



THE CATHOLIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Diocese of Amarillo



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“Italian Prisoners of War”

Bouncing across tall grass pastures at night on the hood of a model T, shooting at jackrabbits with a 12-gauge shotgun borrowed from Fr. Krukkert...



Let's say you're driving southwest on US Highway 60 out of Canyon toward Hereford, the Panhandle plains around you flat and treeless, the road straight and true. There's a good chance that the scattering of houses, an abandoned grain elevator and a few commercial buildings known as Umbarger might not register, particularly if you blink. Umbarger was founded by German and-Swiss immigrant farmers from Nebraska more than a century ago.

You also might miss St. Mary's Catholic Church, an unremarkable tan-brick building with belfry just off the highway. And that's too bad, because inside those church doors is not only an astonishing sight, but also an intriguing World War II-era story that Umbarger residents are proud to tell. Hereford, 20 miles to the west, was home to an 800-acre prisoner of war camp that homed some 3,000 Italian prisoners of war, most of whom were captured in North Africa. In the fall of 1945, with the end of the war in Europe and in the wake of unspeakable concentration camp atrocities, American attitudes hardened toward German and Italian POWs being held in camps around the United States. Aware of the shocking photos of bodies and skeletal concentration camp survivors, the Army colonel in charge at Hereford took it upon himself to drastically reduce both privileges and rations. The POWs began to lose weight and to get sick. Some were reduced to eating grasshoppers and rattle snakes, maybe even stray dogs and cats.

Conditions eased a bit after the Bishop of Amarillo, Laurence J. FitzSimon, wrote a letter to his congressman detailing the harsh conditions. He reminded the congressman that the Italian POWs had not committed war crimes, were not criminal Fascists and deserved to be treated humanely.

Letter to Congress from Bishop L. J. FitzSimon Regarding Mistreatment of POWS

I deeply appreciate your letter to the officials in charge of surplus war Property as I received an immediate reply and now everything is proceeding satisfactorily. Many thanks.

Relative to the other matter I mentioned over the phone and about which you asked me to write, I have been able to make a few more personal investigations and to secure additional information regarding the conditions to which the Italian Prisoners of War at the Hereford Camp have been subjected since about the first week of June, 1945. To supplement my letter, I am sending some papers obtained from the camp. One is the translation of a letter sent by one of the Medical Officers to Senior Officer (General Scattaglia) which was to be used in directing an appeal to the Provost Marshall General, the Italian Ambassador and the Apostolic Delegate. I do not know if the letter was ever sent or any answer received. I am also enclosing copies of calorie estimations for various periods since June 1.

I have visited the camp several times during the past two years, or since it was first established. As these prisoners are practically all of the Catholic Faith, it has been my duty as well as a pleasure to visit them in the compounds and I have held a number of religious services attended by the prisoners. It has been my fortune to have studied in Italy where I acquired a fair knowledge of Italian; consequently, I have been able not only to converse with the men but also to address them in a more formal manner. My visits to the prisoners were always attended

by a considerable display of military honors and I am happy to report that I was welcomed in each compound with every outward demonstration of pleasure and enthusiasm. I have always found the Italian prisoners extremely happy under the circumstances of their confinement and I admired the consideration with which they were treated by our American guards.

However, early this year I heard that the Hereford Camp was being converted into a concentration camp for the Fascist Italian prisoners. When I visited the camp late in the spring, I was told that the camp was filled with the criminal Fascist element. Expecting to find a camp of gangsters, I was somewhat afraid to enter, but the Chaplain assured me that I did not need to fear. It is true that I did not find any of the soldiers I had met before, but after speaking with many of them I saw no reason why should have been classed as criminals. They appeared to be contented; at least as much as it was possible for prisoners of war to be contented. I could learn nothing about the reasons why these men were placed in a separate class or how they had been approached by our Officers when they had to declare their political beliefs. At any rate they had then no reason to complain about their treatment. Early in June of this year, I began to hear reports that new rules, emanating from Washington, had been adopted in the treatment of prisoners of war. I was told that their food was being reduced; the camp stores were closed so that they could buy no extra food or cigarettes; and further-

more they were not to receive any packages by mail. They were also forced to surrender any souvenir or trinket such as they had bought to bring home to their families in Italy. They were being treated with the utmost severity by the guards. This new policy came after our V-E day and shortly after the discovery of the horrible atrocities the Nazis had practiced on their prisoners. As soon as possible I visited the camp in order to determine for myself the truth of these reports.

I drove over to Hereford on July 5, and accompanied by the Catholic chaplain, I made a tour of the compounds. I immediately noticed a changed attitude. I spoke to groups in the barracks chapels, but my words had no apparent effect. Many just stared at me in a sullen, defiant attitude; others turned their faces away; some cried. There wasn't much that I could say either when I heard from individuals what had happened. I finally visited the Italian Officers' compound, where I spent some time to learn the whole story. The first complaint was the food. They showed me a list of calories received during the most of June. This report I am enclosing. Since about V-E Day the rations have been reduced to the minimum necessary to sustain life; nor could the prisoners satisfy their hunger by purchasing in the canteens or receive any parcels of food from the outside. Such parcels were, I was told, returned to the senders. At noon I had lunch with the prisoners. We were served a bowl of weak watery soup containing pieces of gummy-like spaghetti, but absolutely tasteless, as

the concoction was made without any salt, or so little that it was most unpalatable. After this dish-water soup, we each had a dry over-salted herring. I saw some of the men hold back their soup for the herring course and dip the herring into the soup to give it a little salt. Then we had bread and water and that was all. After saying our prayers, we left the mess hall. I was then interested to know what would be served for dinner. I was shown the contents of the kitchen cold-storage room. In it I saw some tubs of pig's feet, sacks of moldy looking potatoes and a basket of over-ripe tomatoes. After talking with the prisoners a while, I visited the hospital. I am glad to say that I heard no unusual complaints from the patients about their treatment there.

