

REPORT:

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CRYSTAL CITY INTERNMENT CAMP RE-UNION

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A re-union of some of the last remaining German/American internees of the Crystal City Family Internment Camp, Crystal City, Texas, happened on November 6th – 9th, 2007. It was the second such event. The first re-union having taken place on November 11th, 2002.

We gathered on the evening of November 6th in the lobby of the Holiday Inn in nearby Uvalde. Eight former internees showed up. Along with spouses, we comprised a very interesting group of 13 seniors. Some still in their 60's, others in their 70's. We went to dinner at a Mexican restaurant and began getting re-acquainted with each other. Although we were all together in camp during the early to mid 1940's and beyond and our common denominator was our childhood imprisonment, we rekindled our friendships with all those many memories that spilled out during the course of the evening.

The next morning we drove to Crystal City, where we were received by the local Del Monte Foods facility. David Vogl, who is employed by Del Monte, Inc. as their Environmental Compliance Officer and travels between five of his company's canning plants in various parts of the country, was awaiting our arrival. He had pre-arranged our visit and all that was to follow. Coincidentally, his father - Ed Vogl - was also a former internee. We were welcomed in the conference room by a group of Del Monte employees, as well as Crystal City's Diane Palacios, City Manager, and Economic Development Officer, Mark Castillo.

David Vogl introduced us one by one, and because we were such a small group, we each had an opportunity to tell our own story. There were many similarities, particularly in the beginning as we all experienced FBI agents knocking on our families' doors and inviting our fathers – in some cases mothers – to come along to their Field Offices for interrogation. There were many shocking revelations about young children being left alone or placed in orphanages. Our families were torn apart and our parents lost everything they had worked for. They were labeled Nazi sympathizers, dangerous enemy aliens, dissidents and in some cases, accused of espionage. None of our parents ever returned home after their initial FBI arrests, but wound up in internment camps all over the United States. By various pathways, we eventually managed to be re-united with our parents in the Crystal City Family Internment Camp. Some of us were repatriated to Germany and landed back in our parents' homelands at the height of WW II. Others remained in camp "for the duration" and consider this - the greatest travesty of all: they were kept in internment, guarded behind barbed wire, until the end of 1947 – only to be threatened with deportation after their release, others were actually deported! This was 2-1/2 years after the war was over in 1945! Following our presentations, there was a very lively question and answer session with much participation by the Mexican/American

employees in attendance. As we left the room, one of the ladies approached me with outstretched arms. She never said a word. Just gave me a heartfelt hug and then we looked deep into each other's tear filled eyes. It was a very poignant moment. I couldn't speak; couldn't even say thank you. -

Crystal City treated us to lunch at one of their Mexican restaurants. Chef and Owner "Miguel" visited our long table and greeted us individually with a hearty handshake. The food was "Tex-Mex-Tasty."

When we left the restaurant, we found ourselves right across the street from the water tower. High above, next to the CRYSTAL CITY lettering was a huge depiction of "POPEYE." Diane Palacios, the City Manager, promised us an explanation, as she now took over as our tour guide.

We followed her to the center of town, where the city had created a strip of green space, using the former location of the railroad tracks, which provided the lifeline to the outside world. Today, semis, pick-up trucks and cars have taken over. It was at this very location that our families were off-loaded from the trains that brought us to Texas. Following a 3-day journey we had finally arrived, hot and sweaty, and were boarded onto old olive drab busses that took us to our final destination: the Crystal City Family Internment Camp at the edge of town. A caboose was left standing in the center of this open space, not only to serve as a reminder of the history of the Internment Camp, but to also serve the community and its current visitors as a Welcoming/Information Center. Approximately 50 feet further, the city had built an over-size square podium onto which the larger-than-life statue of POPEYE, which was standing in front of City Hall, would be permanently re-located.

