 389, National Archives, Washington, DC.

\textsuperscript{19} Camp Croft folder, Inspection and Field Reports, Provost Marshal General's Office Papers, September 13, 1944, Box 265, Record Group 389, National Archives, Washington DC.
provide for a labor-starved agricultural and pulp and paper industry. When the first POWs were brought into the state in the fall of 1943 the expected apprehension about enemy soldiers seemed outweighed by genuine curiosity. In September 1943, when 250 German POWs were brought to a temporary camp in Bamberg County, the county agricultural extension agent wrote: "... there was almost a steady flow of traffic by the camp. People from miles around came to see what was taking place. (Even after they were banned from the camp area) ... they never lost interest in the camp and its prisoners of war."

Within a few weeks the Bamberg county agent reported that POWs were even "entertained" in local residents' homes! Despite the fact that these were prisoners who had recently fought to kill American troops, if not the sons of the Bamberg families that employed them, the bond between Germans and Americans grew during their weeks of association.

This association grew out of the working relationship that was fostered between prisoners and farmers during the last two years of the war throughout the state. Within a few months of the entrance of the United States into World War II American farmers were hit by a chronic labor shortage. This was felt particularly hard by South Carolina farmers. The two or three dollars a day earned by the average farm laborer could not compete with the thousands of new war industry jobs opening up around the Southeast. The Charleston Navy Yard was the nearest where a welder could earn at least eighty dollars per week. While this attracted some traditional farm laborers, many others were drafted or enlisted in the armed forces. Starting in 1942 and continuing into the next year labor problems plagued the rural areas of South Carolina. When the first large influx of POWs filled southeastern POW camps, the message slowly filtered down to the farmers on the labor-starved farms. However, during most of 1943 the Provost Marshal was reluctant to provide POWs because of the fear that they might escape. Nevertheless, some counties in the Palmetto State did get the POWs they requested for the 1943 harvest season.

Although such a rapid increase in the POW population caused concern to security conscious military personnel it proved fortuitous to many labor starved farmers and timber companies. At first POW labor had priority on military installations where they were employed on maintenance crews and in mess hall related activities. However, the private sector was so starved for adequate labor that the Provost Marshal soon made POWs available to those showing the greatest need.

By August 1943 the newspapers in the state reported that the war department and the War Manpower Commission had worked out terms for "increased" use of POW labor. The important stipulation was that all other local sources of workers must be exhausted before employers were eligible to use POW laborers. According to an August 1, 1943 county agricultural agents' report, twenty-nine out of forty-six counties in the state made application for POW labor, but very few succeeded in persuading the Provost Marshal to give them help that year. Some counties were hindered by a lack of facilities: of the 29 requesting POW labor, nearly half had inadequate or no

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21For information about the early labor shortage following Pearl Harbor see USDA War Board Report, January 5, 1943, Miscel. Box, Richard Manning Jeffries Papers, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia; "Yearbook for the S.C. Department of Agriculture," 1942-1943, 29, in Reports and Resolutions of S.C., Vol. II; for early information on POW labor to farmers see The State, August 30, 1943, also in Scrapbook, 1435.
means of accommodating the POWs. Yet even where there were some forms of accommodation, they generally needed extensive repairs, additions, or replanning before they could take in POWs.23

Another issue that was perhaps more significant concerned camp security and available space in already existing camps in neighboring states. An army official wrote to D.W. Watkins, Director of Cooperative Extension Work at Clemson, that camps located in other states were still not filled to capacity. In addition there was a serious shortage of Army personnel to guard POWs if new camps were established in South Carolina.24

In addition there was a tremendous amount of red tape involved before a locality could secure POWs. The process began when a farmer contacted his county agent requesting POW labor. The agent then sent the request through channels, either to the local War Manpower Commission or the Cooperative Extension Work Office at Clemson. It then went to the regional office in Atlanta which forwarded the request to the War Department (Provost Marshal).25

To have any success with this cumbersome bureaucracy the state needed local administrators who understood how to advance their areas' interests. It appeared that many South Carolina farmers thought their County Agricultural Agents were not doing enough on their behalf. In a letter to U.S. Senator Burnet Maybank, Director Watkins of Cooperative Extension Work bemoaned the many complaints he was receiving because of his lack of success in gaining POW labor: "Unfortunately the people in this State feel that I have some power of deciding about war prisoner labor whereas my function is to accumulate and certify as to agricultural situations and the demand for such labor."

