

Archive
Lakeshore Museum Center
German POW Letter Collection

Collection: German POW Letters

Object ID Number: 2007.027.094

Location: LMC Archive, room 204, shelf R 4 Container B-50

Dates: 1947 to 1996

Quantity: 8 Folders, 61 Letters

Restrictions: No Restrictions

Abstract: This collection contains 61 letters from German Prisoners of War sent to Bill Bishop from 1947 to 1996. The eight Germans who wrote these letters were imprisoned at the Fremont POW camp and came to William (Bill) Bishop's farm, the Northshore Celery Farm, to work from 1945 to 1946. Bishop developed a personal relationship with many of these men and corresponded with them after they returned to Germany. These letters detail the hardships, working conditions, economic conditions and family life experienced in post World War II Germany. Several of the men were transported back to Europe after the War ended but were put in French or British POW work camps at coal mines and manufacturing mills for several years before being allowed back home. The letters provide detailed accounts of daily life of the German men, the food packages received from Bishop, and the pleasant memories the men formed while working on the celery farm. Many of the originals are in English and all of the letters in German have been translated into English.

Historical Information: William Bishop's father, John Bishop, first started the Bishop family celery farm. John was born in 1865 and he arrived in Muskegon from the Netherlands in 1891 with his wife Anna. John first worked for the Thayer Lumber Company in the winter and then he worked in the summer on a one acre plot of celery owned by Jerry Beerman. He later purchased the Ryerson Creek Celery farm and was able to support his family of thirteen. John and Anna had four sons, William, Fred, Archie, and Jacob, and seven daughters Ida, Angeline, Henrietta, Jennie, Nellie, Winnie, Dora, who lived to adulthood. John and his family first lived in a house on Orchard Avenue, and then they moved to a house at 768 Oak Avenue near Jackson Hill. The Bishop family's one acre celery farm was visible from their backyard and was located along the western side of what was known as "Getty Street Dip."

With his family to help him on the farm, John built his greenhouses close to the house in order to better tend to the celery seedlings. His sons completed the farm work alongside him and his daughters worked with their mother tending to the housework and the smaller children in the family. At first, all of the farming was done by hand with small tools and a lot of physical work. The Bishops later purchased a horse to pull their wagon and William delivered the celery to the bustling Goodrich Dock on Western Avenue. To enter the dock, William had to show a special

pass that permitted him to enter with the celery. At the dock, the celery was loaded onto ships that brought the produce to Chicago and then later to other locations across the United States.

John and Anna Bishop and their family became known for their fine clothes. Both parents worked hard so that their children were well provided for and always had good food to eat. The entire family would attend the Allen Avenue Christian Reformed Church, which was a social center for the family, and enjoyed the services which were all in the Dutch language. John Bishop died on January 24, 1963 at the age of 98. Anna Bishop died on February 12, 1956 at the age of 89. Both John and Anna are buried in Oakwood Cemetery in Muskegon.

William Bishop, the eighth child of John and Anna, was born on December 25, 1899 and worked for his father throughout his childhood. Along with his siblings, he attended the Wood Avenue Christian School that was located near the corner of Wood Street and Apple Avenue. At school William learned English although he still spoke Dutch at home with his family. He completed the eighth grade and was the valedictorian of his class. As a young man, William enjoyed hunting and providing meals for his family. In 1915, William worked for the Curtis Tire and Rubber Company at the age of 15 in the fall, winter, and spring. During World War I, William did not have to enlist in the military and fight in the war because he was a farmer.

At the age of 21, William partnered with his brother Fred to buy two five acre plots in North Muskegon. The brothers established their ten acre farm, located on the southeast end of North Muskegon, and named it Celery Lane. The first fall, William and Fred bought two wheelbarrows, two spades, lumber, and a shovel. The brothers began breaking up the land by hand and they dug draining ditches so that water flowed towards the North Branch of the Muskegon River. They later built a shed for their tools along with a packing shed and greenhouses.

William and Fred purchased celery seeds from France and then in February they planted the seeds inside their greenhouses. When the third leaf appeared on the seedlings they were transplanted. When the plants reached a height of four inches they were transplanted again outside, in straight rows in the fields. Once the plants were mature, William and Fred cut, trimmed, washed, and packaged the stalks and sent them off to the market. At first the celery was loaded on a train bound for Chicago, but later truckers bought the celery directly from the farm.