Today, Crystal City is known as "The Spinach Capital of the World." Like California's "Gold Rush" era, Crystal City had its "Spinach Boom." "Green Gold" was the cry of the people. In 1933 the Crystal City Cannery was producing 10,000 cans of spinach a day with a two-shift operation. In 1945 the Del Monte Corporation took over and the first can of Del Monte Quality Spinach rolled off the canning lines. It now ships an average of two and a half (2 ½) million CASES of spinach a year!

Back in the 1930's when the annual "Spinach Week" - held every November - evolved into the now very popular "Crystal City Spinach Festival" Mr. E. C. Segar was contacted. Mr. Segar was the creator of the famous spinach-eating hero of the high seas, POPEYE. He was asked to help promote the event using his cartoon hero. Not only did he respond favorably, he stated that spinach was also one of his favorite foods and he wanted all the children of the world to enjoy eating this nutritious vegetable. Additionally, Mr. Segar approved plans for a statue of Popeye to be built, and that solicitations for donations to fund this project be sanctioned, so Crystal City's Popeye would forever symbolize the nutritional value of his favorite food: spinach. He also drew a special cartoon with Popeye, Olive Oyl and Wimpy coming to the Crystal City Spinach Festival. On March 26th, 1937, the beloved Popeye statue was dedicated "to all the children of the world."

This was Ms. Palacios' explanation as to why Popeye – to this day - keeps watch over Crystal City and surrounding spinach fields from the water tower on high.

As we left the area, the town folk were busily setting up for this year's festival, expecting more than 50,000 attendees to come and celebrate this annual occasion. We then followed Ms. Palacios into the Public Library listening room where we settled in to hear her presentation of some more of Crystal City's rich history and the economic impact the internment camp had on the community.

Crystal City was chosen to host the internment camp because the United States Government had previously purchased land on the outskirts of the city during the Great Depression of the 1930's. At one time, the site provided housing for migrant workers, but was easily converted to a detention facility with the addition of 12-ft high barbed wire fencing, guard towers and guards on horseback, patrolling the outside perimeter of the fence. The Crystal City Internment Camp was the largest camp administered by the INS and the Department of Justice. The first people arrived in the camp in December 1942 and at its population peak, it held 3,500 Americans of German, Indonesian, Italian and Japanese descent. There were also a number of families from countries in Central and South America. Our family, for example, had neighbors from Guatemala. They were of German descent. The camp was a big boost to the economy of Crystal City, as it employed many teachers, doctors, dentists, cooks and a variety of other jobs the camp required. A single guarded entrance to the camp provided entry and exit from the camp. There were administrative buildings, schools, community buildings, a dispensary, a canteen and a Japanese Union Store. Rows and rows of barracks, interspersed with community shower houses, provided the housing for the internees. Token money in various denominations, in the shape of coins made of hard-pressed cardboard was issued to every family, according to its size. Additional money could be earned by the internees themselves at the rate of 10 cents an hour for staffing the general store (canteen) or working behind the scenes in their various professions. My father worked as a butcher in the grocery store. My mother worked as a seamstress in the camp sewing room. Our parents always gave each of us a weekly allowance (25 cents), which in typical German fashion, my brother and I had to earn by helping Mommi around the house completing our assigned chores. We could spend our money at the grocery store or the canteen. We even had a "Café Vaterland," staffed by internees that were professional bakers and fine pastry chefs. The best of the best sweets to please the German palate could be purchased there. We children lived a very "campy" life, complete with school, cultural events and sports activities. Movies were projected on the side of a building after dark and I can remember being more fascinated by the Milky Way and the many shooting stars in the beautiful skies over Texas, than the old cowboy movies we were shown. We had many playmates and also made friends with the guards on horseback. They chatted with us, often remarking that we seemed to have more fun inside the camp, than the kids living "on the outside." The most popular song in camp was "Don't Fence Me In." Everybody knew it and it always provoked smiles and laughter when we sang it in class or other fun occasions.