Once a farmer was successful in getting POW workers he still had more bureaucracy to deal with before they could start work. The army charged employers $3.50 per day for each POW used. Eighty cents went to the prisoner and the remainder went to the government for the upkeep and maintenance of POW compounds and services. In addition to agreeing to the pay scale, farmers and other POW employers had to sign a contract with the Army. Once signed, both parties were obligated to follow each contract's provisions. If the employer tried to abrogate the contract before its conclusion the employer was liable to fulfill its provisions regardless of whether the POWs worked. A farmer was supposed to reside within a thirty-mile radius of a POW camp. If not, he was prevented from using the prisoners. Although some reports indicate that a few farmers worked out arrangements for the Army to transport the POWs to and from the farm each day, most farmers appeared to use their own transportation to get their labor.27

23Summary of Reports from County Agents re War Prisoner Labor, ibid.
25The channels for POW labor requests for South Carolina are sketchy, but see Wyatt for how it worked how he worked in the Palmetto State in "US Policy Toward POWs," 80-84; for some early requests on POW labor in the state see John T. Cannon (Chappels, SC) to D.W. Watkins, Director of Extension Service, June 24, 1943 and Emmette Groover (Columbia, SC) to D.W. Watkins, same date, in Series 32, Cooperative Extension Service, Box 113, folder 2, B. Maybank Papers, 1943, in Special Collections, University Library, Clemson University. I wish to thank Susan Hiott, Curator of Exhibitions, Special Collections, University Library, Clemson University for bringing the latter to my attention; for a national perspective on getting POW labor in the civilian sector see Krammer, Nazi PW, 86-90.
27Barnberg Extension Annual Report, 15; Rogers transcript.
Despite the expense and regulations, South Carolina farmers were eager to use POW labor when it was available. The prisoners were used in a variety of agricultural jobs that ranged from crop harvests and farm structure repairs to soil conservation and field improvements. Because the crops grown in South Carolina during the 1940s were largely labor intensive, it was essential to have enough workers to harvest crops but they also had to be knowledgeable enough to do it properly. POW labor was used extensively to harvest peanuts, cotton, and peaches, major cash crops of the state. Each required some specialization. Although not difficult to learn, these specialties required practice to do it efficiently. Although South Carolina farming was new to the Germans, they became eager students who mastered many farming skills which benefited the wartime production of South Carolina agriculture.28

Peanuts were a major cash crop of southwestern counties. It grew in the ground until mature and once it was ready for harvest the pods were plowed up in clusters. Once on the surface, labor came in to pick the nut clusters off the ground and to place them on racks29 to dry for a few days before shipping them to processors. Although this was not a job of skill, it required experience and endurance. Even though the prisoner were not from peanut growing areas, their efforts were commended by the farmers and government agents alike.

In the 1943 Bamberg County Extension Annual Report the extension agent emphatically stated that without POW labor his county’s farmers could not have achieved a 100-percent peanut harvest. One hundred and ten POWs on forty-seven Bamberg farms were essential in harvesting 500 acres of peanuts and twenty-five acres of corn. An additional fifty-three farms in neighboring Orangeburg County used another one hundred and ten prisoners to harvest 800 acres of peanuts and bale 125 acres of hay. Farmers in other areas of the state were just as positive about the POWs they employed. One Marlboro County farmer regarded the POWs he and his father used on their large cotton farm as the best workers he had ever had. He observed that "there was no question that they had real fine work habits."

