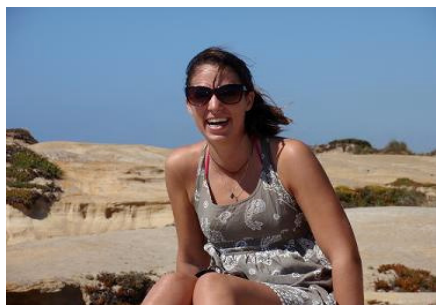


## From Turkey Farm to War Camp: The Prisoners of Clay County

By Kelsey Rogers



*Kelsey Rogers is a recent graduate of William Jewell College with a degree in Biochemistry. While in college, she served as the Vice-President of the student body, was a member of many science honor societies, Mortar Board, and as a resident assistant in a freshman woman's dorm. Most of her time was spent researching the death mechanism behind Alzheimer's disease, which allowed her to travel to Lisbon, Portugal for a summer to collaborate with other scientists researching the same topic. During her travels around Europe, she fell in love with writing and decided to switch*

*from pursuing a career in the sciences to one in the writing world. Currently Kelsey is living in Eagle Pass, Texas working as an intern to help start a women's shelter. She plans to apply to graduate schools for a writing program for the following school year.*

Two miles south of Liberty, near the intersection of what is now Highways 210 and 291, sits a large slab of concrete set off a ways from the main road. Most would never notice the unnatural block, but to six hundred foreigners it holds a great significance. Unbeknownst to many, German Prisoners of War from Rommel's 5th North African Corps called this concrete home for nearly two years during World War II.

The concrete slab began its life as the floor of a laying house for the Desert Gold Turkey Farm. Its main purpose in 1942 was to house hens to lay eggs to produce as many as 30,000 turkeys a year. The building on top of the concrete slab stretched 650 feet from one end to the other. It had fifty-one rooms, each with a window, and a door that opened to a long hallway. The building was separated with a fifty-foot room in the center for feed and egg handling. The laying house and the remainder of Desert Gold Turkey Farm were owned and operated by Leon and Henrietta Miller.

The United States' entrance into World War II brought a new lifestyle for all Americans. Men were being drafted, everyday items had to be rationed, and everyone was responsible for doing their part for the war effort. In a time where most men were being drafted to fight overseas, farming families in the Midwest were buckling down for a long hard fight. While the farmers' jobs didn't change, the availability of helping hands did. Before December, farming families were responsible for feeding the nation. Now they were encouraged to produce as much as possible, while rationing their supplies, and without extra field hands, having lost them to the draft. The farming families in Clay County were not exempt from this new change. Leon and Henrietta Miller's family, completed by five sons and two daughters, were responsible for the entire process of the turkey farm, from the overseeing of the laying hens all the way to the preparation and distribution of the adult turkeys.

The lack of help on the farmland led many to look for alternate means of aid. In 1943, the Millers were approached by members of the War and Labor Board, asking for permission to house Prisoners of War in their laying house. The Millers at the time "didn't feel like they had a choice," (Miller, 1990) and stepped up to do their part in the war effort. The laying house was converted rapidly into a "war camp," with a large wire fence surrounding the area complete with guard towers at each corner. Fifty American guards from Ft. Leavenworth were sent to oversee the proceedings as well as maintain security within the camp.

In April of 1944, 600 soldiers arrived at the Work Camp, they were described as "6 feet tall and at least 175 pounds with powerful arms and leg muscles" (Miller 1990) Phillip Miller, one of Miller's sons said,

“they looked like they were cloned, all with blond hair and blue-eyes...” (Fiedler, pg 350). The POWs changed life drastically for the Millers. The first major change was that now instead of hens occupying the laying house, prisoners wearing clothing marked with the letters POW had taken their place. To combat the lack of turkey eggs, the Millers immediately set in motion plans to buy young turkeys from another farm to keep their production numbers high. Other changes included the rules regarding the prisoners. No pictures of the camp were allowed, and women could not visit, forcing Henrietta and her daughters to stay near the house. The three oldest sons however were often allowed to accompany their father to the laying house. The boys got to interact with the prisoners and even became good friends with some of them.

The main purpose of the POWs at Desert Gold was to replace the farm hands that had been drafted and aid farmers wherever there was a need. Farmers could simply write to the heads of the War and Labor Board to request prisoners for aid. (Labor Situation, 1944). Teams of German prisoners would be sent out in groups of ten with a German foreman and an armed guard to potato fields, apple orchards, dehydrating plants, stockyards, and other jobs not related to the war effort. One group was responsible for planting a semicircle of trees near what is now Highway H, which can still be seen today. (Fiedler, pg. 348)

The Work Camp was set up to let the prisoners be self-sufficient. They were responsible for their meals and as the Miller sons remember, they were often impressed by the German food. (Miller 1990). In the evenings after dinner, POWs spent time on their own gardens made in the hills of the farmland the Miller’s provided to the War and Labor Board, spent time playing soccer on a converted field, or playing cards and listening to the radio. One can imagine that many of the conversations centered on the false German propoganda they had received while fighting in Africa. In one eye-opening situation, a prisoner ran a saw blade through his hand and he was taken to a hospital in Kansas City. While looking out the window on the top floor, he commented on the status of the city. He couldn’t believe that it was still standing, and in perfect shape. German propoganda had declared that the city was bombed. (Miller 1990)

Records show that there were no official attempts at escaping while prisoners were housed at the Desert Gold turkey farm, though one prisoner missed the truck back to the War Camp after the days work ended. He was found later, walking the road outside of Orrick Missouri, trying to make his way back to camp. (Fiedler, 350)

The papers argued that it was better to have war camps in the United States rather than prisoners following behind American Troops while they were fighting abroad. On top of the huge task of caring and guarding the prisoners, it would not have been strategically smart to have enemies behind American soldier lines, even if they were in captivity. This, along with the shortage in helping hands, made the War Camps very useful to those in the area. As ironic as it seemed, the prisoners were filling in where Americans had stepped out to fight the war. They were often the driving force that allowed the farmers in Clay County to keep their farms functioning at the highest level needed to supply the rest of the nation.

The concrete slab and the row of trees on Highway H are now all that remains of the Prisoner of War camp outside of Liberty. The story is one that is only remembered by the Millers, the guards, the prisoners, and a handful of farmers that required aid during the time. Their presence was not advertised and they were shipped in quietly on that first day in April to avoid those in the area who were not comfortable with the enemy being so nearby. It was one of those stories that, for ease and safety sake, was kept quiet while the prisoners were living at Desert Gold. Now, because so few knew of the prisoners, the story of their presence is simply fading into history. However, if you are taking a drive

south on Highway H, the unnatural placement of a semi-circle of trees may be just enough to catch your attention and keep the story around for a few more years to come.

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