The Most Remembered Prisoners in Hamlin's POW Camp

Heinrich, Gottfried, Martin, and Herbert - In Order Of Their Arrivals Here

Part I

To date - November 2022 - we have not been able to obtain any photographs of any part of the Hamlin POW camp while it was in operation! Many people have helped us with the search and many are still searching.

As luck would have it, however, the bottom strand of the barbed wire fence that surrounded the camp was not pulled out of the ground when the camp was completely dismantled after the war ended. And one--only one--of the 300 plus wooden posts that were part of the barbed wire fence was broken off about a foot above ground level when the camp was dismantled and the stump of that post stood there unmolested for 70 years. When we found it and figured out that it was part of the fence, we also discovered that the bottom strand of barbed wire was still stapled to it!



With the help of a metal detector, we followed that strand of barbed wire all around the camp on hands and knees, marking the perimeter of the camp with little flags as we went.

A little work with a shovel exposed the cement foundation of the main gate through the barbed wire fence. The crew of volunteers clearing the "jungle" from the eight-acre campsite had already found the cement floor of a shower room built for the POWs where a CCC garage used to be. Then another artifact that was not



part of the CCC camp was found - the cement floor of a kind of locker room for the prison camp guards!

A big help to our research was an 80 plus year old woman, Margie Boire, who showed up at the main gate of the camp every workday morning during the summer of 1945 to drive one of the guard cars, toured the site with me and Marty Howden. She's the one who told us where to dig to find the Main Gate foundations. She also pointed to the locations of the other features making up the main entrance to the camp and described them in detail. But it would take information from people who lived in the camp coupled with the important finds on the ground and the guard car lady to complete a



story of how the Hamlin POW camp functioned on a day-to-day basis.

Fortunately, we (the Hamlin CCC/POW Camp Volunteers) were able to hear from four former German prisoners of WWII who spent part of their imprisonment in the Hamlin POW camp on Moscow Road. Hamlin Historian, Mary Smith, interviewed two of them - Herbert Holluba and Martin Scherdin. Her interviews were comprehensive and lasted about four hours. And for several years I was what you might call a pen pal to two other former POWs - Heinrich Willert and Gottfried Schulze.

Each one of the four former POWs seemed to have accurately committed to memory specific parts of the camp that probably had special meaning to them. But each of the four also remembered incorrectly or incompletely things about other parts of the camp. [Some of us are old enough to know first-hand that trying to remember things that happened 70 years ago has its limitations!] The trick for us was to put all of the former POW's information into a blender with all that we had found on the ground and come up with the best story we could about the camp, without the benefit of photographs.

All of the discoveries made during the clearing of the camp after 2008 (the wire, cement floors, guard car lady input, etc.) came AFTER Mary Smith conducted her interviews with Herbert and Martin. In other words, Mary Smith was not able to coax the memories of her POW contacts. Heinrich's and Gottfried's memories, however, were triggered many times by that information over the many years they corresponded with me. If you already know the stories about these four German prisoners, skip to Part VI.

Part II



'POW Camp WWII. In 1944-1945, Fort Niagara POW Camp housed interned German and Austrian soldiers, sailors, and airmen captured in North Africa and Europe. Officers Club Museum Coalition, Youngstown, NY', historic marker at the Niagara Falls POW camp site with Heinrich Willert (left) and his grandson, Matthias Heinicke, taken in 2007.

In 2008, a historian/author in Youngstown, NY, hooked me up with Heinrich Willert, a German POW who had just visited Niagara Falls with his grandson the previous year. I had missed meeting him in person by one year!

Heinrich Willert was in the very first batch of German prisoners to be assigned to the Hamlin camp in June of 1944. He enlisted in the German air force right out of high school and was captured in North Africa. Heinrich and I communicated back and forth via typed letters - written in English - from 2009 until his death in 2020.

