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Some Thoughts on Prisoners of War in Iowa, 1943-1946

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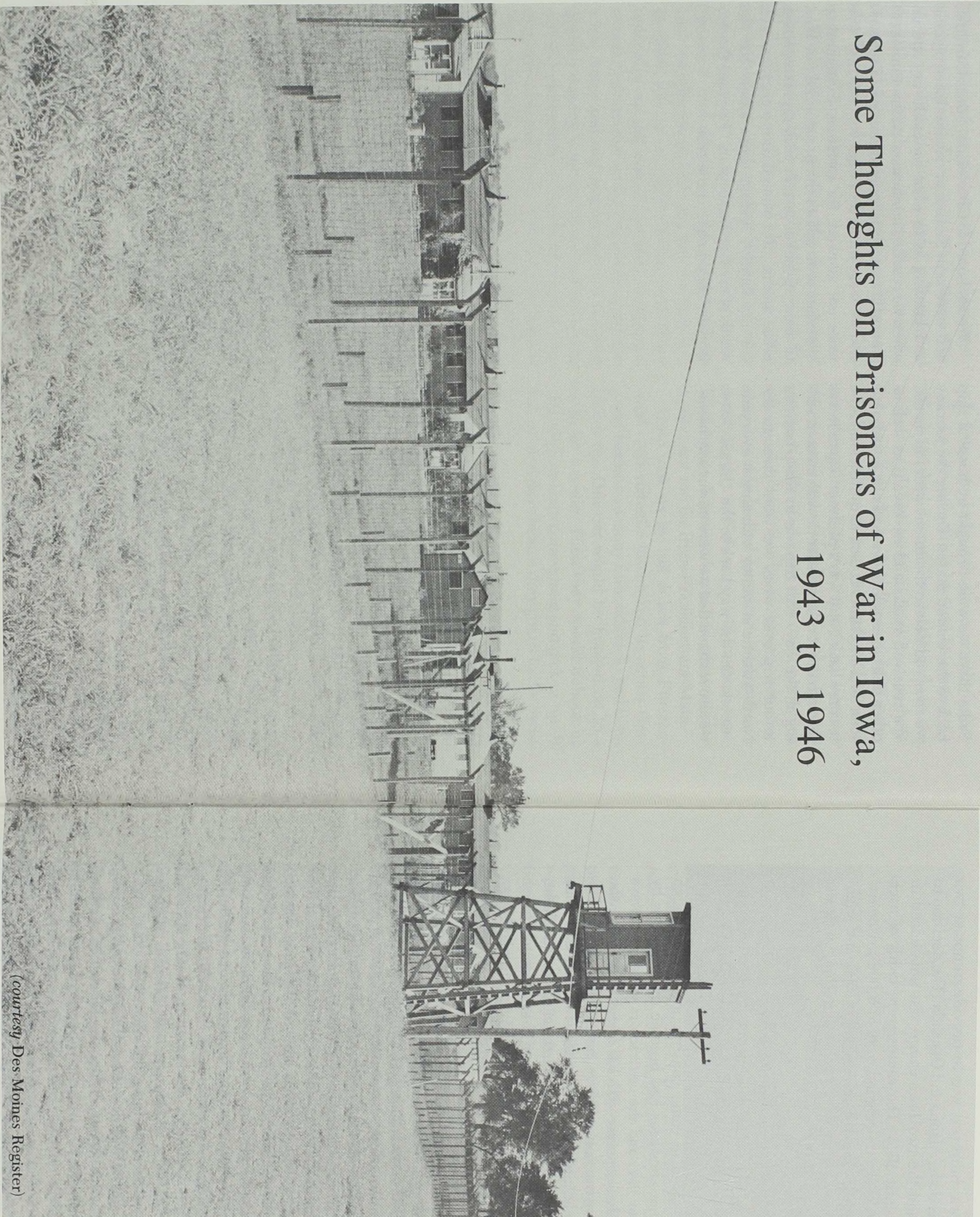
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Some Thoughts on Prisoners of War in Iowa, 1943 to 1946



(courtesy Des Moines Register)

Occasionally the editor of this journal in conversation or correspondence with members of the State Historical Society or other interested Iowans is reminded of areas of Iowa history which have been overlooked in recent years. Late last year, following a conversation with Ruth Watkins of Clarinda about Iowa during the Second World War, I found in this office a fifty-five page typescript of newspaper articles from the Clarinda Herald-Journal about the prisoner of war camp which was located near Clarinda. The articles dealt with the camp and the impact which it had on the town and the area and had been collected three years ago by Betty Malvern Ankeny.

After looking through the typescript, I realized that memories of the Second World War on the home front are memories of a time fast slipping into the distant past. It is often hard to realize that the war ended thirty-nine years ago this year. Or to put it another way, it is difficult to admit that we have an increasing number of high school and even college students whose parents cannot remember that war at all. But those people who do remember Iowa in the years between 1941 and 1945 talk most often, it seems to me, of rationing with its stamps and stickers and books, of shortages of such "essentials" as cigarettes and liquor, of a thirty-five mile per hour speed limit, of scrap drives and bond rallies and V-mail and a paucity of good baseball players in the major leagues. But in two towns in Iowa, Algona and Clarinda, there must be a number of people who can remember Iowa's only prisoner of war camps.