Negative reports about the POW labor are few and came largely from guards who were assigned to prevent escapes. One former camp guard from the Hampton sub-camp said he never trusted them. Once he remembers catching a POW trying to rip up a Bible that he found in his employer’s car. In 1943 Bamberg County reported that there were a few "uncooperative" prisoners who were returned to their main camp in Tennessee. Unfortunately the report did not define what "uncooperative" meant.31

South Carolina farmers treated their POW labor like close neighbors, not recalcitrant workers. The productivity that they showed was rewarded with afternoon breaks, generous lunches, barbecues, and occasional visits with farm families. It is hard to imagine that these POWs were from an enemy nation which the American Armed forces were trying to crush. Provost Marshal regulations clearly told all employers that they were to have minimum contact with their POW labor. Farmers and other POW employers were forbidden from having more than distant working relationships with POWs. The directive was usually ignored. Wolfgang Peter had just started working for one farm in Aiken County when he was invited to an afternoon barbecue with

28The State, October 14, 1943.
29Racks were similar to split rail fences, poles set on cross pieces fixed in the ground; my thanks to F.O. McAlhany, Bamberg County Extension Director, for an explanation.
30Bamberg Extension Annual Report, 16; Rogers transcript.
31Bamberg Extension Annual Report, 16; Wallace transcript.
the rest of the POW force and the farmer's family and neighbors. Not surprisingly he thought that this was one of the best days of his POW experience.32

In Marlboro County Frank Rogers made sure that his POW workers were given a hardy lunch. He considered the food brought from the camp each day inadequate for the hard work they were doing on his farm. Not only did he provide large lunches at his own expense, but he made sure that every member of his foreign work force received a can of beer each day. On the last day of work, before the POWs left Marlboro County for the trip back to Germany, Rogers gave each of his twenty POWs a silver dollar. He asked them when they got home to let him know how they were doing.33 Not every farmer was as generous with his POW workers, but many did provide at least something extra at lunch and kept on friendly terms with them.34

The Geneva Convention did not compel German internees to work so diligently. More practical reasons were responsible. One factor was boredom. Despite several recreational and intellectual diversions that many POW camps provided it was not easy living the life of a prisoner confined to a small enclosure. Peter and other POWs liked the opportunity to get away from the compound five or six days each week. As long as they did their assignments, POWs often were as good as free.35

Although it was nice to have this relief from boredom, there were many POWs who realized that the war for Germany was growing gloomier by the month. There was little to look forward to other than to get away from camp confinement for the day and experience a different environment for a while. When it came time to return to Germany some POWs wished to stay. Many knew that their home towns were under Russian control and there was probably little left for them. Others anticipated the destruction of German cities and towns and just wanted to stay in the United States where things were easier.36

A more intangible factor to consider when seeking an explanation for German POW work effectiveness lies in the German character. Despite the realization that Germany was losing the war German soldiers continued to run efficient camps, often with only rudimentary U.S. Army guidance. Countless observations were made on the well organized and efficient manner in which German POW camps were run by their internees. During a November 1944 inspection of South Carolina POW facilities an international observer, Edouard Pattee of Switzerland, saw a bucolic scene in several camps. The Myrtle Beach POW camp had beautiful trees and barracks just like a boy scout camp. At Fort Jackson Pattee observed, "avenues between the barracks (with) little gardens planted with shrubbery or decorated with designs made of sand, coal, pebbles and broken

32See "Card of Instructions for Persons Using POW Labor, Fort Jackson," n.d., copy provided South Carolina State Museum by Mrs. Catherine M. Rogers, Bennettsville, S.C.; Among the eleven points of this document, point six instructed POW employers: "Do not give them (POW) anything..."; for information on Peter see Repp transcript; Wyatt argues that close relations between German POWs and their employers were rare, see "US Policy Toward POWs," 93-95.
33Rogers transcript.
34For example see Elbert Davis telephone transcript, September 10, 1990, on file at SC State Museum; hereinafter cited as Davis transcript; for an instance where POWs refused to accept food offered by a Hampton County farmer see W.W. Brunson telephone transcript, September 10, 1990, on file at the S.C. State Museum.
35Repp transcript; Ritter transcript; Gaertner, Hitler's Last Soldier, 18-19; I wish to acknowledge John H. Moore for sharing this idea with me.
36T.R. Hawkins telephone transcript, March 13, 1991, on file at the South Carolina State Museum; for the fear that Germans had about returning to their homes under Russian control after the war see Gaertner, Hitler's Last Soldier, 24-25, when he thought that POWs would be returned to their home towns in Russian-occupied zones Gaertner was terrified, "I barely managed to control my panic...I was being turned over to the Russians: my fate was sealed," although unfounded, Gaertner believed it with many others and planned his escape from his POW camp.
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glass . . . (giving to part of the) . . . camp the character of a true German Anlage (park). . . . " Although Pattee's observations may have painted a romantic picture, South Carolinians verified his positive observation in part. Rogers remembers the Bennettsville POW sub-camp as in "tip top" shape.  

