

# BERTHOUD

THEN & NOW

## German POWs worked on Berthoud farms in 1940s

Sixty years ago during the summer of 1944 when every American's attention was riveted on World War II, crews of German prisoners were used as laborers on local farms.

Many were veterans of Rommel's North Africa desert campaign before their capture and relocation to prisoners of War Camp 202 near Greeley.

Once in Northern Colorado, many

were employed as agricultural workers to replace local men who were working in munitions plants or fighting overseas. Under the watchful eyes of combat veterans who served as armed guards, they helped local farmers for nearly two years from March 1944 to February 1946.

Many of the prisoners who worked on farms in the Berthoud area were detained at Camp 202, which was located several miles west of Greeley on U.S. Highway 34.

The camp held as many as 3,000 POWs and was one of over 150 large POW camps spread across the United States. Branch camps in Ault, Eaton, Fort Lupton and Johnstown contained smaller numbers of men who also worked in the area.

Berthoud resident Bob Lebsack was a teenaged farm boy living east of town in 1944 when his father gave

him the job of transporting German prisoners from Camp 202 to Berthoud in a farm truck.

Lebsack left the family farm east of Berthoud at 5 a.m. in order to get a POW crew of 10 to 12 men back and working in the field by 7 a.m.

The prisoners rode on plank benches in the back of the truck while a guard armed with a carbine accompanied Lebsack in the cab.

Lebsack remembers, "One of the guys didn't work. He was a lieutenant from the tank corps named Harry-Heinz Fischer. His responsibility was to see that his men finished the job on time. If they were expected to thin three acres of sugar beets, he saw that they did it."

The armed guard also patrolled the field while the men worked.

At the Lebsack farm, prisoners thinned beets and picked sweet corn, cucumbers and peas.

"All they were allowed to do was hand labor. They were prohibited from driving tractors or trucks," Lebsack said.

Like many area farmers, the Lebsacks stretched the rules by giving the prisoners snacks and tobacco when they worked hard. Young Lebsack became acquainted with Lieutenant Fischer who was a court clerk before the war and spoke English.

When the German soldier departed, he gave Lebsack a book as a present and corresponded later by mail.

Retired Berthoud farmer Gene Kiehn also remembers his father transporting POW crews from Greeley to help harvest beets. Kiehn's parents, Fred and Lottie, were German by heritage and conversed fluently in that language even though it was discouraged by the guards.

Even so, the guards would occasionally ask them what the POWs

were saying and tell Fred to command the slackers to get to work.

Kiehn recalls the POWs fell into two distinct groups: the younger die-hard Nazis who remained defiant and labored grudgingly and the older men who were compliant and willing to work. The latter, who were well-liked, said they hoped to stay in America if given the chance.

The POW laborers were sent from the camp each day with frugal sack lunches of dry bread and sausage. Kiehn's mother occasionally supplemented their noon-day meal by serving the kettles of boiled potatoes on tables set up in the shade of the driveway.

Rules assuring the humane treatment of prisoners were followed closely. At Camp 202, for instance, POWs had privileges to watch movies, take classes and play baseball or soccer. Those who were transported to area farms to work were never assigned jobs that might result in serious injury.

Vernon French, who began farming in the Berthoud area in 1944, recalled using a POW crew to fill an upright silo with corn silage that year.

"We had one blonde-headed boy about nineteen years old named Heinz Thisslering who was a member of the German Air Force," he said. "He was smart and a real help."

"I was putting up the silo blower and I explained to him what I was doing. I told him that somebody was going to have to take a rope and a pulley to the top of the silo. I figured that I'd be doing that myself.

"All of the sudden I hear a yell from the top of the silo and looked up. Here came the guard yelling, 'Get that guy down or you and I both will be going to jail if he falls!' I looked up and there was that blonde-haired kid

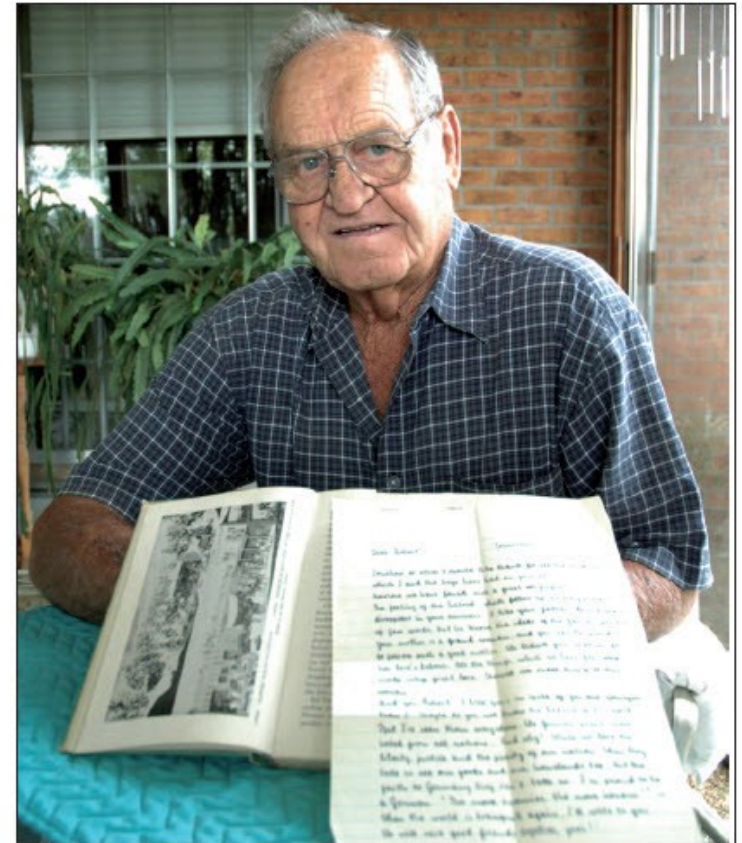


Photo by Rick Padden

**Bob Lebsack of Berthoud displays a book he was given by a German prisoner of war in 1944. A group of German POWs worked on Berthoud farms during World War II.**

walking 60 feet above ground on the edge of the concrete silo. He grinned and hollered down, 'Where do you want the pulley tied?'"

French added, "After the war we received a letter from him. We couldn't read German and felt so helpless. That experience stayed with us a long time."

While the loss of American lives during World War II must never be forgotten, the presence of German prisoners in Northern Colorado gave

local residents the opportunity to demonstrate compassion during a time of conflict.

To many, a POW working in a field was someone's loved one who was completely dependent on the mercy of others.

It must have been a secret hope that if their friend or relative fighting in the war was trapped in a similar situation, he would be treated with an equal measure of kindness.

### Tales of the Little Thompson



Surveyor Columnist **Mark French**