In 1927, William bought out Fred's share and farmed on his own. Two years later, William and other celery farmers faced problems with high water that caused drainage issues. Working together, the farmers of Celery Lane dug a deep ditch at the back of the farms and parallel to the river. They then built a sand dike that protected the farms from the high Muskegon River water, and installed a large pump which poured excess water from the muck lands into the river. With these efforts, William was able to save his farm.

In 1930, William married Mary Hren and they lived in a house at 1901 Holton Road, across the street from the tuberculosis sanitarium and north of their farm. Mary was originally from Hesperia and she lived in Muskegon and worked at the Amazon Knitting Company when she met William. They had two children, Richard (Dick) and Ardis. In 1934, William and Mary purchased more land located on the northeast end of the city, on the south side of Bear Lake. As with his other farmland, William broke up the land and removed tree stumps by hand.

In 1936 William and his family moved to a new house located at 2206 Moulton Avenue. The house sat on the top of a hill, overlooking the North Shore Celery Farm, and William and Mary lived the rest of their lives at this location. Growing up, both Dick and Ardis worked on the farm after school and all day Saturday alongside their parents. Ardis and Dick had friendly

competitions with other children to see who could do the work well and who could work the fastest.

In the 1940s, William sold his land along Celery Lane and bought more virgin muck land. The new land was located along the south side of the White River near Whitehall, and 15 miles from the family's North Muskegon home. This time, instead of breaking the land up by hand, William utilized machinery on his 120 acre piece that featured upland and lowland. This section of farmland became known as the North Shore Celery Farms and many people worked sections on a share-crop basis. Although he did have some help, William worked much of the land himself.

In 1944, due to shortages of labor, William Bishop hired German POWs to work on his celery farm. His ten year old daughter Ardis, worked alongside the men, conversed with them, brought them coffee, and bought them tobacco. Although life in the POW camps was strict and the German men were not allowed to communicate with civilians, things were far more relaxed on the Bishop farm. At noon, each of the POWs knew that soon Ardis would come with a hot cup of coffee for each of them, and they also knew that they would receive a hot meal on the Bishop farm. The men also received free cigars and cigarettes after a hard day's work. The POWs would also give Ardis money to go to the store and buy them tobacco, and in exchange they would give her gold charms. At the Whitehall farm, a man named Bruno Rustika from Lithuania managed the farm and many of the Germans interacted with Bruno. The German men continued to work on the farm through 1945.

William Bishop was the first farmer in the area to employ African American youth, and he also employed young men and women from the area to work on his celery farm. When they were not working on the farm, the Bishop family would spend the winters in Florida. They visited the giant Duda Celery Farms to view the latest methods in celery cultivation. In the summer of 1954, Mary and Ardis explored different art mediums at the Chicago Art Institute Summer School of Painting in Saugatuck and met some famous artists. The Bishop family attended the Allen Avenue Christian Reformed Church and went to several different classes.

After battling heart problems, Mary bishop died on April 25, 1958 at the age of 52. Several years later, William met Beatrice Zhart who had also lost a spouse, and the couple married on December 5, 1961. William continued to farm his land, and was one of the first farmers in Michigan to purchase an electric automated celery harvester in the 1960s.

William Bishop worked on the celery farm for 44 years and retired in 1965. Before he retired, William had sold a section of the Whitehall farm to his son Richard and a section to the Hekkema brothers. In 1965, William sold the remaining farmland to his nephew G. Wm. Wilbrandt, who renamed the farm Willbrandt Farms Green Thumb. After he retired, William still worked to find ways to improve his community and he developed a solution to save the flooding Memorial Causeway. In 1974 he developed a plan for a dike to be built across the mouth of the southern causeway lagoon, and a pump to be installed to control the water level. The plan was adopted in 1975 by the Muskegon Department of Parks. William always enjoyed riding his Harley-Davidson motorcycle and became a member of the Muskegon Motorcycle Club in the 1920s. He was also a member of the Muskegon Seaway Trap Club and he always enjoyed hunting and trapping. William Bishop died on September 6, 1987 at the age of 87.

Ardis Louise Bishop Fitt was born on January 19, 1933 in North Muskegon to William and Mary Hren Bishop. She graduated from North Muskegon High School in 1951 and graduated with a bachelor's degree in education from Hope College in 1955. Ardis married

Donald Clifton Fitt on June 10, 1955. She entered a career in teaching at Kalamazoo Central High and later taught with North Muskegon High Schools. Ardis retired from teaching in 1979. In addition to her career in education, Ardis also worked for the Muskegon County Library where she spent seven years as the librarian for Walker Memorial Library in North Muskegon.