Along with well run camps the Germans had an attitude of confidence, almost superiority towards their American employers and guards. During the 1943 harvest season, Harry Blumenthal, a German sergeant formerly of the Afrika Korps, served as the interpreter and prison officer for the Bamberg POW Camp. He boasted to the county extension agent that, "we Germans are a much more disciplined people than you Americans."  

German POW self-assurance was mirrored by American observers. In July 1943, John Gunther, an American reporter covering the Sicilian campaign, observed a group of German and Italian prisoners recently captured by the Allies. The Germans were smartly dressed and clean shaven, as "neat as ten pins." By comparison the Italians that came in with the Wehrmacht soldiers were an "amorphous mass of poorly dressed soldiers . . . (who came from the) most primitive villages in Sicily."  

The industrious attitude of the Germans was demonstrated in many ways in South Carolina. Prisoners at the Hampton sub-camp were allowed to buy their own seed from the local stores for their flower and vegetable gardens. They were so thorough that they soon bought out all the seed supplies in town and forced the local residents to find their seed supplies elsewhere until the local stores were restocked. Frank Rogers summed up a lot of employers' feelings about their POW labor, " . . . they had more work discipline in their make-up than in any group of soldiers I ever saw, including our own."  

German discipline and work ethic were not always beneficial to Americans. In several camps problems with fanatical Nazi elements caused some Army garrisons to lose control within the camp gates. At Camp Croft POW camp the Army inspector reported as late as April 1945 that prisoners were carrying on quiet subversive activities, but he did not elaborate. Attempts to reeducate the POWs were proving unsuccessful, so the inspector proposed that the Nazi ring leaders be segregated and removed to another camp.  

Even in the fields the Germans showed disdain toward Americans. In at least one instance the POWs working on Bamberg County farms criticized the way the peanuts were plowed up by the local labor. They were convinced that they could do a better job plowing the peanuts out of the ground.  

In April 1944 the most bizarre case of German independence occurred at the Aiken POW camp. One night two German POWs murdered one of their own. The POWs claimed that their fellow prisoner's death was an accident. They had only intended to punish the victim because he was not distributing food fairly. Army investigations showed a more sinister motive. The victim had shown sympathy toward the Allied cause, angering his fellow internees. Just before his

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37 Moore, Nazis in SC, 312-313; Rogers Transcript.  
38 Bamberg Extension Annual Report, 16.  
40 Rogers transcript.  
41 Camp Croft, Inspection and Field Reports, Provost Marshal General's Office Reports, April 10-11, 1945, Box 265, RG 389, National Archives, Washington DC.  
42 Bamberg Extension Annual Report, 16.
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scheduled transfer to the POW compound at Camp Gordon, a committee was formed to discipline the disloyal German. An Army court tried and convicted the two perpetrators of the crime and sentenced them to death. They were hanged at a Fort Leavenworth prison in 1945.43

When working conditions were not to their liking or they felt they were being mistreated, the Germans did not take it lightly either, regardless of their situation. Near Fitzgerald, Georgia 250 prisoners refused to work in the peanut harvest they had started, because a profusion of sand spurs on one farm had injured several POW laborers. Similar affairs occurred in South Carolina. In July 1944 it was reported that several hundred German prisoners went on strike in Charleston and were put on a diet of bread and water until they complied and went back to work. According to the account an ardent Nazi refused to be placed with two anti-Nazis in a separate stockade. The rest of the Charleston camps supported his stand probably because the two anti-Nazis were considered disloyal to the German state.44