The letter continued in this vein and ended: "In behalf of the Italian Prisoners of War at Hereford and in accordance with the highest Christian principles which, I am sure you share with me, I am pleading with you to relieve these unfortunates from their misery..."



Gifted Artisans

For a select few, conditions eased dramatically when the Rev. John H. Krukkert, the newly appointed St. Mary's pastor, discovered that gifted artisans and artists were among the prison population. Krukkert had just moved to the Panhandle from southern California, where he owned a white stucco beach house with a landscaped yard, brilliant flowers and a tiled cliff's-edge patio looking out over the Pacific. In Umbarger he peered out his parsonage window at, well, not the blue Pacific, to be sure.

St. Mary's church, built in 1929 on the cusp of the Depression, was about as drab as the surrounding landscape, so this lover of art and architecture hit upon the idea of enlisting the nearby POWs to decorate the sanctuary. They refused initially, until Krukkert told them: "I can't pay you, but I can feed you." Five days a week for the next six weeks, 11 POWs – nine artists and artisans and two helpers – climbed into the back of a truck and rode the 20 miles to Umbarger. Their "guard" and driver was an Army sergeant from Pennsylvania named John Coyle. In addition to becoming their friend, Coyle helped the POW's increase

their protein intake. Bouncing across tall grass pastures at night on the hood of a Model T driven by local farmer Meinrad Hollenstein, the sergeant would fire at jackrabbits with a 12-gauge shotgun borrowed from Fr. Krukkert. With an estimated 400 rabbits per square mile, it didn't take long before he had dozens of the long-eared creatures, considered pests by Panhandle farmers. Back home, Hollenstein would skin and gut the animals for the Italians. To get past the prison guards, they would tie the carcasses to their belt loops and let them hang down inside their loose-fitting pants.



Sergeant John Coyle

"If Coyle had ever been caught, he would have lost all his stripes, but they never got caught," recalled Jerri Skarke Gerber, who was a teenager at the time. "Next time they were going to do that, Franco Di Bello, who spoke perfect English, he come up to Mr. Hollenstein and said, 'Would you please just leave the fur on? That sure is cold and sticky when you stick it down in your trousers.'"



Geraldine Skarke Gerber

Lifelong Member

Gerber, a lifelong church member who has spent all of her 93 years in and around Umbarger, was a pretty and personable 18-year-old when the POW's came to St. Mary's. A sight for sore Italian eyes, she helped her mother and the other church women prepare and serve meals. (She also confesses to kissing the dashing Di Bello, an Italian officer and gifted painter.)

Gerber remembers lunch – or dinner, as farm families call the midday meal – at long tables in the church basement. After working all morning, the men sat down to roast sausage, ham, fried chicken, homemade bread, sauerkraut, and mashed potatoes. In the afternoon, they took a break from work for cakes, pies, cobblers and cookies. They climbed into the truck in the evening with their pockets stuffed with cookies for their buddies back at camp. Working hard and eating hearty, they began to regain the weight they had lost on their daily ration of one salted herring or a bowl of watery soup.

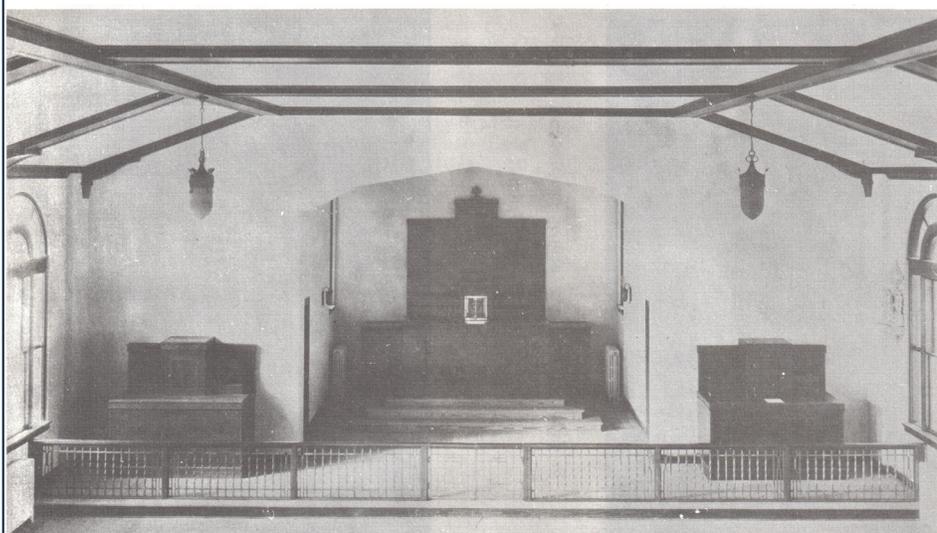


What they were doing in the sanctuary upstairs was little short of miraculous. They repainted the dingy, white walls, cheery pale yellow, with complementary mauve trim. Reflecting their Italian Renaissance roots, they carved a magnificently detailed base relief of Da Vinci's "The Last Supper," which fronts the white marble altar. They installed stained glass windows, painted intricate, historically accurate ornamentation on the walls and large murals of the Annunciation and the Visitation; both mural feature pastoral Panhandle settings (including Gerber's childhood home).



