

Former Washington canning factory once POW camp

By ARLENE WARD of the Journal Star.

WASHINGTON - The hubbub of clanking cans as they traveled on conveyers and the splash of water as the hot cans were dumped into a cooling tank have long been silenced at the old building at the foot of West Holland Street.

Built in 1910, the Dickinson Canning Factory, later sold to Libby, McNeill, and Libby, was the city's only industry. The factory, once called "the biggest thing that happened to Washington," played an intricate part in providing work for the community during the Great Depression and in its little publicized role of being a prisoner of war camp during World War II.

The sounds of machinery put into action early in the spring would alert townspeople that the canning season had begun, but more visual evidence would be women walking toward the plant with their starched cap and aprons.

Women who ordinarily would not think of working away from the home, along with young people, clamored for the summer jobs that paid 25 cents an hour. During the winter, about 30 to 50 men were employed, but during the canning season several hundred people in the community of 2,500 were employed at the factory.

Corn, peas and pumpkin, all grown on nearby farms, were canned at the site. They also canned fruit cake, applesauce and pork for the U.S. Army and the Am Red Cross.

Factory hours were flexible with the work-day ending when, the last truckload of vegetables for the day had been processed.

When the canning process slowed, children of the community were allowed to use the cooling tank for swimming.

"Dad would let us swim there during certain times. The whole town - all the kids would go," according to Jane Putnam, daughter of the late Richard Dickinson.

Roger B. Dickinson, her grandfather, purchased the land in 1898 for the plant and his sons, Richard and Eugene, supervised the canning operation under the name of Dickinson Cannery.

The brothers "saw the Depression coming and they sold out to Libbys," Putnam said. Her father continued to manage the local plant along with seven other plants; all located in states east of the Mississippi River, until he retired.

When Dickinson came home one day and announced to his wife, "Hazel, we need a (pumpkin pie) recipe for Libby's cans," the family members found they had "pie coming out of their ears," Putnam said.

Pumpkin pie was served at the Dickinson table for days on end. They ate pie that was runny, yucky, too green, not spicy enough and too yellow before Hazel put together a recipe that met the approval of the entire family. She said the recipe is still being used on Libby's cans.

Near the end of World War II, Libby contracted for prisoner of war labor and the cannery's warehouse was converted into living quarters for about 250 German prisoners who were captured in the African campaign.

The contract called for 50 cents per hour and the prisoners received 10 cents per hour of that amount for their work. Area farmers also made arrangements for utilizing their work.

Barbed wire fence was installed around the grounds and U.S. Army guards from Camp Ellis (near Ipava) had charge of transporting the prisoners to work sites and patrolling them at the factory.

Activities at the factory were classified and it wasn't until years later that Putnam said she learned that this was the center for packaging fruit cakes, meat, cigarettes and other foods that were sent overseas for the U.S. Army and American Red Cross.

The fact that the canning factory was a camp for prisoners of war may not have been in newspapers during the war but it was no secret to the community.

"I could talk to them through the fence but I couldn't take pictures of them," said 87-year-old Leo Clark. He is a retired railroad engineer whose lifelong hobby has been photography.

His wife and daughter accompanied him on many trips to the factory where they talked with the prisoners.

It was late one night in September 1945 when the telephone rang in the Dickinson home. Putnam said she heard her parents whispering and her father hurriedly left the house.

A prisoner had escaped. Dickinson did not tell the children about it until years later, Putnam said. Community residents soon learned of the escape and classes were dismissed to allow the older children to search for the escapee.

The escapee was 29-year-old Reinhold Pabel, who found his way to Chicago where he opened a shop selling rare books and eventually returned to his native Germany.

The prisoners worked side by side with civilians, but always they were under heavy guard. As a young girl, Putnam said she was impressed when she accompanied her father to the factory and saw the prisoners with large butcher knives cutting pork to go into the cans of beans.

After the war, Libbys closed the local facility and later sold it to Champion Furnace C. A fire destroyed many of the buildings and the furnace company chose to locate elsewhere.

Watching the building burn, "Dad stood there with tears rolling down his cheeks," Putnam said.

For more than 20 years, the remaining buildings have housed American Allied Equipment, where railroad cars are repaired.

"It's only an old ghost of many memories," Putnam said of the buildings.

German WWII prisoner found freedom

WASHINGTON - One day in September 1945, Reinhold Pabel inched his way to freedom along the barbed wire fence that enclosed the grounds at the former Dickinson Canning Factory.

Pabel, along with more than 200 Nazi prisoners of war, was being held there by the U.S. Army following his capture in the North African campaign during World War II.

Eight years later, he described his escape in a story printed in Collier's magazine entitled, "It's Easy to Bluff Americans!" [a very misleading title chosen by the editors without the knowledge of Mr. Pabel, which did not reflect his attitude at all]

Pabel hoodwinked a guard into buying dye and a white shirt for him by telling the guard the prisoners were going to stage a play and the items were necessary for costumes.

When Pabel slipped through the fence and behind a clump of trees out of sight of the guard in the tower, he was wearing a white shirt and blue-dyed pants.

He made his way to U.S. Route 24, just a few yards from the camp site. He had no trouble getting a ride out of town since gasoline and tires were rationed and it was considered patriotic to pick up riders.

A local farmer driving his truck to Peoria was the unsuspecting "Good Samaritan" that stopped for him. The farmer was a staunch Republican and, according to Pabel, attempted to lure him into a conversation by calling President Franklin D. Roosevelt a "warmonger."

Having been picked up so near the prison camp and fearing that his accent would betray him, Pabel said he thought it best to defend FDR. This angered the farmer, who refused to talk to his passenger the remainder of the trip, after first threatening to let him out of the vehicle.