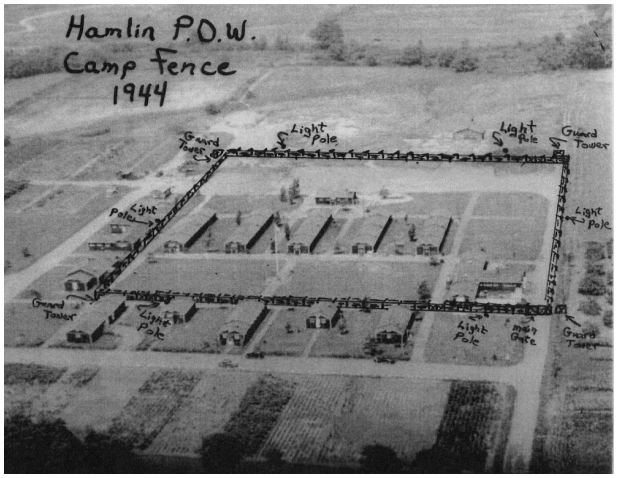


Heinrich was a prisoner of war in Hamlin less than a month when he helped organize a sit-down strike to protest the fact that there was no recreation facility in the camp. His description of the location of the small gate in the barbed wire the guards came through to confront the protesters was detailed enough for me to mark it on a map I was drawing of the

POW camp. Heinrich wrote that the demonstration was a success because it wasn't long before they had a recreation building.

I assumed from that moment on that the barbed wire fence was reconfigured along the west side of the camp to now include the previously omitted CCC Recreation Building. More on that later.

I drew in on an aerial photo of the CCC camp the location of the barbed wire we had located and sent Heinrich a copy. He was confused by the



Aerial photo of the POW camp with the barbed wire drawn in, before the Rec Building was added. The only gate shown is the main gate. The CCC buildings north of the 50-wide road on the north end of the camp have been air-brushed out of this photo. They were not there when the camp welcomed the first batch of POWs.

CCC buildings I did not know how to erase from the photos - the CCC buildings that were hauled away when the CCC camp was converted to a POW camp. But he was able to confirm the location of the main gate, the Mess Hall, the road down the east side of the camp, and the wide road across the north end of the camp. He identified the barracks he slept in and the exact location of his bunk. In his words, in the middle of the night, he "had the shortest walk to the latrine of anyone in camp!"

He never commented on the exact location of the recreation building he helped make happen, but due to an infraction of the rules he was quite familiar with the location of the Commandant's Quarters and the Mess Hall kitchen where he was assigned "special duty." He also supplied me with fun stories about his work experiences in Duffy Mott's cannery. But like most of the German POWs in Western New York, Heinrich was moved to a different camp every six months. He left Hamlin at the end of 1944.

However, his notoriety as a POW continued when he was moved to the camp in Oakfield and then to Niagara Falls. He wrote to me of those adventures, and I found even more about his stay in America in a long magazine article written by a POW he met up with in the Oakfield POW camp.



Part III



Matthias Heinicke, grandson to POW Heinrich Willert at the location of Heinrich's cot in barracks #3.

Sometime around 2010, Gottfried Schulze was messing around with his computer in Germany when he accidently got connected to a Hamlin Beach web site. He immediately recognized the word "Hamlin" and sent an email to the site. His email was forwarded to me, and I suddenly had another German pen pal! Like Heinrich, he was fluent in

English, and I could communicate with Gottfried via email!

Gottfried Schulze arrived in Hamlin sometime late in July of 1944. He had been drafted into the German Army right out of high school and was sent to Italy in time for the epic battle for Anzio. Not long after he arrived there his unit was wiped out and Gottfried was bleeding to death in a shell crater (with his leg all but severed) when U.S. medics rescued him. He was put on a hospital ship headed for the United States and on the way across the Atlantic Ocean a German Jewish doctor patched him up and saved his leg.



Gottfried was sent to the Niagara Falls base camp where he could hear the falls but not see them. After a few days there, he was sent to Hamlin. He arrived about the time the rules had changed and escaped having to be moved to a different camp every six months. Instead, he was assigned to a crew that would work for the Duffy Mott Company in Hamlin for the rest of his stay in the United States.

Gottfried was able to tell me about things in the camp that nobody else could. He remembered four guard towers and their locations. He even knew that the machine guns in the towers were specially mounted so that they couldn't be turned to shoot into the camp. Until Gottfried got here, there was a local myth about a POW getting up into the guard tower at the northeast corner of the camp and shooting the machine gun in the direction of the lake. Gottfried said that only part of the story was a myth. Several rounds were indeed fired, but It was a battle fatigued guard who got up into the tower. Gottfried stood on the ground near the tower and watched the whole thing!

It was thought that our camp did not have the required special wire enclosure that was supposed to serve as a jail. But Gottfried remembered that we did have that jail because he was put inside it for one night. Its use was discontinued shortly after Gottfried occupied it, but the bundle of wire that used to be that jail is still on site.

Gottfried hauled in supper that night that just happened to be tied to the end of a rope that was tossed to him from a nearby barracks. In the morning his boss at Duffy Mott demanded that Gottfried be released immediately to resume his duties at the canning factory.