Their piece de resistance was the Assumption, a painting 8 feet high and 12 feet across of Mary and accompanying infant angels. All in six weeks. When the time came for repatriation, the Italians weren't quite finished. Although it had been years since they had seen their families and their native land, they begged to stay three more days. They weren't allowed to do so, but Di Bello and his prison pals – and later their children and grandchildren – came back to Umbarger in the 1980's and '90's; St. Mary's members repaid their visits in Italy. **By Joe Holley**

A pet raiser, a pianist for whom some others had chipped in and bought a piano so he could practice, kept four or five dogs in his room. They disappeared -- whether during or before la fame, the time of hunger, nobody seems to remember. Perhaps they were victims of nothing more sinister than an order forbidding prisoners to keep pets anymore. But there is no doubt about what happened to most of the other four-footed pets that prisoners kept into the late spring of 1945. They ended up as clean bones underneath the barracks.



Before



After



Artistic Escape

To keep their minds off food, many prisoners dedicated themselves to artistic pursuits. Twenty-four-year-old Franco Di Bello painted a portrait for father Achilles Ferreri, a camp chaplain. Hoping to boost camp morale, Father Ferreri thought of having a public art show and asked the future Italian general for his help.

Held in August, the Camp Herford “Art Expo” displayed 220 works, mostly paintings but also wood carvings and sculptures. Father John Krukkert of St. Mary’s Catholic Church in Umbarger, 26 miles to the northeast, marveled at the extraordinary talent – and the serendipitous answer to his prayers. St. Mary’s was a humble church. Built in 1929 on a Depression-era budget, the church of honey-colored bricks was extremely plain. Parishioners were mostly German-Swiss farmers, and though they worked hard, the Panhandle did not yield its fruit easily. Parish funds left few dollars for decoration.





Franco Di Bello

“The church was as white as a barn when I left for the war,” recalls Harvey Artho of nearby Wildorado. “It had been that way ever since it was built.” White walls, white windows, white Stations of the Cross, since there hadn’t been enough money to buy painted ones. Everything was white, except the dark altars and statues.

Father Krukkert’s plan was as plain as his church walls – the Italian artists! But would they work?

“We will decorate St. Mary’s Church only in the bonds of Christian brotherhood and to the glory of God,” replied Di Bello. The artist recruits were among Italy’s finest.

Texas Panhandle

Above the altar, the vibrant, swirling colors of the assumption make this larger-than-life mural appear to ascend. This oil – on – canvas work, which took Gambetti a week to complete, includes a familia touch. The Blessed Mother’s face is modeled after Gambetti’s wife, and a cherub-like bambino resembles his then-two-year-old daughter.

When the POW’s returned to camp at night, their trousers bulged with chicken drumsticks, German sausages and cheeses, coconut-filled chocolates—whatever they could stuff into their pockets and pants. Several inmates caught with this contraband spent time in the guardhouse, including Carlo Sanvito, creator of *The Last Supper*, a masterful relief carving. This sermon in wood, with its deeply etched lines, leads all eyes to Jesus Christ. Only the greedy can linger at Judas’s bag of money.



Sergeant Cole, Fr. Steinloge, Bishop FitzSimon, Fr. Krukkert and the 11 Artists

A Seventh Heaven

Working six days a week and resting on Sundays, the POW’s converted St. Mary’s into a seventh heaven. Upstairs, downstairs, behind the statues, between the windows—there’s hardly a spot the prolific artists didn’t improve by their work. “They liked the meals so well they just kept on painting.” Good-humored parishioners speculated.

A pair of angels, capturing the likeness of golden-haired parishioners—or so church legend has it—keeps watch from the nave’s semi-arch. A row of Catholic symbols adorns the balcony’s outer rim.

In the choir loft, a painted angel holds Veronica’s veil etched with the face of Christ; another angel bears the inscription INRI (Jesus of Nazareth, king of the Jews). Once white, the Stations of the Cross now present Jesus’ passion in color. Krukkert earlier order stained-glass windows in jewel colors from his native Holland, and the POWs installed them.

Completed in 41 working days, the artwork was dedicated on December 8, the feast of the Immaculate Conception. On this emotional day the artists sat in the first row. Repatriation would begin soon, and they had to say good-bye.

Hearts melted and tears flowed freely as POWs and parishioners hugged. In six short weeks, they had become more than artists and farmers to each other.



From the beginning of the project, the artists, and especially Di Bello, had a regular audience of one. He was a powerful man in overalls, unendingly curious about people and the world. His name was Paul Artho.

Artho stood with his thumbs hooked in his overalls straps or sat on a wooden box at the base of Di Bello's scaffold. Along with his curiosity Artho showed a fatherly regard and consideration that Di Bello found deeply touching. It had been a long time since an older man had taken a real interest in him, and in this setting he responded with more than ordinary warmth—far more than he had shown or felt in his withdrawn state in camp.

Artho wanted to know about fascism and Mussolini. Why had Italy attacked Greece? Why had she taken Ethiopia? He thought Mussolini had done some good things for Italy. Did Di Bello agree? And he thought Mussolini was not like Hitler. Di Bello agreed, saying it had been a mistake on Mussolini's part to become an ally of Hitler, a mistake even to have entered the war. Before the war, things were good in Italy and there was no sign (so he said) of anti-fascism. The mistakes started right after the war in Ethiopia, when Mussolini began to think of himself as a military genius. But he had never been cruel and barbarous like Hitler. Artho seemed glad of this answer.