Even though these incidents were not common, they received notice in the media. When these stories were combined with the persistent rumors that POWs lived better than Americans, a growing chorus of voices argued that the Army was too soft on enemy soldiers. The U.S. Senate established a committee to investigate these charges. Reports stated that POWs received better medical care than wounded American G.Is. Some people believed that POWs were treated like pampered guests and were held up as heros in some communities. One New England resident wrote to the Provost Marshal that when he saw German POWs playing soccer in the nearby POW compound he wanted to know, "...why are these beasts pampered here" when sons, brothers, and husbands were dying in Europe.45

In communities throughout the nation commanders of POW compounds had to defend policies toward the POWs under their command. In December 1944 Lieut. Col. Manning, commander of the Fort Jackson POW camp and most of the sub-camps in the state, spoke to a Columbia rotary meeting. Manning defended the treatment of POWs with the standard argument. By living up to the standards of the Geneva Convention and providing good treatment to Germans American POWs in Germany would receive equal care.46

However, by the spring of 1945 the living conditions for POWs declined noticeably as American troops liberated POW camps in Germany and discovered the horrors of the death camps. US authorities incorrectly equated these places of genocide with POW camps. Privileges for German POWs deteriorated significantly during the spring and summer of 1945. Once Germany surrendered in May, the incentive to provide POWs adequate provisions also declined. Wolfgang Peter saw a noticeable reduction in his food allowance. As the food ration declined to less than 1,000 calories per day Peter and his comrades supplemented their food by earning money, exceeding their production quotas and buying staples such as milk, eggs, and bread from local farmers. Food was not only scarce but what was available grew very monotonous. During an

43Moore, Nazis in SC, 309; for more details about this incident see Donald M. Law, "'Holy Ghosts' Deal With Suspected Traitor" in Aiken Standard, December 9, 1990, 8.
44The State, July 7, 1944; Scrapbook, 1949.
45The State, August 20, 1944; Scrapbook, 1919; Major General Archer L. Leech, "The Army Reports on Prisoners of War," The American Mercury, May 1945, 1; Wyatt, "US Policy toward POWs," 88-91, for some specific public protests in the state about pampering of POWs.
46The State, December 19, 1946; Scrapbook, 2032.
eight-week period at the Shaw POW camp near Sumter the prisoners had the same bean soup diet for lunch every day.47

Although working conditions were generally good for most POWs, they were not easy despite what some Americans thought. Farm labor could be difficult but it was better than working in the pulp and paper industry. The latter was more physically demanding and involved stringent production quotas that the novice POW workers had trouble reaching. The demands on production were often greater than on the farm and this made the job even more difficult. If the daily wood quota was not reached, those who failed went back to camp at the end of the day and were put in an isolation tent for the night without the chance to wash. If they did not reach their quota the next day the restrictions would continue. Wolfgang Peter was employed in this trade during his early internment in the Palmetto State. Only after he injured his back was he transferred to agriculture labor. This was less demanding and the food ration was better.48

In their study of the southern pulp and paper industry during the war years, Fickle and Ellis noted that the job was dangerous and took skills that took time to learn. In many instances the communications between American management and the POW labor was insufficient. Frequently there was no one available to translate the employers' instructions into German for the POWs. Despite the Provost Marshal's directive to provide workers adequate safety, the working conditions in the forests were commonly poor for American workers, making the directive meaningless.49

Unlike the pulp and paper industry, farmers provided more realistic quotas and incentives. Lunches and special treats such as beer made POW laborers work at a level farmers' expected. The importance of proper leadership and incentives was described in a 1944 letter to Eugene Bewkes, director of Manpower Utilization, a branch of the War Manpower Commission. After spending time in Georgia and then traveling north to Minnesota, the writer observed that German prisoners who worked in the Peach state's pulp and paper industry were not doing the work expected by their employers. Production varied from thirty to fifty per cent of free labor. One problem which the Germans had was their inexperience in the woods. However, POWs who worked in lumber camps in the northern states did much better. He believed that there was more effective leadership at the northern lumber camps and they provided better supervision for the prisoners.50

Regardless of whether conditions were better in some camps than in others as the war came to an end, the German POWs began thinking about returning to Germany. Some wished to stay in the United States, but the government made it clear that all prisoners must return to Germany.