I asked Gottfried if POWs in Hamlin were restricted to "spoons only" in the mess Hall - like the rule book for POW camps required. He said that Hamlin POWs had spoons, forks, and knives!

He couldn't remember exactly where the Recreation Building was but recalled that "you turned left when you left the back door of the barracks." Strange, because he did use the Recreation Building - especially the little store that was part of it. He had always wanted a calf skin wallet, and he saved enough of his 80 cents a day wages to buy one there.

It was a treasure he said he would keep forever but he had his grandson deliver it to me about four years ago.

Part IV

I'm sure she told me once, but I don't remember how Mary Smith met Martin Scherdin. Martin was a German POW who jumped through all the hoops to get back here after the war, but he didn't want to be bothered by people asking him about his experiences as a German soldier and a prisoner of war. Somehow, Mary got him to sit down with her for an interview and she promised not to reveal his whole name. She kept her promise and always referred to him as Mr. S.

He passed away in October of 2001 and Mary passed away in the spring of 2022.

Martin Scherdin was drafted into the German army when he was 17. Four years later he was captured during the Normandy invasion. After a stay of a couple of months in a POW camp in Scotland he was put on the Queen Mary and sent on to Fort Dix in New Jersey. He eventually arrived in Hamlin towards the end of February 1945. Like Gottfried, he was not scheduled to be moved to a different camp every six months.

Mary Smith interviewed Martin in April of 1999, 10 years before work was begun unburying the CCC/POW camp. Not having the advantage of all the discoveries that would eventually be made, Mary showed Martin the aerial photos of the CCC camp and put in front of him a very crude, unlabeled line drawing of the CCC camp layout - minus the buildings. Mary drew in squiggles for barbed wire and boxes for buildings as he answered the questions she asked him.



He had Mary squiggle-in the barbed wire fence between the guard quarters at the southern end of camp and the soccer field where the CCC flag pole used to be. That matched what we figured out. Then he had her draw in the traffic pattern of the vehicles that arrived every day to pick up the POWs and take them to work. He told her there was only one guard tower and he had her place it on the wrong side of the main gate. But for some reason, no one else in all of Hamlin had ever purposely inventoried the guard towers like Gottfried did so I'll let that pass.

What I appreciated most about the final sketched-in drawing he and Mary came up with was the POW recreation center he had her draw in. It was where the CCC Recreation Building had been! And he had Mary draw in the barbed wire fence behind it! He even described what was in it - down to the four ping pong tables left behind by the CCC guys. I knew Heinrich and friends had lobbied for a recreation facility and I guessed that the barbed wire fence was altered to make the CCC Recreation Building part of the POW camp. And Martin proved me right!

But the other CCC buildings on the aerial photos Mary showed Martin obviously really threw him off. He had the wire fence drawn behind a sketched-in building (with the same weird shape as the CCC Education Building in the Jacobs CCC aerial photo) and a question mark on the building because he really didn't remember it being inside the fence. Same for the two long CCC era garages to the north. And that in turn threw off his location of the shower and washrooms even though his descriptions of the showers and laundry tubs were very accurate.

Part V

Heinrich and Gottfried wanted to stay in the United States after the war, but the Geneva Convention sent them back to where "they signed up." That turned out to be Communist East Germany for them and no one got to leave there to go back to America! Martin Scherdin, however, spent over five years filling out the paperwork to get back here and he succeeded.

Then there was Herbert Holluba. Like many others of the 400,000 plus POWs sent here during the war, Herbert went back to Europe and stayed there. But In 1996 Herbert Holluba and his wife flew from his home in Austria to California to begin a bus tour that included the Grand Canyon. He had kept in contact with three "buddies" he met during his stay in the Hamlin POW camp and when they found out that he was in the States, they suggested he go to Hamlin and check out the Hamlin POW camp.



Memory leads to Hamlin

Former POW visits site of incarceration

By JIM ORR
STAFF WRITER

HAMLIN — Tall grass sways in the breeze among a scattering of wild bushes, trees and unused, weather-beaten picnic benches.

The dirt path that leads here is blocked by an iron gate along a country road.

This is a mostly forgotten corner of Hamlin Beach State Park, but Herbert Holluba remembers it well.

Holluba was brought here in the spring of 1945 and stayed 13 months. He then was a young soldier from German-occupied Austria who was interned in Hamlin as a prisoner-of-war camp.

He returned this week as a nostalgic, gray-haired, 73-year-old tourist.