Di Bello had questions for him, too, about cowboys and their duties, about cows and corn, and about whether he owned a car and farm machinery. Conscious always of the proprieties, he avoided asking personal questions of a man twice his age. So he did not learn the background of this crude and complex immigrant to whom he was becoming deeply attached.



Louisa and Paul Artho

Born in Switzerland, Artho left in 1914 at the age of nineteen and settled in the Umberger community, where his sister, Paula Hollenstein, already lived. He worked as a butcher and as a farm and ranch hand before buying a farm in 1919. The same year, he married Louisa Skypala, “nothing but an angel in human form.”

Artho owned one of the first motorcycles in the area, a Pope. Later, he bought a fine horse and rode it to Clovis, New Mexico, and back. All his life he wanted to see new places in new ways. He saw Umberger barefoot; his feet developed rinds like smoked hams. When he was twenty-five, a neighbor watched him walk across a pasture full of goat-heads, burs with spikes like carpet tacks. Artho stopped every now and then and brushed the stickers out, and went on. He would rest a foot on the fender of a tractor in

the mid-afternoon sun of the hottest day. In Henry Bracht's shop once, the men talking with him smelled something burning. After a moment, Artho gave a jump, he had been standing on a coal.

He was a hard-working, thrifty farmer, narrowed to that life and to this Catholicism and yet restlessly curious about the world. He read murder mysteries, *Time Magazine*, newspapers (some of them from Switzerland) and history books his children brought home from school. On a small table in the living room he had a globe and typewriter. He would spend hours typing letters to relatives and friends and mere acquaintances.

By the mid 1940's Artho was beginning to get a belly. He was short and so powerful he lifted the front end of a Model T truck while his sons put a block under it. He had short, reddish hair and a strong chin, and his blue eyes were remarkably sensitive in a man who hooked his thumbs in his overalls and strutted through the world belly-forward, staring this way and that.

Moon shining must have attracted him as a flouting; another way of going downtown barefoot. The law saw a difference, though. On March 9, 1927, the Sheriff of Deaf Smith County went out to the Artho place with a search warrant. Artho, who was outside measuring oats, grabbed a couple of gallon jugs and broke them, but the sheriff salvaged enough of their contents to convince a jury. The sentence was one year in the Texas State Penitentiary. Artho served much less than a year. His wife died on May 2 of the following year, at the age of twenty-nine, after the Caesarian birth of their fifth child, Irene. He had delivered some of the other children himself, and the Department of Corrections had given him a furlough to attend this birth. There were problems that required a Doctor in Hereford and the operation. After Louisa's death, Artho was given what amounted to permanent clemency by Governor Dan Moody on the recommendation of the Board of Pardon Advisers, of the physician who attended Mrs. Artho, and of "a number of the county officials and several hundred citizens," who said "Artho is a first class German citizen, honest in every respect and industrious," and that "his young children need his further care and attention."

A few months later, Artho typed a letter to his mother and stepfather in Switzerland. He had not seen them since going overseas. He said his children were healthy and thriving and that there had been sufficient moisture for his crops.

You want to know what I expect to do, well I don't know that myself yet, I will just let the wagon roll until it ends up somewhere, the dear Lord will add something of his own. It seems to me very often that human life with all that goes with it is already laid out for a person when he first sees the light of the world. But why my so dearly beloved spouse was called away is still an unanswered riddle to me today... I feel sometimes as if God had torn my heart from my body... I could cry out from sheer woe, but what good would it do? I am sitting here in comfort and should not have to worry about anything. I have enough of everything, but the blow has hit me too hard... But I hardly think you understand me, you never saw or knew her, in short, she was nothing but an angel in human form.

To know more read *Interlude in Umbarger* by Donald Mace Williams.



Fr. John Herman Krukkert

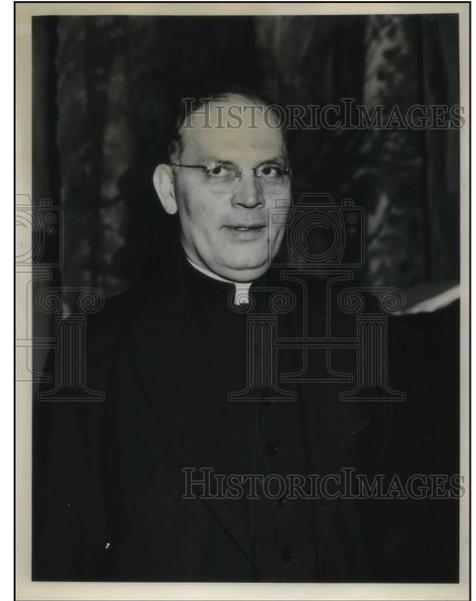
On January 17, 1944, Krukkert became pastor at Umbarger. His predecessor, John Dolje, another Hollander, had died six days earlier at the age of 83—the oldest priest in the diocese--- and was buried next to the church he had built. Dolje had come to Umbarger in 1916, when settlers were still trickling in from the Midwest, from Schulenburg and other Texas German towns, and from overseas. He started his pastorate in a white wooden church south of the Santa Fe Tracks and moved north to the new brick building fourteen years later. For long periods during the rest of his life he refused his own salary in order to help pay off the debt on the church while his parishioners raised money with picnics, dances, and door-to-door solicitations. The debt was retired in 1943. Now there was nothing for Krukkert the builder to build. The drabness inside St. Mary's was bound to disturb him, but bargains in churchly ornament