As soon as the war ended some politicians clamored for the quick return of the Germans to make room for the influx of returning American GI's. Everyone thought that they should have first

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47Repp transcript; Moore, Nazis in SC, 314; Wyatt, "US Policy Toward POWs," 108-110.
48Wolfgang Repp (Peter) to author, 25 March 1992, letter on file at the South Carolina State Museum, Repp remembers that the heat and bugs were so bad during the summer for some POW workers that they collapsed or tried to find an easier work schedule. He believed that several South Carolina employers exploited their POW labor far beyond what was allowed in their contracts.
50Hal Rothchild to E. Bewkes, Chief Utilization Consultant; Minnesota, May 4, 1944, Records of the Bureau of Manpower Utilization, RG 211, National Archives, Washington, DC. I wish to thank Jackie Flowers for providing me with this information.
chance at the civilian job market and no one wanted German POWs to stand in the way of a deserving American veteran. However, many soon realized that the GI’s could not all come home at once. There were not enough ships nor could all American troops come home anyway, because some were needed to maintain a presence in the devastated lands of Europe and the Far East.

In the meantime rural labor was still scarce. At first Senator Burnet Maybank admonished his colleagues to demand the rapid return of all POWs to their homeland as quickly as possible. Ironically, once his constituents in South Carolina heard this they flooded him with letters demanding that the POWs be kept until there was sufficient local labor available. This reaction changed Maybank’s mind and he dropped his original request.51

Although POWs stopped entering the United States in May 1945, they would remain in the country in large numbers until the new year. As long as they could, South Carolina farmers took full advantage of their opportunity by using them as long as they could. By the early spring of 1946 most POW camps were closed in the state. In July 1946 the last POW left the country.52

The POW experience did not linger with most Americans after the last POW left the Palmetto state. Only those farmers who developed close ties with POWs while employing them on their farms seemed to have a lasting association with the former soldiers of Nazi Germany. Many correspondences were started, and some lasted for several years.

For POWs like Wolfgang Peter, returning to Germany, ravaged by war and hunger, the experience of America seemed a distant memory. Germans not only had to rebuild their lives, they had to reconstruct a shattered nation. Peter spent the hardest years of his life in post-war Germany rebuilding his family home and then helping to resurrect his home town of Würzburg. By the early fifties he, like the rest of the new German nation, was back on his feet. But it was a struggle. Frank Rogers received many letters from his German workers asking for all kinds of assistance. Those received are filled with requests for food, clothes, and other necessities to help them and their families through the cold winters where food and shelter were nearly impossible to find. Many began with “I have the best memories of the happy time we had in the States.”53

Some desired to return to the United States and requested that their former employer sponsor them so that they could start a new life. One POW who worked for a Sumter County farmer during the war was sent back to Germany in 1946. By the early 1950s he had returned to Sumter County to work for the farmer he had started with during the war. Although it does not appear that many former prisoners were able to return to South Carolina, many more did receive moral support through letters from former South Carolina employers with small food and clothing shipments during the difficult time of post-war Germany.54

51Krammer, Nazi PW, 232, 234, 238; Lewis, POW History, 172-173.
52Ibid.; also see Wyatt, “US Policy toward POWs,” 115-118, for debate in South Carolina about keeping POWs on the job in the state after May 1945.
53Ewald Wollburg to Frank Rogers, Wollburg, November 30, 1947; this is just one of more than twenty letters from former POWs to the Catherine Rogers family, Bennettsville, SC.
54Ibid.; Davis transcript.
Today the POW experience has disappeared from most minds, but the significance of the POW labor force to South Carolina's successful food production during the war should not. The existence of over 8,000 enemy soldiers on South Carolina's doorstep was another example of the many changes which the war brought to the Palmetto State.55

55There are conflicting statistics on the number of German POWs actually interned in South Carolina, Moore, Nazis in SC, 306, states that by mid-1945 "some 8,000" were in the state while Wyatt, "US Policy Toward POWs," 131 states that a total of 11,000 were interned in the Palmetto State; Wyatt, 94-98, also has an interesting breakdown of the total value of POW labor in the state, both through wages saved, crops harvested, and other services rendered.