The retired engineer from near Vienna returned to the camp site, at which 347 German soldiers were held. The camp, located just west of Route 19 and south of the Lake Ontario State Parkway, was the second-largest of 14 camps in Western New York during World War II.

Holluba remains in touch with three or four fellow Austrians who also were held at the camp. He said that when he returned home, he would brief his old buddies on the condition of the camp.

"They said, 'Go look at this place and tell us what is there,'" Holluba said during a visit to Hamlin's North Star History Center. He will report this: The barracks, mess hall, guard quarters and soccer field are gone, bulldozed long ago.

Still, he smiled as he and his wife, Erika, strolled through the rain-dampened, overgrown parkland.

Hamlin town historian

View of the past An old photograph taken from an airplane shows the prisoner-of-war camp amid farms in Hamlin.

YVONNE LIN staff artist

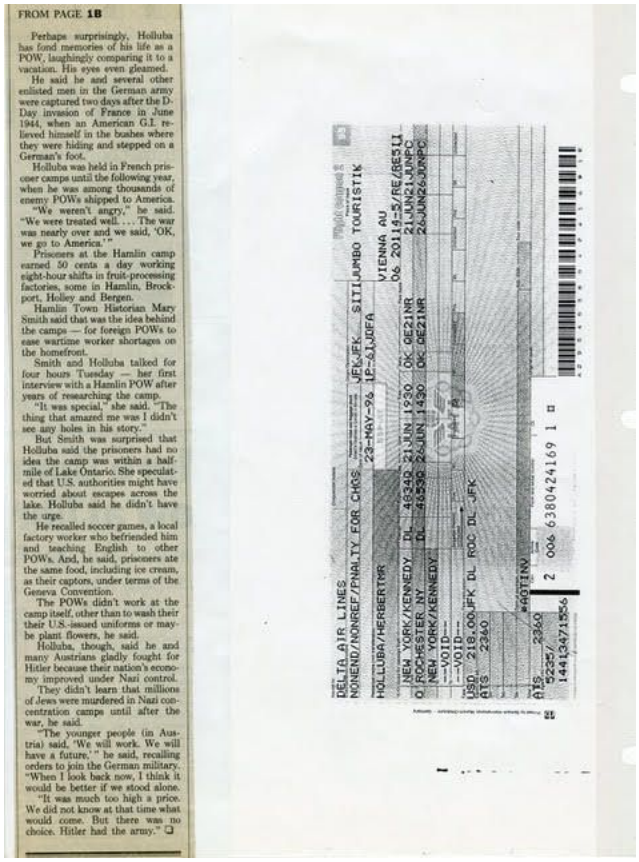
Jim Orr

Present day Former POW Herbert Holluba stands at the site of the camp in Hamlin.

POW, PAGE 2B

Democrat & Chronicle article 6/28/96

Herbert arrived in Hamlin in a rented car and right away got hooked up with Mary Smith. What a disappointment it was when he saw what had happened to the camp. He told his buddies "It is a jungle!" Absolutely nothing of the old camp could be seen through 50 years of Mother Nature's successful attempt to hide the camp.



FROM PAGE 1B

Perhaps surprisingly, Holluba has fond memories of his life as a POW, laughingly comparing it to a vacation. His eyes even gleamed.

He said he and several other enlisted men in the German army were captured two days after the D-Day invasion of France in June 1944, when an American G.I. relieved himself in the bushes where they were hiding and stepped on a German's foot.

Holluba was held in French prisoner camps until the following year, when he was among thousands of enemy POWs shipped to America.

"We weren't angry," he said. "We were treated well. . . . The war was nearly over and we said, 'OK, we go to America.'"

Prisoners at the Hamlin camp earned 50 cents a day working eight-hour shifts in fruit-processing factories, some in Hamlin, Brockport, Holley and Bergen.

Hamlin Town Historian Mary Smith said that was the idea behind the camps — for foreign POWs to ease wartime worker shortages on the homefront.

Smith and Holluba talked for four hours Tuesday — her first interview with a Hamlin POW after years of researching the camp.

"It was special," she said. "The thing that amazed me was I didn't see any holes in his story."

But Smith was surprised that Holluba said the prisoners had no idea the camp was within a half-mile of Lake Ontario. She speculated that U.S. authorities might have worried about escapes across the lake. Holluba said he didn't have the urge.

He recalled soccer games, a local factory worker who befriended him and teaching English to other POWs. And, he said, prisoners ate the same food, including ice cream, as their captors, under terms of the Geneva Convention.