did not grow in scrap piles. It was over a year before the art exhibit at the Hereford camp showed him the way to his next labor. The days in this quite pastorate flowed placidly into each other. Crying babies were the most common disturbance, and as a remedy, Krukkert had only to stop preaching and pointedly wait while the mother took the disturbance outside. It's doubtful that he ever had to wait long. Krukkert could be charming, but until he smiled, he seemed on the point of finding out guilt of whomever he looked. He had close together eyes, rimless glasses, thick eyebrows that stopped abruptly in the middle of their outward arches, a wide, thin mouth, and a wart on the left side of his nose. He was the priest who asked the Amarillo visitors why they didn't go to their own church. But that was not just Krukkert; that was part of being in Umbarger, where the populace consisted of those who had sought out minds and were on guard against the influence of unlike ones.

Art Show

There was a chaplain, and Ohio priest name Achilles P. Ferreri, who was distressed by the prisoners' hunger—this was in the late summer of 1945. Ferreri knew that there were many talented painters among the officers. It seemed a good time to have their work shown; it would help keep their minds off food. Would Di Bello help him set up an art show? With his linguistic and artistic ability, his leadership and efficiency, Di Bello was well qualified to do this, and he agreed. The show was held in August in an empty barracks at the north end of Compound 4. There were 220 works on display, mostly paintings, but also pieces of sculpture, wood engravings, and a few objects of handicraft. Di Bello had one work—an oil portrait of a "man in burnoose." The show was open to the public, and one extremely interested visitor was the Reverend John H. Krukkert, pastor of St. Mary's Church in Umbarger. He had been invited by his friend Fr. Ferreri,



Fr. Achilles P. Ferreri

formerly a church builder of considerable attainment in the big Diocese of Amarillo, noted bargainer in such projects, too—but lately limited by poor health to the unchallengeable assignment in the isolated little parish. Krukkert can't have looked at the exhibition very long before beginning to envision a work that would glorify God, constitute an enduring bargain for the parish, and for a while keep his mind off his boredom and his aching joints.

The priest and the chaplain got the necessary authorization, which in view of the unprecedented nature of the project must have contained some more-than-ordinary evasive language, even for the Army. And the chaplain asked Di Bello a question: "Did he know prisoners who would be willing to use their talents as painters and carvers inside a Catholic church in a little town near camp?" A week before the project at St. Mary's was to start, they made a reconnaissance. Under the date October 15 in his "One Year Diary,"

Di Bello wrote in Italian: “Cattanei, Gambetti and I are taken in the chaplain’s car, in absolute liberty, to the Umbarger church that we have been asked to decorate.” They took measurement, assessed the needs for materials and colors, and listened to the parish priest’s suggestions in regard to subjects and placement. Then the artists “had another experience which we hadn’t had in the last two and half years. We sat at the table with Father Krukkert and were served a magnificent lunch. It was a great day, the first in years which gave me the feeling of having come back to my normal status of a free and dignified individual.” Back in the camp, the artists had a week to make preliminary sketches and plans. Gambetti did most of this.



Hereford - 1988

They were prisoners in a strange land, thousands of miles and an ocean away from the battles that brought them here. More than 150 people attended a rededication ceremony for the Camp Hereford Italian POW memorial chapel built by Italian POWs during World War II.

From 1943 to 1946, 4,000 Italian prisoners of war were confined at the 800-acre Hereford Military Reservation and Reception Center. A stark white reminder of the World War II POW camp sits lonely in the middle of a cornfield about three miles south of the city. It’s a small chapel, paid for and built by the prisoners to honor five who wouldn’t return home.

On Saturday, four Italians returned to the camp they left more than 60 years ago. They were honored guests at a ceremony marking the restoration of the chapel built for fallen comrades. The rededication was an international event and featured military and government representatives from Italy. Adriano Angerilli, 91 is the only survivor of the original group who built the small white chapel as a burial marker for the Italian POWs who died in Hereford. He left Italy to go to war in 1939 and was a lieu-

tenant for the Italian National Guard when he was captured in 1944 and left in 1946

The POWs paid for the chapel and built it, said Giuseppe Clemente of Norman, Okla., an Italian-American who volunteers his time to care for the graves of the five Italian POWs which were moved in 1947 to Fort Reno, Okla.

He acted as a translator for the Italians in Hereford on Saturday. Saturday marked Angerilli’s fifth and best trip to Hereford, he said. “It’s too many emotions,” he said. “it’s exceptional.”

The ceremony marked the first time the Italian government recognized the chapel and one of the most welcoming receptions for the former POWs, Clemente said.

He never saw America as an enemy, Clemente said, translating for Angerilli. “He just happened to be here. Based on what happened to other people, he was lucky to end up in Hereford. He still remembers how much the U.S. did after the war to rebuild Europe.” He remembers the U.S. more for the aid given to European nations than his time as a POW, Angerilli said.

“It’s the spirit of freedom when you read the Declaration of Independence”, Clemente said for Angerilli. “That’s the way he sees it.”