Since talking with Ruth Watkins and reading through the Clarinda newspaper accounts, I have talked with a few of my colleagues and read some more newspapers and I have come to the conclusion that some serious historical work should be done on Iowa's prisoner of war camps. And perhaps a small introduction to the subject from this desk might spur someone to do just that. I hope so.

* * *

In the first years of the Second World War, the United States was not faced with any serious problem concerning prisoners of war. In the course of a series of disastrous setbacks

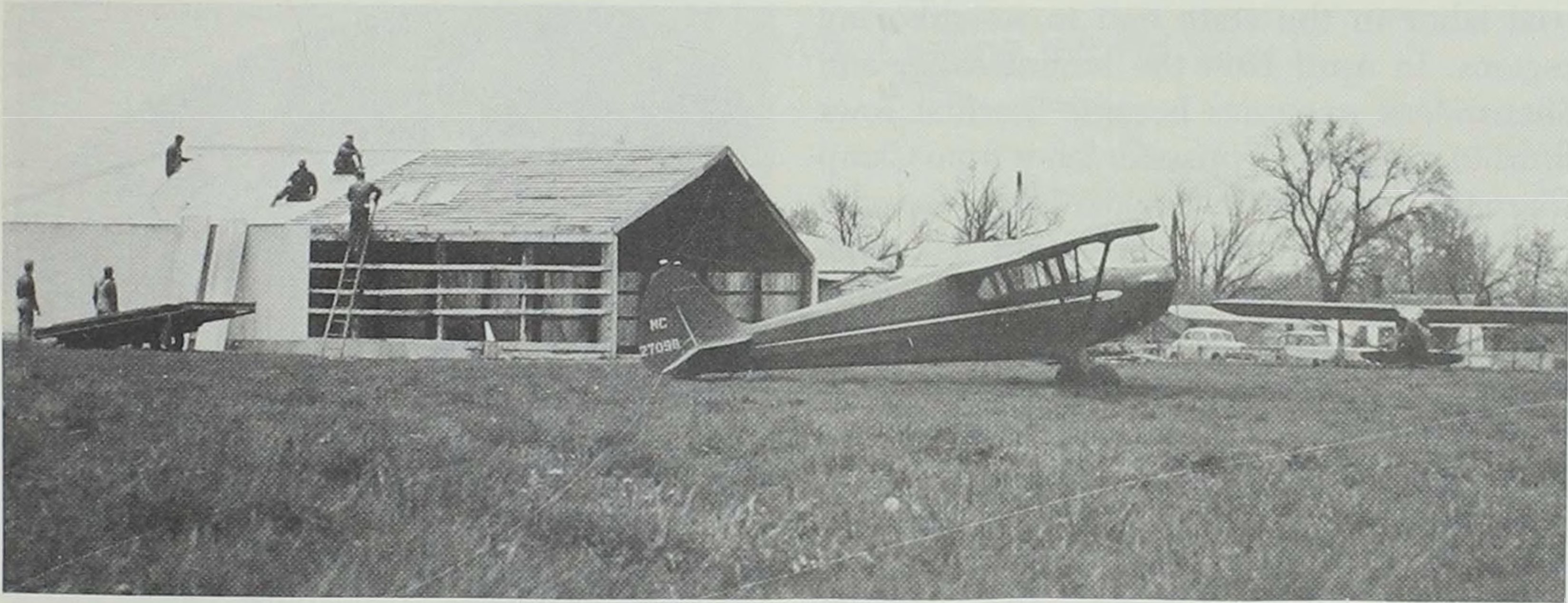
in the Pacific and during the longer period of military buildup in Britain and Ireland before beginning operations against the Axis powers in North Africa or Europe, the United States had simply not taken prisoners in any great number. The North African campaign changed all that. Thus, in 1942, the War Department found it was necessary to make decisions about moving prisoners to the United States and making provisions for them there. The decision to transfer prisoners to the United States was based in part upon the ease of transporting them in Liberty ships and other ships which would be returning in need of ballast after bringing their cargoes of men and matériel to the British Isles or elsewhere in the European war zone. In May 1943, following the defeat of Rommel's forces in North Africa, our prisoner hauls suddenly increased in size and soon the pipeline to the United States was delivering prisoners in great numbers. It has been estimated that there were less than 3,000 prisoners of war in the United States in March 1943 but that their number increased to over 53,000 by June of that year and to over 163,000 by September.

The biggest problem in this country was establishing camps to house the prisoners. Initially it was believed that they could be put in Civilian Conservation Corps camps which were no longer in use or in camps originally created for the internment of enemy aliens but the number of prisoners eventually forced the War Department to build new camps. The location of the camps was somewhat restricted as the army did not want prisoner of war camps in blacked-out coastal areas, in areas close to either the Canadian or Mexican borders, or in any area near shipyards or airplane factories. There were also serious questions raised about locating camps in or even near large urban areas. Consequently, camps tended to be located mainly in the South and Southwest.

Iowa, however, was to provide camps at two locations, Algona and Clarinda. The decision to build the two Iowa camps was announced in August 1943. The camps were twins of each other, each designed to hold 3,000 prisoners, with a guard complement of 500 and eight officers. They were to cost something in excess of \$1,000,000 each.