Always interested in the history of the Muskegon area, Ardis and her husband began collecting postcards and antiques in 1967. Ardis was a member of the Laketon Bethel Reformed Church, the Beta Sigma Phi Sorority, and the North Muskegon Historical Committee. Ardis and Donald had two children, a daughter Kelly Fitt White and a son Daniel Fitt. Ardis died September 11, 2012 at the age of 79.

Richard "Dick" Bishop was born on May 10, 1930. He attended North Muskegon School until high school when he transferred to the Muskegon Christian School. He graduated from high school in tenth grade, as the school did not have eleventh and twelfth grades. Like his father, Richard enjoyed hunting and trapping and was well known for his skills in trapping muskrats. In 1951, Richard was drafted into the US Army and was shipped to Korea. On the Korean Front he served in the Second Infantry Division, part of a group of engineers working on roads and bridges with heavy duty equipment. In 1952, his mother Mary bought a brand new Chevy hardtop convertible and shortly after she surprised Richard with it when he came home from Korea as a welcome home gift.

After Korea, Richard went back to working in the celery fields on the farm. He later met Dorothy Sikkenga and the couple married on October 30, 1954. Soon after the couple started their own farm and entered the celery business. Richard and Dorothy had two sons, William and John. Richard died on March 31, 1986 from pancreatic cancer.

Scope and Contents: This collection is arranged into eight folders, with the name of each of the German POWs at the top of the folder. This collection contains letters written by the following men:

German POWs Who Worked on the Bishop Farm

George Brandenstein

George Brandenstein wrote to Bill Bishop from 1947 to 1950. After he left the Bishop farm, he was sent to New York in February of 1946 where he boarded a boat with Harry Baer. George then went to France where he and Harry were separated and where George spent a quarter of a year. He returned to his family in Rotenburg, Germany, which was located in the American Zone after the war. He had a wife and three children, including a daughter who was born in 1948. George was laid off from the factory where he worked because the factory had to shut down due to the shortages of fuel. George and his family had to face food shortages and were especially grateful to receive Bill's CARE packages. When he left America, he weighed 182 pounds but when he returned to Germany he was only 120 pounds. George's wife was sick for quite a while and he wrote to Bill asking for another package due to the lack of food in Germany.

In his letters, George often asked how Bill's brother Jacob is doing and how Kenny and George, two workers on the celery farm, were doing and asked for details about Ardis and Dick. George was especially curious about Dick's recent hunting trips and if Dick could send him a flint. He remembered how good his time was in America and how good the food was, but he

commented that he didn't miss the wire fence. He also wrote about how his daughter Waltraud wanted to meet "Uncle Bill" and that he sent greetings to the policeman Harry.

In 1949, George wrote about how he and was able to once again buy things in Germany and that the windows are once again full of goods like before the war. According to him, the wages did not go up with the prices of goods, and there was a shortage of work for people throughout the city. George had a job, but he only worked every other week due to the high unemployment rate and he only made 25 marks per week. His family had a ration card and only had a meager amount of money to spend on necessities.

Heinz Krimphove

Heinz wrote two letters to Bill in 1947, one of the letters is not in the collection and its whereabouts are unknown. When Heinz left the United States, he was sent to a prisoner of war camp in France where he remained for several years. Heinz's home was destroyed back in Germany and when he wrote to Bill he was not optimistic about the future. He mentioned to Bill that he would like to come back and work on the farm when he was discharged.

Hans Schmid

Hans wrote to Bill from 1947 to 1948. After he left the United States in January of 1946, he was shipped to a prisoner of war camp in France where he worked in a mine until August of 1947. He was in bad health while in the camp and was released early due to his health. Hans returned to his home, which became the American section of Germany, where according to Hans the American soldiers kept the area disciplined. He also mentioned that the American people sent CARE packages to his hometown and that many German children had American "uncles." When Hans returned to Germany, his area was experiencing a bad drought and thus they had the worst harvest for the past 100 years. He wrote about how he was grateful for the Marshall Plan and the Americans for their assistance after the war.

Horst Baumann

Horst wrote to Bill from 1947 to 1983 and then to Ardis from 1995 to 1996. Horst was born in December of 1919 and received an education as a compositor from when he was 15 to 18 years old. He was 25 when he came to the Bishop farm. After Horst left the United States, he was sent to a French prison camp where he worked nights in a coal mine for about 18 months. The coal mine was at a depth of 1000 to 1600 feet. He was injured in a mine explosion and suffered from lack of food. The local newspaper had listed Horst as dead from the accident.