Once in Peoria, Pabel was on his way to freedom with his pockets holding what was left of \$15 in American money that he had managed to accumulate.

He garnered his meager fortune from the sale of a small wood carving to a guard and money he picked up that was dropped around the slot machines by American soldiers.

He told the guard the carving was done by a famous wood carver and he asked to be paid in American money, rather than coupons that were exchangeable for merchandise at the post exchange, so he would have something to show his children and grandchildren someday.

His fluency of the English language had earned him the position of an interpreter in the camp, giving him the freedom to roam places that were off limits to other prisoners. This is how he had access to the area where slot machines were located for the American soldiers. When coins were dropped he eagerly picked them up.

Pabel's stay at the local camp was short but he admitted later that he planned his escape from the day he was taken prisoner. When the time came, he confided his plans with only one other person, the prisoner that would answer roll call after Pabel's departure.

Pabel was a non-commissioned officer in Hitler's army and was not required to work as a prisoner of war but he volunteered to do so, working in the cornfields for the cannery.

His escape was discovered early the following morning by Melvin Pruss of 1703 W. Garden, Peoria, when a count of the prisoners on the bus, ready to go to work in Eureka, was short a prisoner.

Pruss was one of the U.S. Army guards stationed at the local camp.

"We had a ball game with the young men against the older ones. The losers had to buy a keg of beer," Pruss recalled. He thought it was during the beer party that followed the game that Pabel escaped.

Pruss had guard duty at midnight and when he got on the bus that was waiting to transport the prisoners to Eureka, the driver told him all of the prisoners were there.

Reinhold Pabel was one of the few inmates whose preoccupation with currency led to his successful escape from Camp Grant, Illinois. In his search for money, Pabel recalls that

Mac [one of the guards] was quite anxious to obtain a souvenir made by prisoners. One day I somehow managed to secure a neatly done wood carving and showed it to Mac. His eyes lit up instantly and he asked eagerly:

'What do you want for it?

'Not much,' I replied. 'Since we are friends, I'll let you have it for five bucks.' . . .

He eyed me suspiciously:

'What do you want the cash for? You can't spend it anyhow. And it is against orders, you know' . . .

I argued: 'Look at it this way, Mac. I assume you want this genuine POW-made carving as a souvenir, right?

'Yeah, of course!'

'O.K. And I want a five-dollar bill as a souvenir, so I shall be able to show my grandchildren something to prove that I really was in America once. In other words: souvenir for souvenir. Fair enough?

This did the trick. He handed me a crisp shiny greenback and I shoved this first contribution to my escape fund in my pocket, trying to appear as casual as possible about the whole transaction while my heart cried out in exuberant joy: 'I've got it! I've got it! I've got it!'

That the government's policy regarding currency inside the camp was well-founded is borne out by Pabel's eventual escape, his disappearance into the mainstream of life in Chicago, and the F.B.I. manhunt, which did not end until his capture and deportation in 1953!

Pruss said the beer made him a little belligerent and he began counting the passengers himself, finding one to be missing. He said the driver was employed by the canning factory and ordinarily he would not have questioned him.

Pruss reported the incident to the sergeant and continued to accompany the other prisoners to their work.

He said he never talked with Pabel since he did not associate with any of the prisoners like some of the soldiers did. "A lot of times they had better meals than we did," Pruss said. Some of the guards would go to the prisoner's mess hall for meals but Pruss said he did not.

The prisoners lived in the cannery warehouse and did their own cooking.

Pruss recalled an incident when the bus passed a house that was being demolished and, "They cheered. They were told the United States was bombed." They thought they were winning the war, he added.

According to Pruss, the escape was not made public.

Jane Putnam, daughter of the factory manager, recalled her father getting the telephone call informing him of the escape and the secrecy that surrounded it. Factory personnel also were told not to discuss it.

High school boys were allowed to take the day off from school to help search the fields for the escapee.

In Pabel's story to Collier's, he told how simple it was to get a Social Security number by using the alias of Phillip Brick. In 1980, he was eligible to receive Social Security benefits for earnings he received as Phillip Brick.

With the Social Security number, he was able get jobs that included setting pins in a bowling lanes, washing dishes in a restaurant and a stint in the circulation department of the Chicago Tribune.

With a savings of \$450 he went into business for himself by purchasing 50 books from the Salvation Army and opening a store in Chicago that specialized in old books. It was in this store that the FBI apprehended him.

Pabel's most noteworthy sale at the book shop came when he received an order for 20 textbooks on cooking and economics. The order was from the U.S. Army at Fort Sheridan, where he had spent two weeks as a prisoner in 1945.

His freedom in the United States lasted for almost eight years when the FBI caught up with him and arrested him in his book shop. At the time of his arrest there were only five other World War II prison escapees out of 2,803 that were still at large.

By then he was married to an American woman and Pabel wanted to remain in the United States. He soon learned what government "red tape" was all about. The war was over and he thought a hearing before the immigration authorities would clear him, but he learned that the U.S. deportation laws apply to illegal entry and his entry was not illegal as he put it, "The government invited me."

Subsequently he was sent back to Hamburg, Germany, where he became a successful businessman with a shop filled with antique books and he authored several books. His experiences as a prisoner inspired his book, "Enemies Are Human."

In 1979, he returned here with a son and daughter to give them a glimpse of the camp where he escaped after his brief stay as a prisoner.

The POW camp no longer looked like it did when he left there. The canning factory had moved to locations in nearby towns and a fire destroyed the warehouse where the prisoners were housed. The barbed wire fence had long ago been trampled down and a new business, American Allied Railway, had taken over the remaining buildings for its operation.

When Pabel left Washington, it was to look for old books to purchase for his shop, "Kramer-Amtsstudenten."