After the war, Angerilli joined his nation’s Corpo Forestale Stato, the national forestry service, Clemente said. He is retired and now lives in Arezzo in Tuscany, Italy. He earned a doctorate in Italian. He knew one of the Italian POWs for whom the chapel was built.





of residents on Castro and Deaf Smith counties and a financial donation from the Committee for Italians Living Abroad. Clara Vick, chairman of the Castro County Historical committee, has played a key role in rekindling the friendship between the Italian POWs and Panhandle residents. “While the chapel could serve as a memory of the enemy for Italians, a marker of history for a symbol of spirituality, it highlights the reconciliation of two nations,” said Roberto Menia, Undersecretary of State for Italy, during a luncheon after the chapel rededication. “The two countries now have joined in fighting for freedom, democracy and to overcome terrorism,” he said.

“Sixty-five years ago, the prisoners of war were considered your enemy,” he said through an interpreter. “Now, 65 years later, you consider them among the best friends you have.”



P. O. W. CAMP CHAPEL
 THIS CHAPEL IS ONE OF THE FEW PHYSICAL REMINDERS OF THE DAYS THIS SITE SERVED AS AN ITALIAN PRISONER OF WAR CAMP DURING WORLD WAR II. THE PRISONERS, SEVERAL OF THEM FINE ARTISANS AND CRAFTSMEN, DESIGNED AND BUILT THE CHAPEL, CRAFTING THE CONCRETE BUILDING TO RESEMBLE MARBLE. COMPLETED IN 1945, THE CHAPEL STANDS AS A MEMORIAL TO THE FIVE ITALIANS WHO DIED WHILE INTERNED AT THE CAMP. A RESTORATION PROJECT, BEGUN IN 1987, WAS COMPLETED IN 1989.
 RECORDED TEXAS HISTORIC LANDMARK - 1992



Also present for Saturday’s festivities were Ezio Lucioli, Fernando Togni, and Giuseppe Margottini, 80, the youngest of the surviving POWs. He faked his age to join the military. Togni and Margottini were captured in 1944 at Anzio Beachhead in what is known as The Battle for Rome.

They were joined by many other Italian dignitaries and Hereford residents celebrating the revitalization of the historic chapel, which sat empty and bare for 40 years. It was first restored in 1988. In 1992, the chapel earned a designation as a Texas Historic Landmark. The site was vandalized in 2008, but the chapel was rebuilt through the efforts



Bishop is Guest at Drama Produced in Hereford Camp

*Play Written, Directed and Staged
by Inmates, Musical Instruments Manufactured
by Men in Spare Time 7-25-43*

Saturday Evening July 17, His Excellency, Bishop Laurence J. FitzSimon, was the guest of honor at a unique entertainment. The Italian Prisoners of the Hereford Internment camp gave a play to which the Bishop was invited by the commanding officer of the camp, Colonel A. M. Ridon.

So many elements combined to make this affair singularly exceptional, that only the main features can be recorded here. The play itself was written in Italian, and directed and produced by one of the prisoners. The Musical parts were original. The plot had to do with a double romance, and might be classified as a melodrama. Every actor had to be carefully selected, and all enacted their roles with the utmost skill. Particularly interesting were the stage props—the stage itself, the properties, the costumes and furnishings were the work of the prisoners. After the play several variety bits were offered. Outstanding among these were song selections featuring baritone and tenor voices.

The evening's performance demonstrated beyond a doubt the craft and culture, the skill and exceptional talent among the prisoners. At the conclusion of the entertainment, Bishop FitzSimon, who has been vitally interested in the prisoners as their religious superior since they came under his jurisdiction, addressed the actors and the audience in Italian, thanking them for the pleasure they had given and encouraging them to continue in their good will and bravery in bearing with their present lot.

Bravo!

The First Captives, who were Italians, arrived April of 1943

There's hardly anything left, besides a small chapel that is in somewhat disrepair, and during cropping season it is almost surrounded by cornstalks, and a couple of marble markers. But once the section of land, 4½ miles southwest of Hereford, in the Texas Panhandle, housed almost 4,000 Italian Prisoners of War and was a city within itself, surrounded in barbed-wire. The ground breaking for the camp, on the Texas High Plains was on June 30, 1942, and the Hereford Internment Area cost approximately \$2 million to construct. It contained four compounds, each designed to hold 1000 prisoners, and a military police unit quarters for those guarding the POWs. The first company of American soldiers to come to the newly built POW camp was the 400th Military Police Unit, followed by the 426th and the 417th Military Police Escort guide. Each of these policing units had 155 soldiers and two officers, and the men worked in the prison camp compounds, hospital, and kitchens.



The first captives, who were Italians, arrived in April of 1943, and most of them had been taken during the invasion of North Africa, in battles near Tripoli and southern Tunisia. The prisoners were shipped in by train to Summerfield and marched the eight miles north to their new quarters. Tromping down the flat, dust roads to the encampment, the prisoners were said to have sang "Roesmunda," as they marched, or as we know the song, "Roll Out the Barrel," as they passed the cotton and vegetable fields of the area.

"You can imagine the sight of 'the enemy' marching down the road that we'd only heard about on the radio, and us seeing them walk past our farm fields, heavily guarded, as they made their way to the camp," exclaimed one Hereford resident, as she described the scene that was played out before her eyes, as a child in her father's farm field. "Singing in a foreign language, they offered a certain mystique and element of danger, but we soon learned they were just regular people, when later they came to work in the fields. But, we were always warned by our mothers not to have any contact with the Italians.