The impact on the towns of Algona and Clarinda was immediate and largely beneficial. At the outset there was an increase in the local labor force by upwards of 700 men involved in camp construction, even though labor shortages had become quite serious by late 1943 and the contractors were not always able to operate with full crews. Moreover, the construction workers needed housing. Clarinda city officials quickly realized that they might have to expand the city's water, light, and power capabilities if they were to furnish such services to the camp. Even the post offices had to prepare for boom times ahead since they would be handling mail for both prisoners and guards. And finally there were those patriotic responsibilities to fulfill such as establishing USO centers in both Clarinda and Algona for the American servicemen who would be part of the new local scene. In early November 1943, with construction underway at both sites, the *Des Moines Register* indicated the effect of the rapid changes on the citizens of Algona. It suggested that their first reaction to the news that a camp would be built near them was one of astonishment, then concern about whether it would be a good thing, and, finally, the *Register* stated that the citizens of Algona had adopted a mostly neutral but still slightly positive attitude toward the whole affair.

By mid-December 1943 the new commander of Camp Clarinda, Lieut. Col. Arthur T. Lobdell, arrived on the scene and began a public relations campaign to assuage any worries that local people might have about the camp. On 9 January 1944, with the camp vir-



Construction work began on Camp Clarinda in late September 1943. The Seventh Army Service Command believed the camp would be activated by 15 December 1943. (courtesy Ruth Shambaugh Watkins)

tually completed, and before the arrival of any prisoners, Lieut. Col. Lobdell even set up guided tours of the facility for the public. Two weeks later, on 24 January 1944, the first contingent of prisoners arrived to prepare Camp Clarinda for the arrival of the main group of prisoners.

The treatment of German prisoners of war was governed by the terms of the Geneva convention which provided for "guarantees of hygiene and healthfulness," and conditions in terms of housing and food which would be comparable to those of "troops at base camps of the detaining power." Provision further had to be made for care of the sick, religious freedom, and the encouragement of "intellectual diversions and sports." Moreover, under the terms of the Geneva convention, only privates were required to work and that work was carefully limited to tasks not directly in support of the war effort of the detaining power.

The War Department had begun to work out the terms of such prisoner labor in 1943 before the Iowa camps were opened. It found that care had to be taken to insure that prisoner labor was never allowed to compete with American labor for jobs. In 1943, however, and later in 1944, labor shortages in certain areas

made it possible to put prisoners to work outside the camps.

Prisoners certainly worked inside the camps from their arrival there. In the Iowa camps they functioned as cooks and bakers, as maintenance men, as cabinet makers, sign painters, and even, one Christmas, as toymakers for the children of their guards. Most importantly, however, they put in a very large victory garden at the camp near Clarinda. Initially it was planned to put much of the 120-acre garden into corn but the German prisoners had little appreciation for corn (or squash or sweet potatoes, for that matter) and seventy to eighty acres of the garden ended up in potatoes.

In addition to working in the Iowa camps, prisoners of war did a certain amount of volunteer work during the floods which threatened the Missouri Valley in spring and early summer of 1944. In April they were sandbagging on the dikes on the Iowa side of the river near Nebraska City, and in June German prisoners were credited with having saved 12,800 acres of land and the entire town of Percival by their later efforts on the river.

But eventually German prisoners of war in the Iowa camps became involved in easing the shortage of agricultural and indus-

trial labor in the state and in neighboring regions. In April 1944 the Mount Arbor and Shenandoah nurseries became the first Iowa firms to make use of prisoner labor from Camp Clarinda. Such labor, incidentally, was also covered by the Geneva convention. The prisoners were paid by the army while the army was paid the prevailing wage rate for labor by the contracting industries or farmers. Since the army then only paid the prisoners eighty cents a day, there was a sizable amount of money pocketed, as it were, by the government. Judith M. Gansberg, in her book *Stalag: U.S.A.*, has estimated that for 1944 that difference meant a profit on a national scale for the government of \$100 million from prisoner of war labor.

Shortages of agricultural labor in May 1944 brought prisoners from Camp Clarinda into the asparagus harvest in Fremont County. In late May 1944 a series of storms devastated several Iowa counties and prisoners were quickly put to work rebuilding fences, reconstructing barns, and repairing farm equipment. Later in August 1944, War Hemp, Inc., began to use Algona prisoners in its hemp processing plants, as did the Reinbeck Canning Company for its sweet corn pack.

