

Enemies Come to Campus

STORY BY
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IN 1944, ITALIAN POWS CAPTURED IN NORTHERN AFRICA SPENT THE SUMMER BUNKING

AT THE SIGMA PHI EPSILON HOUSE, DETASSELING CORN WITH FARMERS AND WINNING OVER LOCALS.

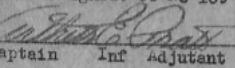
THREE WAS SOMETHING ABOUT that summer. It was 60 years ago, June 1944, and people in Columbia were living in momentous times. American involvement in World War II was in its third year, and the story of D-Day was unfolding in real time. Accounts of this desperate, daring attempt to retake the European continent dominated the newspapers, while other pieces speculated on the possible nomination of U.S. Sen. Harry S. Truman

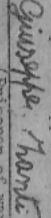
as the country's next vice president. The city and campus sweltered as the temperature marked record highs, peaking at 100 degrees or better for a week straight.

Even though the fighting was far overseas, the war deeply affected life on campus. Students who sat in biology one semester found themselves in boot camp the next, and the draft had drained almost every male from campus. Dorms and fraternity houses stood vacant, awaiting the return of their residents

now scattered around the world.

And then a short piece on the front page of the June 23, 1944, edition of the *Columbia Daily Tribune* alerted readers that the war was coming even closer to home. Italian prisoners of war (POWs) were moving to Columbia. The Missouri Hybrid Corn Co., based in nearby Fulton, Mo., had several thousand acres in Callaway and Boone counties under contract to produce seed corn but no one to work in the fields. The Italian POWs

| | |
|--|--------------|
| Date of birth | 19 Sep 19 |
| Color eyes | Hazel |
| Hair | Blond |
| Weight | 184 lb |
| height | 5 ft 6 |
|  | |
| Countersigned: CC No 169 | |
|  | |
| Captain | Inf Adjudant |

| | |
|--|----------------------------|
| HEADQUARTERS, ARMY SERVICE FORCES PROVOST MARSHAL GENERAL'S OFFICE | |
| This is to identify: | |
| ZANTI, Giuseppe | |
| (Prisoner of war in limited parole) | |
| Rank: Mariotto | Serial No. 741-3236 |
| Whose signature, photograph, and finger- | prints appear hereon. |
|  | |

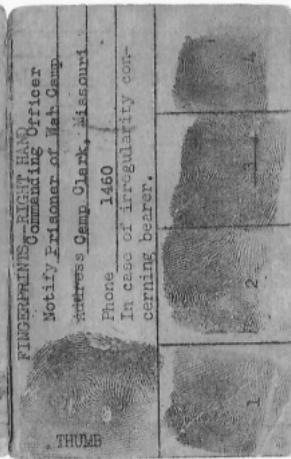
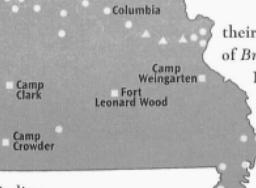


PHOTO COURTESY OF GIUSEPPE ZANTI AND PETER PULEO SR.

POW Camps, World War II

- Main Camps
- Branch Camps
- ▲ Boat Camps



were the answer.

Less than two weeks later, 90 POW's arrived on campus. These men were part of 15,000 POW's held in some 30 Missouri camps and just a tiny sliver of the nearly 450,000 German and Italian soldiers who came to the United States during World War II. Moving into the Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity house at 509 (now 405) Kentucky Ave., the men first frightened, then delighted those they encountered.

"We were warned to stay away from the area and not to linger near that block," recalls Marion McGee Guffey, BS BA '47, a member of Chi Omega sorority. "They worried that we girls might be in danger."

The irony of that warning is not lost on those who remember the sweet temperament of the Italians on campus. People in Columbia that summer must have wondered if they had stumbled into

their own version of *Brigadoon*, for the 90

Italian POW's soon sang and smiled and otherwise charmed their way into the hearts of people in town and then disappeared again just as quickly.

Ernest Wagner, BS Ag '34, the general manager of Missouri Hybrid, was the man who brought the prisoners to Columbia. He typically employed some 300 to 400 men and boys in the cornfields during July and August, but the war had drained his labor pool. Wagner's solution came when the government made prisoners available for agricultural work, but he still needed housing for them. At the last minute, Wagner learned that the Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity house would soon be available. The Army Air Corps training detachment at the University had leased the site as quarters for cadets,

but that agreement was set to expire June 30. Wagner agreed to rent the place for \$100 a week beginning July 10, 1944, for four to six weeks.

The bulk of the Italian prisoners, officers all, arrived on July 10 and began working in the cornfields at once. Originally captured in northern Africa, the men came from a massive 5,000-man POW camp in Ste. Genevieve County, south of St. Louis. Their presence caused quite a stir. Students and townspeople alike quickly found excuses to go by the "camp" at the Sig Ep house, a highly visible spot on Kentucky Avenue between Providence Road and Maryland Avenue. The friendly men soon won over the locals. Kids in particular stood fascinated by the Italians, who socialized outside on the lawn, chattering away in their native tongue.