The Italian prisoners that worked the farms were utilized in the short labor supply, caused by our own men fighting in the war, and were used to harvest crops, clear trees, clean river banks and canals, and various other tasks suitable to their skills. Most of those in the Hereford camp were used to harvest cotton, vegetables, and for shocking feed for cattle, on the Texas High Plains. Local farmers paid the government the prevailing local wage for laborers, so as not to undercut what other available laborers might receive, but the prisoners only received 80 cents per day for their labors. Their pay, including a regular monthly allowance, based on rank, came in the form of scrip, which they could spend at their own prisoner PX (post-exchange store). The PX had candy bars, cigarettes, art and stationary supplies, sports equipment, and even musical instruments that could be purchased.

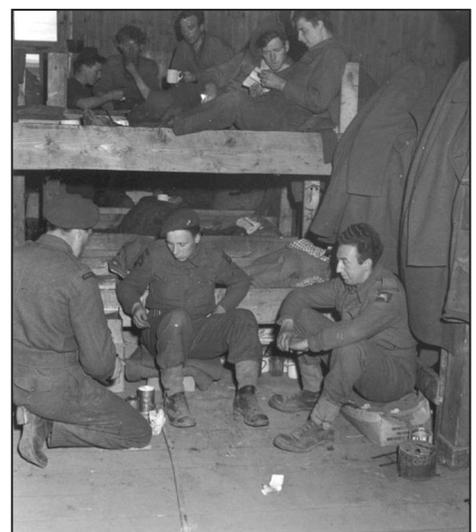


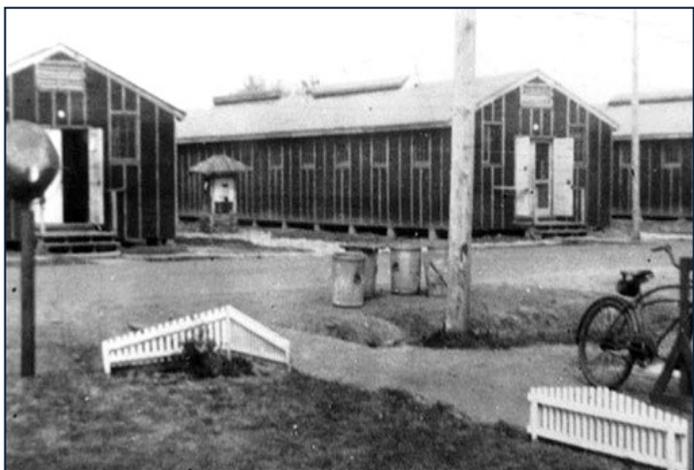
ITALIAN PRISONERS of war relax and joke with their guard during their lunch break on the Leonard Wilhelm farm near Nazareth in the 1940s. The POWs worked on farms throughout the area for 33 cents an hour, and many local farmers said they couldn't have made their crops without the prisoners' help since the war had created such a labor shortage here. More than 50 of the former prisoners of war will return Saturday to renew acquaintances here.



So, that made them that much more mysterious and us that much more intent on trying to learn a few words of Italian, so by chance we could say something to them!"

The Hereford Camp was originally designed to house prisoners from Italy, Germany, and Japan, but due to animosity among the prisoners, it only housed the Italians, and the others were taken to other camps. There were two classes of Italian prisoners at the camp, and they were kept separated...the "Nons" or those who remained loyal to the Fascists, and those who switched sides to the Allied forces, when Italy joined the allies in September 1943. Almost all of the "Nons" in the U.S. were housed at the Hereford Camp. And, most of the men who were termed "Nons" were not "hardcore Fascists," though a few certainly were, and they were not particularly evil, but just remained true to their beliefs, principles, and honor regarding original purpose in the war.





The Compound



These guard towers were located at each of the four corners of the Hereford Camp

Fast-forward to 1943. World War II had created a need for prisoner of war camps in the United States. Texas, and the Panhandle area in particular, were considered good spots for a camp because the area was far away from the critical war industries on the East and West coasts and had a climate similar to where the prospective prisoners had been captured, which was Tunisia. A requirement coming out of the Geneva Accords' rules of war was that the prisoners should be held in a climate similar to the one in which they were captured. Texans were agreeable to the idea of POW camps because the prisoners would be available to provide needed labor to fill the gap left by area men who became U.S. soldiers in the war. So it came to pass that Texas became the site of seventy-nine POW camps, the second-largest one being built in Deaf Smith and Castro Counties, a few miles from Hereford, Texas, off FM 1055 on County Road 507.

Hereford Military Reservation and Reception Center was the official name of the camp, and it was designated for Italian prisoners: 850 officers and an average of 2,200 enlisted men were housed in the camp. A few Germans were held there, but discord between the two groups created a prison riot, and when the Germans were moved to another location peace returned to the camp. Many of the Italian POWs were still loyal fascists, even after Mussolini was shot and killed, so the demeanor of the camps, including this one, depended on the American commander and how he ran things. At Hereford, things seemed to run smoothly, all things considered.