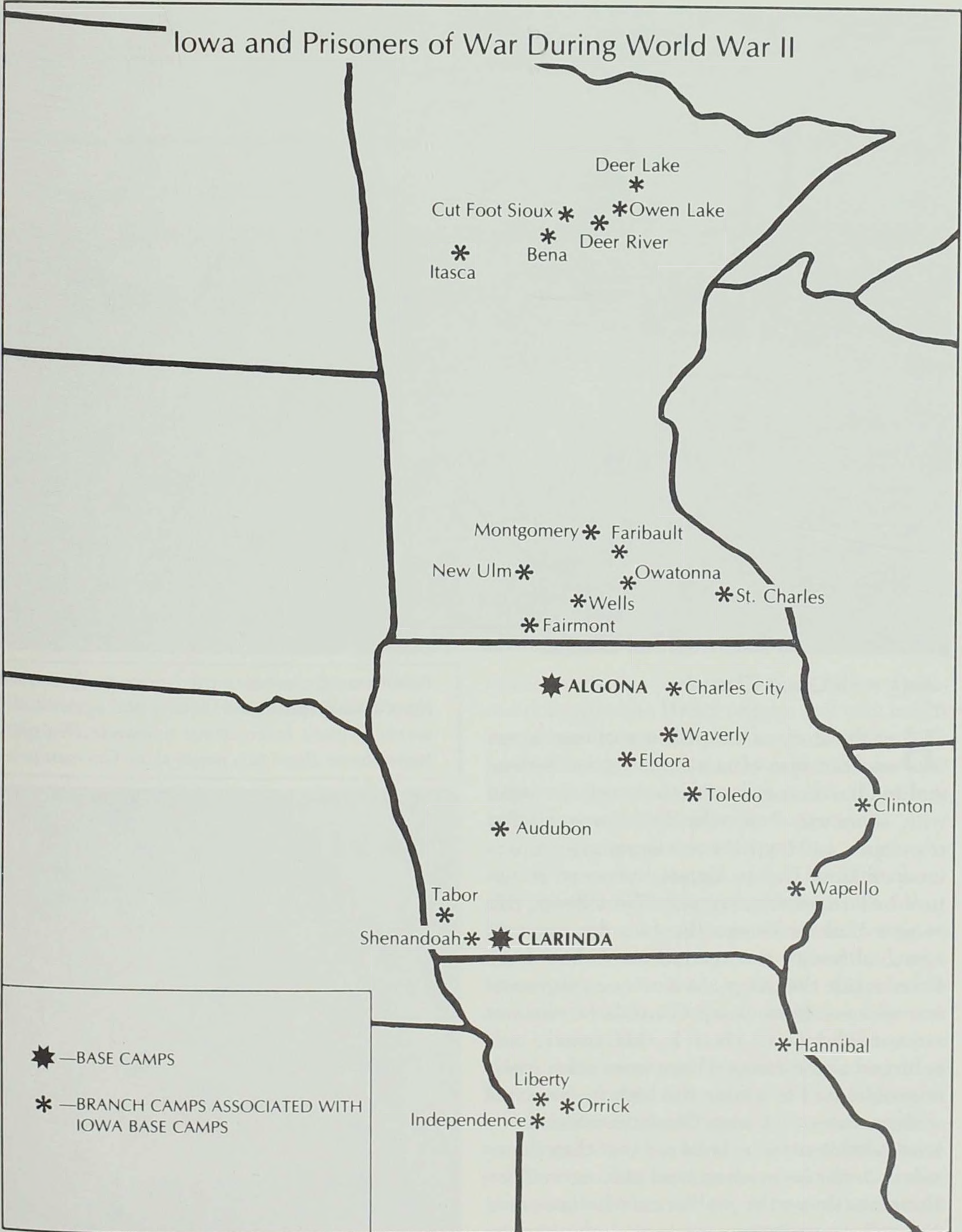
Finally a broad network of branch camps had to be built and staffed. Some of Camp Clarinda's branch camps included camps at Hannibal, Missouri, where prisoners were set to work sorting shoes, at Liberty, Missouri, where they worked in an alfalfa dehydration operation, at Wadsworth, Kansas, where they became involved in the construction of a veterans' hospital, and in Wapello and Audubon. Camp Algona maintained side camps at Eldora and Waverly while other prisoners from Algona worked for Pillsbury Mills, Inc., at Clinton. Camp Algona even had another eleven side lumber camps in Minnesota. Overall, at least twenty-two branch camps were associated with Camp Algona during the course of the war, as were at least ten branch