The POWs didn't work at the camp itself, other than to wash their their U.S.-issued uniforms or maybe plant flowers, he said.

Holluba, though, said he and many Austrians gladly fought for Hitler because their nation's economy improved under Nazi control.

They didn't learn that millions of Jews were murdered in Nazi concentration camps until after the war, he said.

"The younger people (in Austria) said, 'We will work. We will have a future,'" he said, recalling orders to join the German military. "When I look back now, I think it would be better if we stood alone.

"It was much too high a price. We did not know at that time what would come. But there was no choice. Hitler had the army." ❑

Mary photocopied his plane ticked as documentation and then chatted with him through a four-page interview. The newspaper article was published several days later. He explained that he was from Austria but when Hitler took over, all male high school graduates had to enlist in the German Army. Herbert was 17 when he signed up and was sent to the Russian front. After the Normandy Invasion he was transferred to Southern France.

Much of his interview with Mary was about his attempt to keep from being captured. “I couldn’t run so fast” Herbert told Mary, and after several narrow escapes, he was finally caught in August of 1944. The next few months were spent being moved from one European POW camp to another.

Eventually Herbert was put aboard a ship called “Walter Reed,” one ship in a convoy of 120 plus and he enjoyed an eventful ride to New York City. On the way, two ships were sunk by German submarines, but Herbert arrived safely. From NYC a train took him to Fort Niagara. One month later three buses headed towards Hamlin. Herbert was on one of them. By the end of June 1945, he was finally a resident of the Hamlin POW camp.

Herbert had a lot to say about everyday life in the camp. Keeping the camp looking pretty was a goal of the CCC boys and according to Herbert, the German prisoners kept up the tradition by tending flower beds and repairing roofs. He also described in detail efforts to keep their uniforms and work clothes clean and pressed. Herbert is also the one responsible for what has been printed about the Viennese cooks in the Mess Hall replacing the Army cooks.

I don’t think Mary Smith tried to help him during the interview by showing him CCC photos because Herbert was a little bit off on his description of the camp itself. He was unsure about the number of barracks (he said four or five) and the only other buildings he mentioned were the “smaller buildings near the road the guards slept in.” His stories about his wartime adventures, playing look-out looking for the guard who slept on boxes at Duffy Motts, and his long and chopped up trip home were very interesting, but I didn’t learn much new about the camp when I finally got to read the full interview Mary transcribed.

I only wish he had made his sight-seeing trip to the U.S. AFTER we cleared the site. He would have been amazed at what was really left there and he would have had a bunch of stuff to tell his buddies!

Part VI

And that explains how we got to know all we know about the POW camp without ever having the benefit of an aerial photo. But there are some things we still can’t explain!

Every bit of new information I was able to get about the POW part of the CCC/POW camp reclamation was exciting and I passed it along to Heinrich in Germany via “snail mail.” He, in turn, added to that collection of history in every letter he wrote back.

Then Gottfried happened. Right away I was amazed to calculate that he was assigned to the same barracks that Heinrich was in, and AT THE SAME TIME! 400,000 plus German prisoners to pick from and I somehow got hooked up with two who were in the same Hamlin POW barracks at the same time! When I shared this information with them, I was disappointed to learn that neither one of them remembered meeting up with the other. And their bunks were only 50 feet apart.

New information about our camp kept coming in from Heinrich and Gottfried and new discoveries were made on the ground. One night after a long day at the site I focused on the snail mail return address on the envelope of the six-page booklet Gottfried wrote and had sent to me about his

Hamlin experience. I Googled a map of Germany and plotted his and Heinrich's addresses on the map and found out that they were living about 11 miles apart from each other! Mind blowing! 400,000 plus German prisoners to pick from and I somehow got hooked up with two who were now living 11 miles from each other!

A few days later, I got an email from Heinrich's grandson. [He knew who I was because Heinrich had him proofread the letters he wrote to me.] The grandson, Matthias Heinicke, was going to be in the United States attending a wind power symposium and asked if I could meet him at Niagara Falls. He wanted to meet me in person.

Nick Kramer and I drove to Niagara falls and gave Matthias a crash course about the Hamlin CCC/POW camp while sitting on a park bench. I told him about Gottfried and Barracks #3 and that the two men were now living 11 miles apart.



Nick (left), Ed (center), and Matthias (right). Ed is holding a picture of Heinrich and Matthias from when they visited the Niagara Falls POW Camp site.