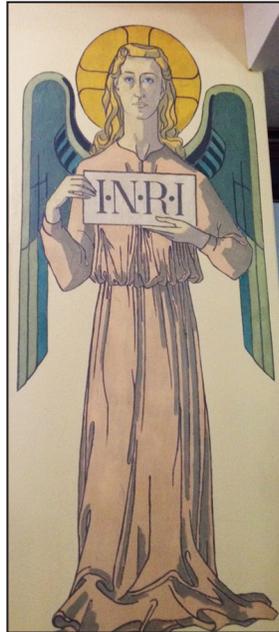
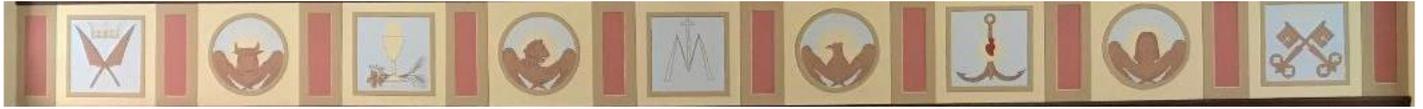
Farmers in the area, like E.K. Angeley from Muleshoe, would drive over with flatbed trucks or trailers to haul fifteen to twenty men to their farms to work in the fields, and his wife Alice would provide them



with meals, which was part of the deal; if the men left the camp to work, they had to be fed by whomever was employing them. And feeding a group that size who ate military rations back at the camp was no mean feat! Based on my research, I think they were more than happy to be fed rather than paid money. By February/March of 1946 the camp was officially closed. The deserted camp was declared surplus U.S. property. The structures were cleared off, for the most part, and the land sold to local farmers. All that remains is the abandoned water tower and a small chapel built by the prisoners as a memorial to the five prisoners who died while in the camp.



The Church



The Art



Ester Kline and a former POW holding a picture he drew of her during his stay at the camp



Temple Hill of Hereford, a former secretary at Hereford's former POW camp, received a portrait of her, then 18, done by one of the camp's Italian prisoners



This copy of *The Nativity* was painted by Achille Cattamei an Italian POW at Camp Hereford. It is housed in our museum.



This jewelry was made out of coins by the POWs at Camp Hereford



The Great Escapes

The POWs burrowed under the fences and pole-vaulted over them; they hung underneath laundry trucks that entered and left camp, posed as American guards and walked out the front gate, and slipped away from work details. Escape attempts were always in progress and their uniqueness was limited only by the imaginations of the prisoners and the tools at hand. At Camp Brady, as at Hereford, the prisoners dug and maintained a tunnel under the floor of their barracks into a nearby field.

Despite the handicrafts and privileges, the camp was filled with hardened fascists and monarchists who gave each other a straight-arm salute as they passed on the camp sidewalks. They feigned illness by the dozen and complained continually to the Red Cross, to the Bishop of Amarillo, the Italian Ambassador, and the U.S. War Department. They broke windows, set their barracks on fire, and, on one occasion, two men stabbed each other over a candy bar. They fought among themselves, monarchists against fascists, or the fair-skinned northern Italians against the swarthier southern Italians. They rioted regularly, once against the presence of one thousand German POWs in transit through Camp Hereford, but usually against the guards or the firemen called to put out a barracks fire. The American commander was a tough old officer, and during one riot, a company of American MPs waded into the angry crowd, with the result, the official reported, of over two hundred Italians injured, eighty-five with skull fractures.

But mostly the Italian prisoners escaped. They dug numerous tunnels from beneath their barracks to distant corn fields. The largest tunnel was five hundred feet long and big enough to stand in, with a sophisticated ventilation system. They dug so many tunnels, in fact, that local residents continued to discover them as late as 1981. The Italians tirelessly repeated the same cycle: escape, get caught a day or two later, be returned to camp to rejoin their cheering comrades, and escape again.

Regardless of the camp, the escapees were a mixed lot. Career militarists among them believed that they were under orders to escape, others were wild-eyed about the safety of their families in war-torn Europe, some were simply homesick and wanted desperately to find their way home, and still others just wanted to tour the United States and meet girls. Since there was no serious punish-



ment involved beyond several weeks in the brig and loss of pay if the effort failed, escape became a game. Stronger punishment, it was felt, would jeopardize the safety of American prisoners in enemy hands who would doubtless escape if possible.

Punishments ranged from loss of privileges to fourteen days in the cooler on a diet of bread and water. At Camp Hereford, three Italian prisoners escaped on Christmas 1944, and stole a Plymouth from an area resident. The men were soon recaptured tooling down the back-roads like a bunch of high school kids, tried for theft, and were sent to Leavenworth for a three-year stint.

The last Italian POWs left Hereford during the first week of February 1946, and gradually the Buildings were sold off to the public. The mess hall with the murals became a cafeteria near Stanton High School, and the only visible remains of the once bustling camp are the memorial chapel and the massive amount of barbed wire that still entangles the remaining fence posts.



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A Night at the Museum



Thursday, June 24th
6pm To 8pm

4512 N. E. 24th Ave., Amarillo, Texas

Come join Bishop Zurek and honored guests for an evening
of food, wine and the unveiling of our Diorama of St.
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Diocese of Amarillo
Museum Open House

Susan Garner
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March 3, 2021 to May 19, 2021

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Audrey & Leo Wink	1000
Bishop John W. Yanta	75
Total	3520



Xitlaly Barba, archival assistant, presents Bridget Britten with her award for winning essay.



In the fall issue of the newsletter watch for more pictures of the St. Mary's Academy fifth grade class. The kids had a great time, taking a tour, trying on vestments and great fun with a scavenger hunt.



Bridget Britten is the winner of this years essay contest. The fifth grade children from St. Mary's Academy visted the museum and wrote an essay entitled "What I liked most about the museum." The winner received a certificate and \$25.00.

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You may stop by daily (Monday through Thursday) to view the museum, for a guided tour it is recommended that you make an appointment.. The museum is open by appointment for church and school groups. This includes evenings and weekends.

Susan: 383-2243 Ext. 120 or even better: sgarner@dioama.org

Thank you for your continued generosity!