"They reacted as if we were normal persons," says a pleased and surprised Italian POW, Quirino Ciarlantini, of the townspeople he encountered. Ciarlantini recalls that his fellow soldiers, in turn, were awed by the community, that its peacefulness stood in contrast to what they had seen on the battlefield.

"There was something unreal about Columbia," he recalls. "With its quiet, ordered, tree-lined streets, trimmed houses and trimmed lawns, it looked like a movie world."

Despite being the "enemy," these prisoners were certainly not hidden away, nor were they shielded from the public eye. In fact, they marched to Mass each Sunday at Sacred Heart Catholic Church at 1115 Locust St. downtown. So that they might make their own contribution

Warren Historical Manuscript Collection, Columbia, Mo.



In the summer of 1944, Italian POWs bunked in MU's Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity house and spent days detasseling corn in local fields. The Missouri Hybrid Corn Co. brought the prisoners from camps elsewhere in Missouri to shore up scarce local labor.

to worship, the men formed a quartet drawn from the best singers in their group. Parishioners soon packed the sanctuary to hear this foursome perform selections in magnificent voices, "unequalled by anything heard in the Columbia church for a long time," reported the *Columbia Daily Tribune*.

On another occasion, the Italians went to see a movie at the Hall Theater at 102 S. Ninth St., also in downtown Columbia. A Disney picture was playing, Ciarlantini recalls, but it wasn't the film itself that the men noticed. "There were lots of children, and, when back at the house, we commented on our experience," he says. "We all, rather shyly, admitted that what had really impressed us was hearing the children's laughter in the dark."

The late Professor Donovan Rhynsburger, chair of Mizzou's speech and dramatic art department and leader of the University Theatre for 43 years, went out of his way to see that the Italians were happy and comfortable.

"Don was a person of considerable civic enterprise and love of people," says Loren Reid, a retired English professor and longtime colleague of Rhynsburger. "He did any number of things to ease the plight of the Italian prisoners."

One evening, Rhynsburger went by the Sig Ep house to see what he could do for the prisoners, said his wife, Peggy. "He found out that most of them were professors, musicians and artists. So he asked what they would like to have. Well, we had a wonderful selection of records. So they said, 'Bring us opera, bring us this,' you know. Don would take those over and visit with them."

Just about every Sunday afternoon that summer, Rhynsburger went by the fraternity house toting a hand-cranked Victrola record player and an armload of records. He set up the player on the sidewalk, and the Italians gathered to listen to the music. His daughter, 8-year-old Donia, came too, and 60 years later,

she clearly recalls the visits.

"Daddy didn't have any plays or classes that summer due to the war," says Donia Rhynsburger Scholar, BA '60. "He wasn't always at home that much, and so I loved to go with him to see the prisoners laughing and the smiles on their faces."

Rhynsburger grew fond of the educated officers, many of whom came from the upper crust of Italian society. He brought them art supplies, including sketching pads.

"All these prisoners had degrees and spoke four and five languages," Peggy Rhynsburger said. "There was an artist in the group. He wanted some sepia to paint, so Don took him some, and he

THE WAR WAS COMING EVEN

CLOSER TO HOME. ITALIAN PRISONERS OF WAR WERE MOVING TO COLUMBIA.

painted the prettiest little landscapes of what he could see."

The prisoners enjoyed their stay in Columbia, but after just a few weeks their work in the cornfields was finished. On Aug. 11 they bid farewell to Rhynsburger, Mizzou and the others they had met and returned to their camp at Weingarten, Mo.

Although the war ended the following summer and the Italians returned to Europe, for several years Wagner continued to receive cards and letters from them. The men thanked Wagner for his kindness and expressed hope that they would see him again. Several thanked Wagner for a 'souvenir' he gave them as a memento, though they didn't say what it was. Perhaps what they took with them was just a bit of the Missouri spirit, soaked up during those five weeks on campus in the summer of 1944. For instance, consider the postwar business proposal that another former POW,



POW Quirino Ciarlantini, right, now living in Italy, recently remarked how Columbians in 1944 treated POWs like "normal persons." He was amazed and grateful. The Italians marched downtown on Sundays to attend Mass at Sacred Heart Catholic Church. Although parishioners packed the sanctuary to hear a quartet of POWs sing during worship, a complaint brought the practice to a stop.



PHOTO COURTESY OF QUIRINO CIARLANTINI

Bruno Balocco, had for Wagner:

"I allow myself to address this letter to you in order to ask if you are willing to start a business relation between you and me about the importation in Italy of 'Missouri King' hybrid corn," wrote Balocco, a born salesman. "I am sure, about what personally I saw during my sojourn at Columbia, Mo., that your corn will be able to interest our farmers, and, with your help, it will not be difficult for me to have a success on our market."

And although it doesn't appear that Balocco ever sold Missouri Hybrid seed in Italy, on occasion Italian motorists have reportedly spotted a tiger tail on a car belonging to an elderly gentleman — someone who just might have been in Columbia that summer of 1944. *

*About the author: St. Louisan David Fiedler's recent book on Missouri's POWs, *The Enemy Among Us*, is published by the Missouri Historical Society Press and distributed by the University of Missouri Press, 1-800-828-1894. For more information on the Missouri prisoners, go to mopows.tripod.com.*