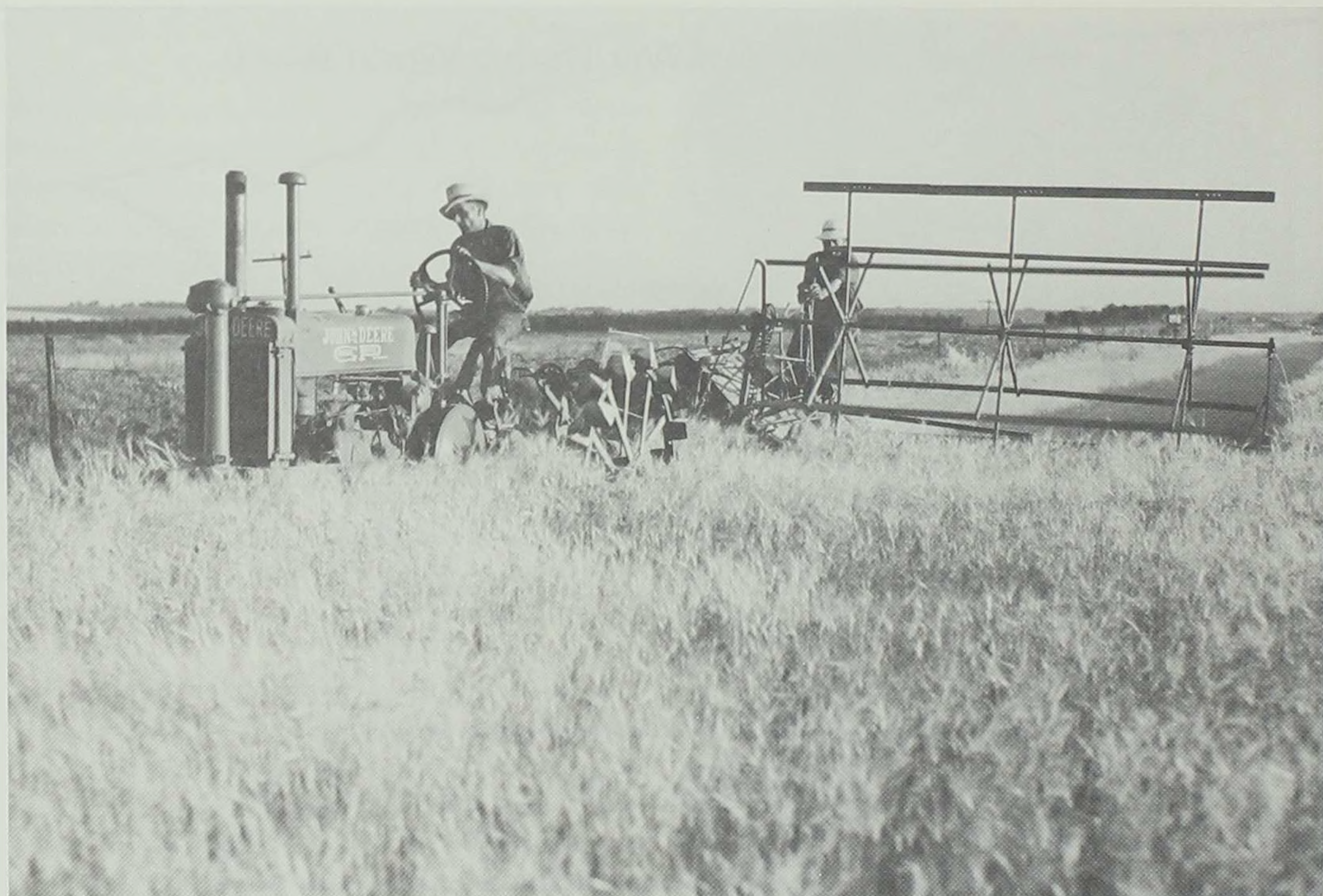


Lieut. Col. Arthur T. Lobdell, Army Engineers Corps, was named commanding officer of Camp Clarinda in early December 1943. He worked closely with members of the community to calm any fears created by the proximity of prisoners of war. In June 1944 Lobdell was transferred to Algona to assume command of the prisoner of war camp there. (courtesy Ruth Shambaugh Watkins)

Opposite: While incomplete information prevents the pinpointing of all the branch camps associated with Camps Algona and Clarinda between 1944 and 1946, the map is illustrative of the breadth of the branch camp network and the places where prisoner of war labor was used to help ease the wartime shortage of labor.

Iowa and Prisoners of War During World War II





camps with Camp Clarinda.

But the story of the prisoner of war camps was not one of continuous good feeling and amelioration and volunteer work. To begin with, there was always the threat or possibility of escapes. In May 1944 two German prisoners escaped from Camp Algona but were recaptured shortly thereafter near West Bend. (No sooner back in camp, the two disappeared again, although the second time they were found inside the camp.) At least one prisoner of war escaped from Camp Clarinda but he was recaptured near Orrick, Missouri, and returned to the camp. There were other kinds of problems. For a time the high incidence of malaria cases at Camp Clarinda worried the local inhabitants who believed that they themselves might be in some kind of danger. Then there was always the problem of whether or not internal camp governance was dominated by

Prisoners of war were used extensively to ease the wartime shortage of labor, and agricultural workers were in constant demand. The photographs on these two pages show German pris-





German prisoners of war at work on a haying crew near Clarinda, c. 1944-1945. (courtesy Ruth Shambaugh Watkins)



hard-line Nazis who were seeking to keep prisoners loyal to the Hitler regime and who might try to maintain such loyalties by tactics which could lead to murder or suicide. There was little surface indication that this problem existed to any degree in the Iowa camps.

Far more serious was a question which was raised by many citizens of this country about the possible 'coddling' of prisoners. The War Department made serious efforts to live up to the letter of the Geneva convention and, as a consequence, German prisoners did receive treatment similar to that given base soldiers in the United States Army. Difficulties arose when it became apparent that, in the world of the home front, that world of shortages and going without, there were many citizens who were not living on a level equal to our own base soldiers or the captured prisoners. German prisoners themselves were oftentimes astonished at the treatment they received in

the camps. It has been suggested by some that some German prisoners never lived so well in their entire military career as they did in captivity in this country. They had mail privileges, they could have visits from relatives in the United States, they could pursue their education, and their food was at times so good that American personnel preferred to eat the food

prepared by the German cooks in the prisoner of war mess halls.