At this point, Ms. Palacios took us “on a fast forward” and told us of an incident that happened in the late 1960’s – long after the camp was closed. The population of Crystal City had remained heavily Mexican/American when the Crystal City High School experienced a confrontation that began about the ethnicity of the cheerleaders. A compromise was attempted by changing the squad to three white and three Mexican/American girls. The school, however, invalidated the compromise and as a result 100 Mexican/American students and their parents went to the school board with a list of grievances. Subsequently, the board denied charges of discrimination, which caused 200 Mexican/American students to stage a walkout without their parents support. The Department of Justice sent a team to stop the crisis, probably the result of three striking students who visited Washington headquarters. The federal officials met most of the students’ demands, including bilingual and bicultural education, better testing programs and more cultural celebrations. This incident proved to have a very positive outcome in the following year’s elections, when qualified Mexican/American citizens won seats on both the school board and city council. Coincidentally, one of the teenagers vying for a spot on the high school cheerleading squad was our hostess, Ms. Diane Palacios. Today she holds the position of “City Manager.” At a very early age, she too had experienced the pain and inequities of prejudice, discrimination and misunderstanding between peoples. At the end of her presentation, I had handed her a copy of my book to be placed in the Crystal City Public Library. Shaking hands and hugging each other was another one of those emotional moments. Again, neither one was able to utter a word, but it made us sisters. Before we left the library to drive out to the campsite, our last stop for the day, she handed us all an order form called “PAVING THE WAY.” The Crystal City Centennial Celebration Committee is soliciting funds by selling bricks onto which we can add our names and become a part of an historical record, visible and permanent. The bricks will be placed on the floor of the podium in the center of town and become our lasting memory as former internee-residents, watched over by the beloved POPEYE statue.

The fenced in portion of the camp encompassed an area of 290 acres plus. “500 acres” was a number that was often mentioned, but that included the farmland outside the camp. After it finally closed in December 1947, the entire property was deeded over to Crystal City. It is now the site of the Crystal City High School, complete with out buildings and sports facilities.

Like homing pigeons we caravanned directly to the northeast corner of the former camp. There were no identifying structures left at this end of the camp, except for the remnants of the swimming pool where we all hung out as kids. The pool was built with internees providing free labor and \$2,500 worth of building materials supplied by the government. Some in our group had very vivid memories of the days when temperatures rose above 110 in the shade for weeks on end and the only bearable place to be was splashing in the pool. It was a very large round pool, approximately 100 meters in diameter. Unfortunately my brother and I never got to enjoy the pool, inasmuch as we were repatriated to Germany in February of 1944 – several months before it opened. We did however experience the clearing of the area when so many snakes were caught at this naturally swampy site; they had to be thrown into barrels. My brother loved to grapple

them, skin them and hang the skins from the rafters of our front porch to dry. He viewed himself a “the mighty hunter” and those were his trophies. During some of the very hottest weeks, the internees, with the camp administration’s permission, invited the children of Crystal City to come into the camp and enjoy swimming in the pool. There were days designated for their use alone.

We then drove to the opposite end of the camp, the southeast corner. We had a map that a former Japanese internee had drawn, but it still took us a while to get our bearings. There were six concrete foundations left at this site; two rows of three. According to some in our group, they recalled these foundations to be of the typical size of a single, large family (3 or more children) housing unit. In 1985 a group of Japanese/Americans, former internees themselves, had placed a granite marker commemorating their internment, on one of the foundations. Nearby stood yet another historical marker, awaiting its unveiling and installation on a neighboring foundation. It was the German/American internees’ memorial and the ceremonial unveiling was to take place during the Spinach Festival on Saturday, November 10, 2007. Unfortunately, we couldn’t stay. Our visit to Crystal City came to an end that afternoon and we had to move on. We expressed our gratitude – individually and collectively - to our gracious hosts and prepared to leave for San Antonio the following morning, a distance of 110 miles to the northeast.