Horst wrote about how he longed to work somewhere with windows, fresh air, and sunshine. After he recovered from his mining injuries, Horst was sent to help bricklayers and carpenters and continued to work as a prisoner. He then worked with masonry in France and was soon building bridges and houses. He remarked that many things were rationed in France, and that he was worried about his mother back home.

One of the things that Horst was concerned with was trying to locate the missing package that Bill had sent him. Horst was hoping to receive the package full of food because his family was unable to send him anything. He wrote several letters about the package, and how it might be delayed because he was moved, but then he later mentioned that he was probably never going to receive the package. He remarked that he did not trust the guards at the POW headquarters and other German and French officers, and he was sure one of the guards had stolen the package. He mentioned that the Russians were not around to deal with dishonest situations.

After the war, Hort's home became part of the Russian Zone and he wrote about how it was hard for his family to find food. Horst was not able to buy basic things with his POW pay and he wrote about how he couldn't even obtain things that were sold on the black market due to the high prices. Horst was finally given orders in July of 1948 that he will be allowed to leave the camp. He had to stay two weeks in a camp in the Russian occupation zone, but then he was allowed to return home. Although he was happy to be freed, Horst was not happy to be living under the Russians and he wrote about how he wanted to come to America at the first opportunity.

Once he returned home, Horst wrote about the lack of food and goods in the stores, and about his mother's ill health. In 1949, Bill sent Horst a package and Horst and his mother were grateful for the food, coffee, cocoa, and tea as they were not available in stores. Horst remarked that at that time there was an announcement that all packages from Americans into the Russian zone should be stopped. Later that year, Horst found a job as a compositor, the same profession he had before the war. In 1954, Horst wrote about how things were still the same in many ways, and that he was still unmarried because he could not afford a dwelling. He also mentioned that many of the homes had been bombed.

In 1980, Horst wrote to Bill that he was surprised to receive a letter after all that time, since 1954, and that he still remembered the Bishop family fondly. He wrote about how he married in 1955 and that they celebrated their silver wedding anniversary in 1980 when Horst was 60. He was still working at the same printing shop and wrote about how there was progress in the rebuilding of Germany and his hometown. The name of the town had changed from Chemnitz to Karl-Marx-Stadt. Horst wrote about his memory of Bill and his hunting rifles, and how Bill liked to show the Germans his collection and talk about hunting. Horst mentioned a 1946 photograph that Bill had sent, and wrote about how when some German soldiers were transported to the branch camps to the main camp to be shipped back to Europe, some of the men who had worked on the farm suffered an accident when the truck they were in crossed the railway tracks and collided with a train. Sixteen men were killed, and many injured, one of those men was Franz Armbruster, who was standing on the right side in the back row and had a double fracture of the pelvis.

Horst often wrote about his fond memories working on the farm, talking with the boys George and Kenny, the kindness of the Bishop family, and he often asked about how Richard (Dick) was doing. He wrote about his memories of how Americans were fearful of the German POWs at first, and that at first the only civilians who would talk to them were Bill, George, and Kenny, and the truck driver. He also mentioned how shy Dick and Ardis were at first, and how he and Harry helped Bill translate instructions to the other Germans.

In many of his letters, Horst also wanted to hear about how the crops were doing, how the weather was in Michigan, how Bill was managing on the farm, and if Bill had heard from the other German POWs. In his later letters, Horst often wrote about politics, his thoughts on current American presidents, his thoughts on weapons and war, and the improvements of life in Germany.

George Balzer

George wrote to Bill from 1946 to 1949. After George left the Bishop farm, he went to work for the Harry Becker Company on a celery farm near Detroit. He then went to a sugar beet farm, Fort Custer, and then an airfield near Detroit where he spent a month from December 1945

to January 1946. At the end of January, George boarded the ship *Victory* and he was sent to Le Havre, France.

Unlike many of the other German POWs, after George landed in France he was allowed to return home to Germany. In March of 1946, he began work as a construction engineer and helped rebuild his local areas of Germany. Many of the cities, including Frankfurt his birthplace, were destroyed during the war and he wrote about the destruction and the lack of food.

In many of his letters, George asked Bill how the harvest was doing in Michigan, how the weather was, and how Bill's family was doing. Like many of the other POWs, George also wrote Bill to thank him for the CARE package and to give him news about the birth of his daughter.

