

POW Camp / Country Campus

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Read by Cheryl Spencer, Library Associate in Special Collections.

"Prisoner of War Camp, later Country Campus." Read by Cheryl Patton, Library Associate at Newton Gresham Library at Sam Houston State University.

In 1942, a German Prisoner of War Camp was opened in northeast Walker County. It was to have the capacity to accommodate 4,800 prisoners. It was one of 33 such camps in Texas. The number of prisoners stationed in any one place was determined by the number needed to relieve manpower shortages in agricultural areas. The county agents determined the farm labor needs in the area. These needs had arisen because of the loss of the work force due to the armed services.

The United States Army had selected the Huntsville area because it was accessible by railway and highways. The camp was located 12 miles north of Huntsville on Highway 19. The County Commissioners voted to abandon the road that divided the property, September 1, 1942.

The Prisoner of War Camp was completed September 18, 1942. Lieutenant Colonel H.E. Fischer was commanding officer of the camp. The camp consisted of 400 buildings, four deep water wells, a sewage disposal plant, and an incinerator. It had a hospital of seven wings for beds, one wing for a cafeteria, and one wing for dental work. The camp also had a clothing shop, barber shop, laundry, bakery, cafeteria, commissary, gymnasium, guard house, fire station, and motor pool. There were clubs for commissioned and noncommissioned officers. There were barracks for the American and prisoner personnel.

On the east side of Highway 19, just inside the wire fence, was a cemetery. Here, the prisoners who died while in prison were buried. According to records found in the courthouse, eight prisoners died between June 1943 and April 1945. Causes of death were from drowning, pneumonia, tetanus, gunshot, and hanging. These bodies were disinterred at the end of the war and shipped to Fort Sam Houston Cemetery and Germany for reburial.

For security reasons, the date of arrival of new prisoners was not announced in advance. A large group of Rommel's Afrika Korps arrived in the early months of 1943. During the last stages of the war, Japanese prisoners arrived at the Huntsville camp.

Two of the first Walker County residents to secure contracts for prisoner labor were W.O. Simmons and Mrs. Marguerite Eastham Thomason. The majority of the prisoners had never seen cotton plants before, and the foreman of the farm had to teach them the difference between the plant and the weeds. The workers were guarded by soldier guards from the camp. The farmers had to provide transportation to and from the camp.

The Huntsville camp reported only one escape. He was found a few days later hanging from a tree. There were very few problems with the prisoners. One was asked if he would try to escape; he replied, "Well, where would I go?"

Civilians were employed in a few capacities: clerks, postal workers, and stenographers. The military furnished all guards and persons who were in direct contact with the prisoners.

The camp in Huntsville was inactivated on January 5, 1946. On March 7, 1946, it was announced that President Harmon Lowman of Sam Houston State Teachers College was seeking to obtain the camp for the agriculture department at the college. July 6, 1946, the 837 acres, once a POW camp, became "Sam Houston Country Campus." The buildings were converted into dormitories for 200 coeds, 300 single veterans, and 800 married students. There were classrooms, offices, and recreational facilities. Buses were used to transport the students from the country campus to the main campus. A post office was established in 1948.

The campus was used for several years, and served its purpose. It was used for the Josey Vocational School and for agriculture classes. Once a bustling campus, now all that remains is the golf course, a hay meadow for the beef cattle that roam the pastures, and the deserted guard shack at the entrance.