The University of Texas San Antonio Institute of Texan Cultures was expecting our group. Upon arrival, we were escorted to a large exhibit room, which turned out to be a veritable treasure trove of Internment Camp pictures, documents, books and computer research material. We were let loose and acted like “kids in a candy store” as we searched the old photographs the librarians had spread out for us on large tables, looking for those familiar faces of many years ago. It was an amazing experience and the few hours we spent researching our individual families went by much too quickly. Some of us donated books to the Crystal City exhibit room. I had written a book telling my family’s internment story and it’s aftermath, following repatriation to Germany during the height of WW II in February 1944. A fellow internee, John Schmitz, still had in his possession original textbooks from the elementary school in camp when he was a young student. He donated these priceless treasures as well. His sister, Louise, showed me her autograph book full of the most beautiful dedications from her fellow students. Words cannot describe the value of personal documents such as these. They give meaning to the exhibit and breathe life into the family pictures that lay on the tables. That evening we said “Auf Wiedersehen” to each other on San Antonio’s beautiful River Walk, promising to keep in touch and perhaps even have another re-union in two years.

On November 16th I received an email from Rhett Rushing, Research Department, UTSA’s Institute of Texan Cultures. It was directed to all of us and I quote:

“I was thinking about John (internee: Schmitz/Veteran USMC) and the rest of you on Veteran’s day last Sunday. It amazes me that the United States treated you and your families the way they did, and yet you all responded with loyalty and sacrifice to this

country. You have my utmost respect and admiration. This is the lesson I want my two sons to learn. You have made a real impact on my life and my understanding what an American should be. I thank you all”.

I could have never written a better ending.

By: Anneliese “Lee” Wiegand Krauter
Interned; July 1943 – February 1944
Repatriated: February 15th, 1944

Some personal observations:

The UTSA’s Institute of Texan Cultures is without a doubt the primary repository for all Crystal City Family Internment Camp documents, pictures, books, artifacts and personal memorabilia. All items are of equal importance and are registered, catalogued, documented and made computer accessible. I found the caretakers of these priceless treasures to be knowledgeable and helpful in assisting searches and above all, respectful and interested in the individual internees’ stories. I almost felt – had there been enough time – they would have liked to de-brief each and every one of us. In fact, they did have the opportunity to (audio) tape an oral history given by internee John Schmitz the following day.

My perception of the folks in Crystal City is somewhat different, but just as important. Crystal City has a rich history in its own right, from its beginnings as a settlement in 1907 to its incorporation as a town with a population of 350 one year later. In 1928 an election was held that made Crystal City the County Seat of Zavala County. It got its name from nature’s bounty, which endowed its environs with fertile land and clear artesian well water.

Social, political and racial struggles abounded over the years, forcing the population to face many challenges in moving the town’s economy forward. But today, one feels a real unity and vitality among the populous. It doesn’t “feel” like a sleepy little town.

There seems to be a real awareness of a piece of history that Crystal City was very much a part of, and that is of course, the WW II internment camp. It was very evident to me, that the city leadership, the librarians and the educators are dedicated to recapturing this important history that took place at the edge of their town. They want to teach it in their schools, even as many of their parents and grandparents are still alive and experienced it first hand as well. Ms. Palacios, the City Manager, was telling me, that they were actively putting together a program to be presented in their high school sometime in the not too distant future. Would any of us come at its initial presentation, she wondered? I told her to keep in touch. We had already talked among ourselves to have another reunion – perhaps as soon as the Crystal City Spinach Festival 2009. Perhaps we could

coordinate our next visit with their premier program presentation at the local high school – which just happens to occupy the same land we internees once called “home.”

Wouldn't that be wonderful!

Post Script:

All of the former internees who attended the re-union were American born. There were eight of us - five women and three men. Of those, five were repatriated with their families to their respective homelands in Germany in 1944 - at the height of WWII. The other three remained interned “for the duration.” The war ended in Europe on May 8th, 1945. Two of three remaining in camp were released shortly thereafter. The last gentleman and his family didn't get out until late 1947. Almost 2-1/2 years after VE Day!