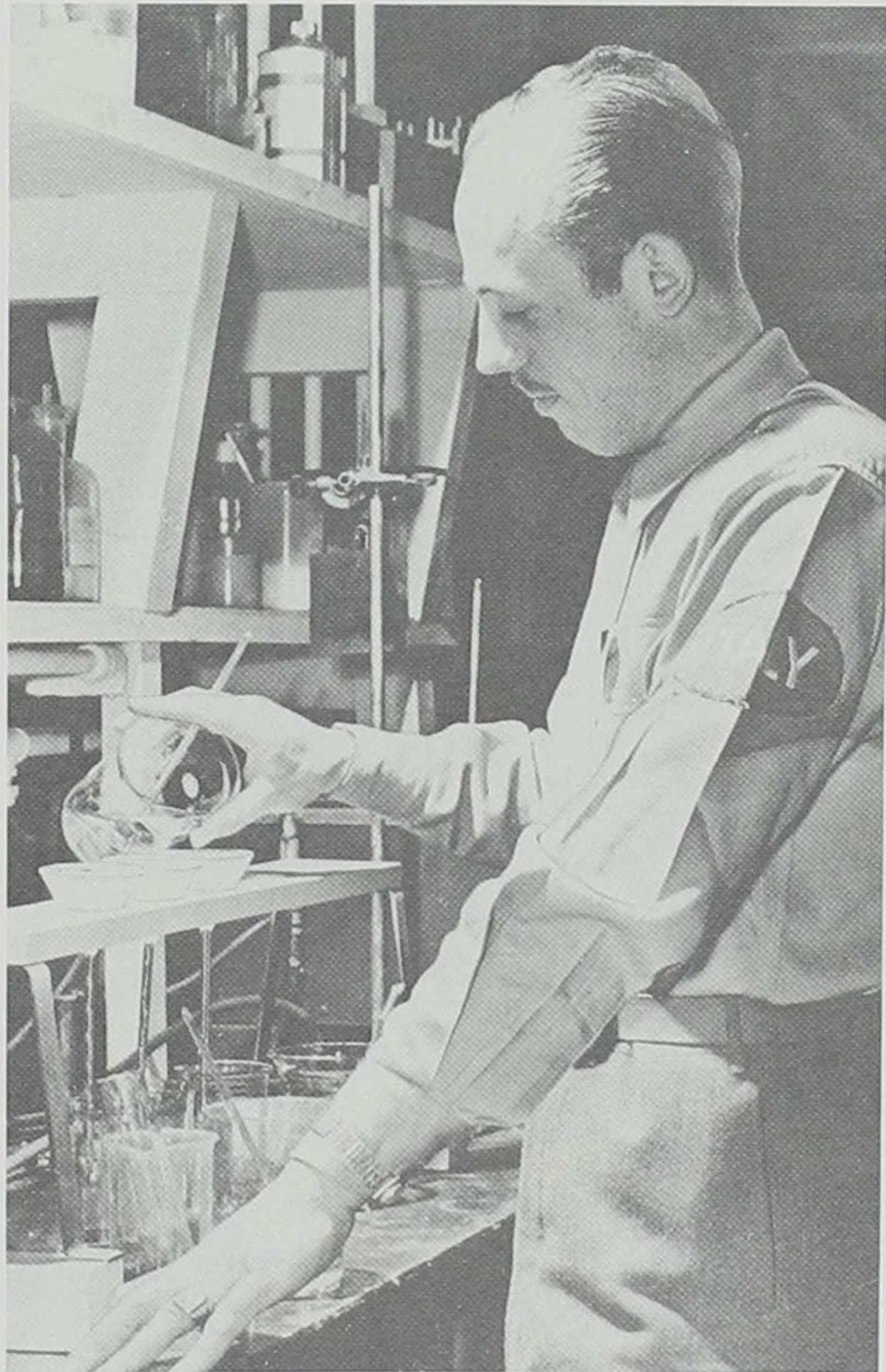
As the war progressed, the degree of our enmity increased with the atrocities of the Battle of the Bulge and the indications of the manner in which our own prisoners were being treated in Germany and elsewhere, and there began a series of outcries against 'coddling'.



Several hundred Italians worked in two service units at the Rock Island Arsenal between 1944 and 1945. Primarily, they were assigned to heavy work, such as moving boxes and crates, salvage work, or general cleanup. (courtesy Des Moines Register)