Matthias was awestruck. Three days later he was back in Germany and quickly arranged a reunion of the two former POWs at a local restaurant. A German newspaper filled a whole page with the story, with photos, about their part in the war and their stay in the Hamlin POW camp. In one photo Heinrich and Gottfried are pictured together and Heinrich is holding at arm's length, towards the camera, a "Hamlin New York" lapel pin I had sent him.

A short time later, Gottfried's grandson was taking a bus tour of the east coast of the United States and Gottfried asked me if I could intercept the bus tour at Niagara Falls and whisk his grandson to Hamlin for a tour of the POW camp. With the help of a neighbor, Nick and I made it happen. We met Andreas Anschuetz at our end of the Peace Footbridge and drove him straight to Hamlin Beach State Park for a special luncheon. He got to meet Mary Smith and the Hamlin Town Supervisor and then we went to the camp site.



By now, it no longer looked like a jungle. It looked a lot like part of a golf course. Andreas asked lots of questions so that he could give his grandfather a complete report and then we headed for downtown Hamlin. Almost all of the Duffy Mott buildings were gone, but the one Gottfried worked in for a year and a half was still standing. A former student of mine owned it now and he had loaned me the key so that I could take Gottfried's grandson inside.



The heavy sliding door to the railroad loading platform Gottfried passed through many times a day back in 1944 and 45 was just as it was back then. It hadn't even been re-painted. Andreas stood in front of the door holding the same pose his grandfather might have and I took his picture. 400,000 plus German prisoners to pick from and I got hooked up with the only one who could fit in that picture!



Then I got to see Mary Smith's original transcripts of the interviews of the two former POWs she stumbled onto. Martin Scherdin was also assigned to Barracks #3 right after Heinrich left. Who knows? He might have taken over Heinrich's bunk! But it is quite likely that Martin and Gottfried knew each other.

Since Martin wasn't moved to a different camp every six months like most of the POWs, it is quite probable that he was part of the same Duffy Mott crew Gottfried was part of. Besides that, just before the camp was closed for good at the end of 1945, 12 prisoners volunteered to stay a few extra days to help clean up the camp. Gottfried was one of those 12 and so was Martin! How could they NOT have known each other? 400,000 plus German prisoners to pick from and we got two of the 12 who spent the first week of 1946 cleaning up the Hamlin, NY, POW camp!

I wish I could have asked Gottfried about Martin. Martin died in 2001, but his sons are still alive living in this part of the state. They might have consented to communicate with Gottfried. Heinrich and Gottfried had a great time "remembering together" after Matthias got them together. Memories of Martin could only have made Gottfried's golden years even better!



Gottried (left) and Heinrich (right) sharing memories about the Hamlin POW camp.

And given a little more time, who knows? We might have even found that Herbert Holluba somehow fits into this somewhat miraculous ending to the Hamlin POW camp story. Herbert was only here for six months, but he knew an awful lot about Duffy Mott's canning factory. He must have run into Gottfried sometime. Besides, Herbert never did tell Mary which barracks he was assigned to, but there is a one in five chance it was Barracks #3!

And a strong, positive involvement in the POW camp would have been necessary for him to have decided to go out of his way to jump from California to Hamlin on a vacation just to check out the place. On top of that, the three buddies who helped him decide to make the side-trip might have lived in Barracks #3, too. With all the other times that we had 400,000 plus German prisoners of war to pick from and ended up with the right ones, who's to say it couldn't have happened again?

Ed Evans
November 26, 2022

There are many more coincidences that cropped up during our 14 years of researching and uncovering the Hamlin CCC/POW camp. Another one had to do with Gottfried. His boss at Duffy Mott's was Bill Burke and they became good friends. Bill lived a short distance down the street from where I live now. I know the house well. The Hilton High School principal who hired me 58 years ago lived there after buying the house from Bill Burke. Gottfried and Bill corresponded for a few years after the war.

And all four of our "Remembered POWs" became part of the German army right out of high school. And all four ended up with professional careers. Heinrich became a high school principal, Gottfried got his PhD and held a chair at Rostock University, Martin became a machinist and retired from a company that did work for Kodak, and Herbert went to a university in Austria and became a construction engineer. Not bad for a random pick from 400,000 plus German prisoners of war!

One other POW to mention is one that painted a painting for Gary Leverenz's sister for her birthday (they lived at 968 Moscow Road). We don't know his name because it is hidden behind the matting, but it is a beautiful painting.



The original painting hangs in the Hamlin Beach State Park office building.