Walter Andreas

Walter wrote to Bill Bishop from 1946 to 1949. After Walter left the Bishop farm he spent two weeks in Camp Coloma where he worked on the large celery farm owned by Harry Becker. He was then sent to Camp Crosswell where he worked in the sugar beet fields. From there, Walter was sent to Fort Custer where he was in charge of a military sport hall. In March of 1946, Walter returned to Europe and he was sent to Camp Munster, a prison camp in England. Walter stayed 12 weeks, became sick at the camp and was released early due to his illness.

Once he was released, he faced the lack of food and the destruction of his home town. Walter wrote about how pleased he was to receive Bill's package and that he and his family were thankful for all the food. He found a job in a paper mill, his wife worked as a dress maker, his oldest daughter was a hairdresser, and his son studied to be a machinist. With all of them working, they still were unable to buy what they needed as the goods were not in the stores. For his daughter's wedding, Walter used the food Bill sent in a CARE package for his guests as he was otherwise unable to provide food.

In his letters, Walter wrote about his memories of Bill's father driving a car in his 80s, Dick's skill with trapping animals, how he wished he could return to America, and he often asked how everyone was doing and if the crops were hearty.

Harry Baer

Harry wrote to Bill from 1947 to 1950. Harry left the Bishop farm and worked at the celery farm owned by Harry Becker, and he was then sent to a naval air station where he worked in an officer's club. He left the United States on April 23, 1946 and he was sent to Liverpool. In the POW camp in England he worked on building plots in London, and he served as a squad leader and a translator. Although he was in a POW camp, Harry wrote about how he had enough food to eat, was treated well, and that he was allowed to go out every day and eat with English families if invited. As a prisoner, he was also allowed to visit shops and buy goods, use all means of communication, and receive English currency. Harry worked as a policeman towards the end of his imprisonment and he was freed in April of 1948.

When Harry returned to Germany, his home was in the Russian Zone and there was a lack of food. He remarked that a lot of people tried to get into the Western Zones and that people could not get enough coal during the winter. Harry worked as a technologist in a factory producing tower clocks, a rare profession at the time. He married in 1949.

Harry wrote about how much better his life was as a POW in America, how he wished he could return to the Bishop farm, and that he would never forget the Americans for selling the POWs to England. He wrote about his brother's experiences and how his brother would rather be

a POW than live in post-war Germany. In many of his letters, Harry asks about the farms and shares his memories of driving the tractors and his gratefulness for Bill's CARE packages.

Franz Armbruster

Franz wrote to Bill from 1947 to 1948. In 1946, when some German soldiers were transported to the branch camps to the main camp to be shipped back to Europe, some of the men who had worked on the farm suffered an accident when the truck they were in crossed the railway tracks and collided with a train. Sixteen men were killed, and many injured, one of those men was Franz Armbruster, who was standing on the right side in the back row and had a double fracture of the pelvis.

Franz was sent to France after he left the United States where he had to work in the coal mines. When he arrived in France he had a bag full of clothes and two blankets, but everything was taken from him. He returned to his wife and children in Germany in 1947, where they struggled to find food and clothing. Franz wrote about how grateful he was to receive a package from Bill and Bill's brother, as they had to live on only 50 grams of fat a month.

Franz wrote about his fond memories of the Bishop farm, the Bishop family's kindness, all the good food he had to eat in America, and his curiosity about the farm. When he returned to Germany life was hard and he remarked that he told his wife about how life was good when he was in America.

Arrangement: This collection was arranged by the donor and the letters were organized by the names of the persons sending the letters. At the time of donation, each letter contained notes as to contents, detailed information about the status of these men, and other notes. Most of this collection adheres to the original order. The letters have been divided into eight folders, one folder per German POW, and each folder lists the name of the German man at the top. All of the letters are placed with the original envelopes and any photographs, postcards, or other materials that were sent with the original letters. All the translations of the original letters, which were translated when Bill received each letter, are also placed with each letter. There are both photocopies of every letter, as well as transcriptions of each letter to both protect the originals and better serve researchers' needs.

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Series 3: Hans Schmid

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Originals in English
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Series 4: Horst Baumann

26 Letters, Including Letters from Ardis
Originals in English
Dates: 1947 to 1983 with Bill, 1995 to 1995 with Ardis

Series 5: George Balzer

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Series 6: Walter Andreas

5 Letters
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Series 7: Harry Baer

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Originals in English
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4 Letters
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Dates: 1947 to 1948