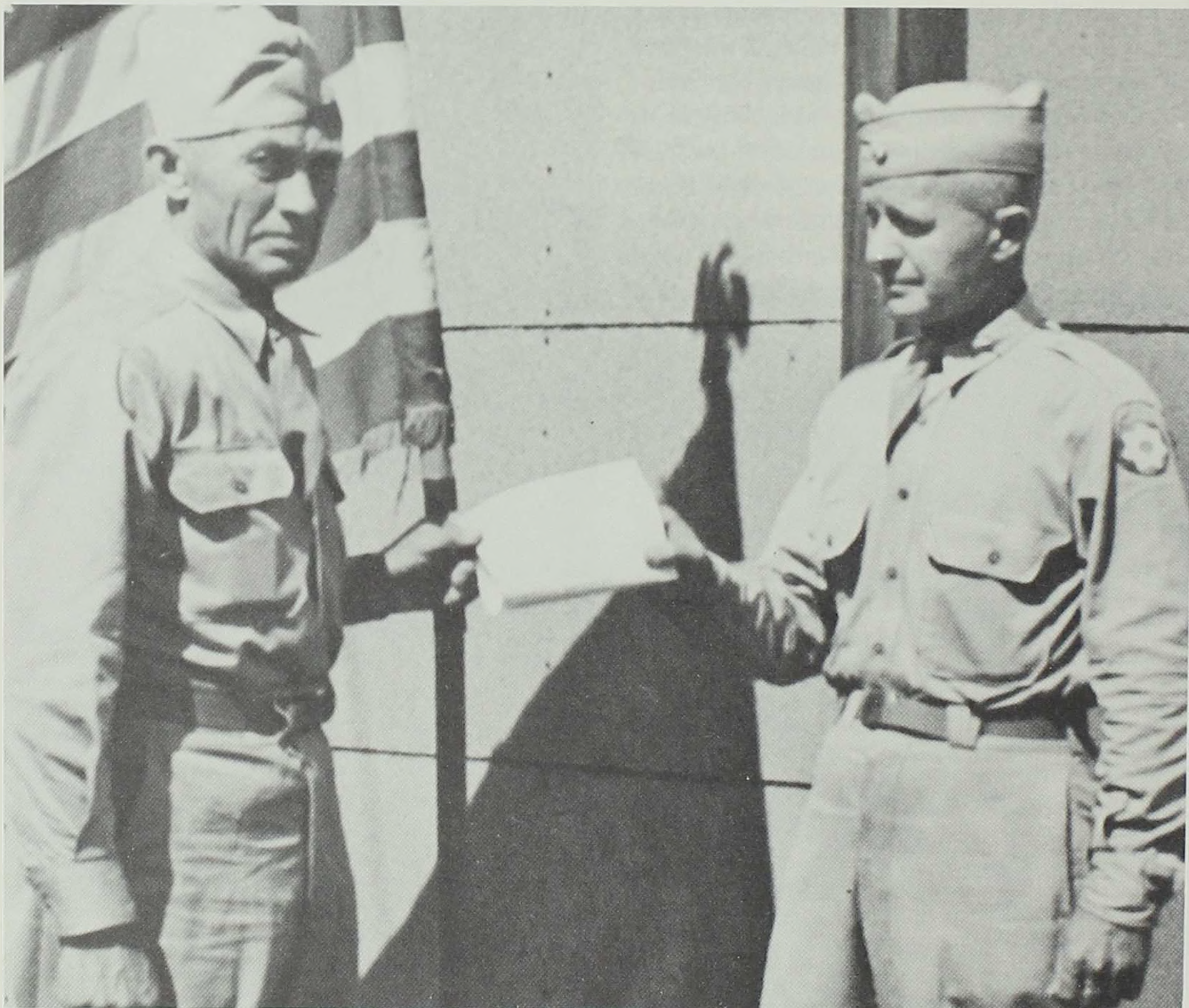
There were rumors that dances were being held at one camp in Pennsylvania. It was true that the prisoners at Camp Algona had managed to buy a used grand piano with \$750 taken from their canteen profits. Finally, in August 1944, Representative Andrew May of Kentucky announced an investigation of camps in Pennsylvania and Kentucky after having heard of prisoners being taken to movies and other places out of the camps. By February 1945 a variety of congressmen were warming to the task of castigating anyone who might be responsible for "pampering prisoners of war." In one speech Representative Sikes of Florida talked about "frequent accounts of the good food, cigarettes, and candies enjoyed by German prisoners. Elaborate menus are printed, many of them showing meat point requirements higher than those available to American citizens." Representative Sikes yielded the floor to Representative Charles B. Hoeven of Alton, Iowa, who added: "I am glad the gentleman has brought this matter to the attention of the country. I know of a prison camp in the Midwest which is supplied with every luxury — innerspring beds, the newest type of Frigidaire, and the finest food. At the same time I know of a hospital which has been trying to get a priority on a new Frigidaire and has been unable to get it."

In an aside, it might be pointed out that particular animosity was at times visited on the Italian prisoners of war whose status in this country had been horribly complicated by the fact that Italy had joined us in the war as a cobelligerent. The United States government could not send the Italians back to Italy but some attempt had to be made to place them in a different category than the German prisoners of war in this country. The result was to check out Italian prisoners (or former prisoners) very carefully and then to form large numbers of them into special service units which were allowed to function with a greater degree of



A few members of the Italian service units had specialized skills valuable to the work of the arsenal. Lieut. Lucianno Carpi, an industrial chemist, helped ease the shortage of civilian chemists by working in the arsenal laboratory. (courtesy Des Moines Register)

freedom and often without guards. Additionally, they were allowed to work in jobs more directly related to the war effort. Thus some 400 of them were assigned to the Rock Island Arsenal. During the first half of 1945 this group came increasingly under fire from such groups as the Marine Dads club of Rock Island. There were charges that the Italians had bothered local girls while being marched to church, that they had engaged in drinking parties with girls, that they were getting popular brands of cigarettes in quantity when such were not available



Lieut. Col. George W. Ball, right, served as commandant of Camp Clarinda after Lieut. Col. Lobbell's transfer to Camp Algona, and throughout the period of Camp Clarinda's service as one of the few Japanese prisoner of war camps in the United States. (courtesy Ruth Shambaugh Watkins)

to the civilian population, and there was even a charge that they had caused an ice cream shortage in Rock Island.

Sensitive to all charges of 'coddling', officers in charge of the various camps did tend to reduce cigarette rations for prisoners, to substitute oleomargarine for butter in their rations, and generally to attempt to assuage the anger of the civilian population without breaking the spirit of the Geneva convention. They were intent upon not endangering our own prisoners abroad.

With one group of prisoners, however, there was never any hint of 'coddling'. On 1 February 1945 there was an announcement that Camp Clarinda would shortly begin a process of replacing its German prisoners with Japanese prisoners. It was to be one of two camps in the United States taking Japanese prisoners at the time; the other was Camp McCoy, Wisconsin. Within a few days of the announcement, a letter to the editor of the *Des Moines Register* was printed which included a suggestion that perhaps former American pris-



The Oscar Youngmark home before the Clarinda prisoner of war camp was constructed. (courtesy Ruth Shambaugh Watkins)

Ruth Shambaugh Watkins, a cub reporter for the Clarinda Herald-Journal during the summer of 1944, recently reinterviewed Mrs. Oscar Youngmark regarding her memories of the building of Camp Clarinda.

Time has done little to ease the sense of disappointment and loss that Mrs. Youngmark still feels about the necessity of giving up the family farm to make way for Clarinda's prisoner of war camp: "I tried to rationalize and not feel bitter, because, after all, we were only giving up our farm while so many others were losing sons or daughters to the war effort. But that home place had been in the family for fifty years! My grandpa built it in 1890 and I was born just a mile away, on some of the other land that was also condemned [for the camp]."

The 70-acre Youngmark farm was only one of several farms condemned by the government during the summer of 1943 to make up the 293-acre camp area. It was prime Nodaway River Valley bottomland—level, excellent, and flat farm land. It was also just the kind of land the government needed for the camp site: "I happened to look out the window and saw some fellow surveying — out

there on the road in front of our place. Then one Sunday morning, not too much later, they'd cut down about four rows of corn from our field . . . without saying anything to anybody — and they were out there surveying in the corn field! Oscar went out to talk to the surveyors, but they didn't tell [him] anything. Oscar always said 'if you want to find out anything you have to go uptown,' and that's where he finally learned what was going on — some fellows up there thought they knew, or at least this rumor was going around about a POW camp going to be built."

A considerable resettlement process was involved for the Youngmarks after their farm was condemned: "they held an auction and we bought back quite a few of the buildings, including the house, but everything had to be torn down before we could have it again. . . . [W]e had to live in town for two years before we could find another farm to buy. . . . [A]fter everything was all torn down and we'd moved to town, a U.S. Marshal appeared at our door to serve the [condemnation] papers. I always did think that was the oddest thing. Putting the cart before the horse! He came to tell us we had to move — after all that!"

oners freed by MacArthur would make good guards at Clarinda. Whatever neutrality or attempt at fair play had been the hallmark of the German phase of life at Camp Clarinda, such was not to be a feature of the Japanese phase. Both civilians and the military seemed to have had too vivid a memory of what had gone on in the Pacific since that fateful day in December 1941. Lieut. Col. George W. Ball, Lieut. Col. Lobdell's successor as commandant at Clarinda, made that abundantly clear. An article in the *Des Moines Register* on 8 April 1945 described Lieut. Col. Ball as openly despising the Japanese prisoners. It was pointed out in the article that that hatred was shared not only by the officers and enlisted men at Camp Clarinda but also by the remainder of the German contingent at the camp. Lieut. Col. Ball's description of the life of the Japanese prisoners at Clarinda made it very clear that attitudes were vastly different than they had been prior to the arrival of the Japanese. Summing it all up in his own terms, he said: "The German was far more desirable. They looked you in the eye. The Jap doesn't."

Finally the war ended. But for prisoners of war in this country, it did not end in either the month of May or the month of August in 1945. Delays followed upon delays as harvest needs and other labor demands came into play to set back final repatriation. It was not until early October 1945 that the Japanese prisoners of war were shipped out of Clarinda by rail, bound for agricultural work in the San

Joaquin, California, area. The War Department suggested that they would be returned to Japan at the end of the harvesting season. Their departure left only 500 German prisoners in the Clarinda camp, and by mid-October they, too, had been shipped to other areas in need of agricultural labor. The Clarinda prisoner of war camp was ordered closed at midnight, 1 December 1945. In mid-January 1946 the 293-acre Clarinda camp was declared surplus and "designated for disposal as an airport" by the Surplus Property Administration. The Algona camp was even slower to close. The majority of its German prisoners were transferred to Fort Crook, Nebraska, in January and early February 1946. It was not until midnight of 15 February 1946, however, that the Algona camp closed, and Iowa's prisoner of war camps experience came to an end. □

Note on Sources

Several good sources were available for the preparation of this article. The *Des Moines Register* for the period from 1943 to 1946 was excellent in its coverage of Iowa's prisoner of war camps. Betty Malvern Ankeny's compilation of *Clarinda Herald-Journal* articles relating to the Clarinda prisoner of war camp was also valuable. Ruth Shambaugh Watkins provided invaluable assistance in terms of interviewing Clarinda residents directly affected by the camp — as in the case of Mrs. Oscar Youngmark, whose farm land and home was condemned to make way for the prisoner of war camp — and providing the editor with photographs to accompany the article. Judith M. Gansberg's *Stalag: U.S.A.* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1977) and Byron Fairchild and Jonathan Grossman's *The Army and Industrial Manpower* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1959) were consulted, as were the *Council Bluffs Daily Nonpareil*, the *New York Times*, and the *Congressional Record* for early 1945. The editor should like to thank Dr. Raymond A. Smith, Jr., for the time, patience, and assistance he gave to this project.