

A Tale of Two Christmases at the Algona Prisoner-of-War Camp

by George H. Lobdell

AS CHRISTMAS 1944 approached, the people of Algona, Iowa, prepared to celebrate the yuletide season with mixed emotions. The happy holiday mood of earlier, peacetime years on the broad, rich plains of northwest Iowa was again muted by the overriding anxiety almost everyone felt as the fourth wartime Christmas neared. There was concern for Algona's sons and daughters who were serving in every theater of World War II. In addition, the war had taken a grim turn in Europe. Hitler's forces had struck suddenly at the American lines in Belgium, and the week before Christmas Allied troops had suffered reverses in the Battle of the Bulge.

Algonans would have been even more anxious if they had known that a wartime crisis of another sort was developing just three miles

west of their community, where a prisoner-of-war camp was the internment and processing center for captured German soldiers.

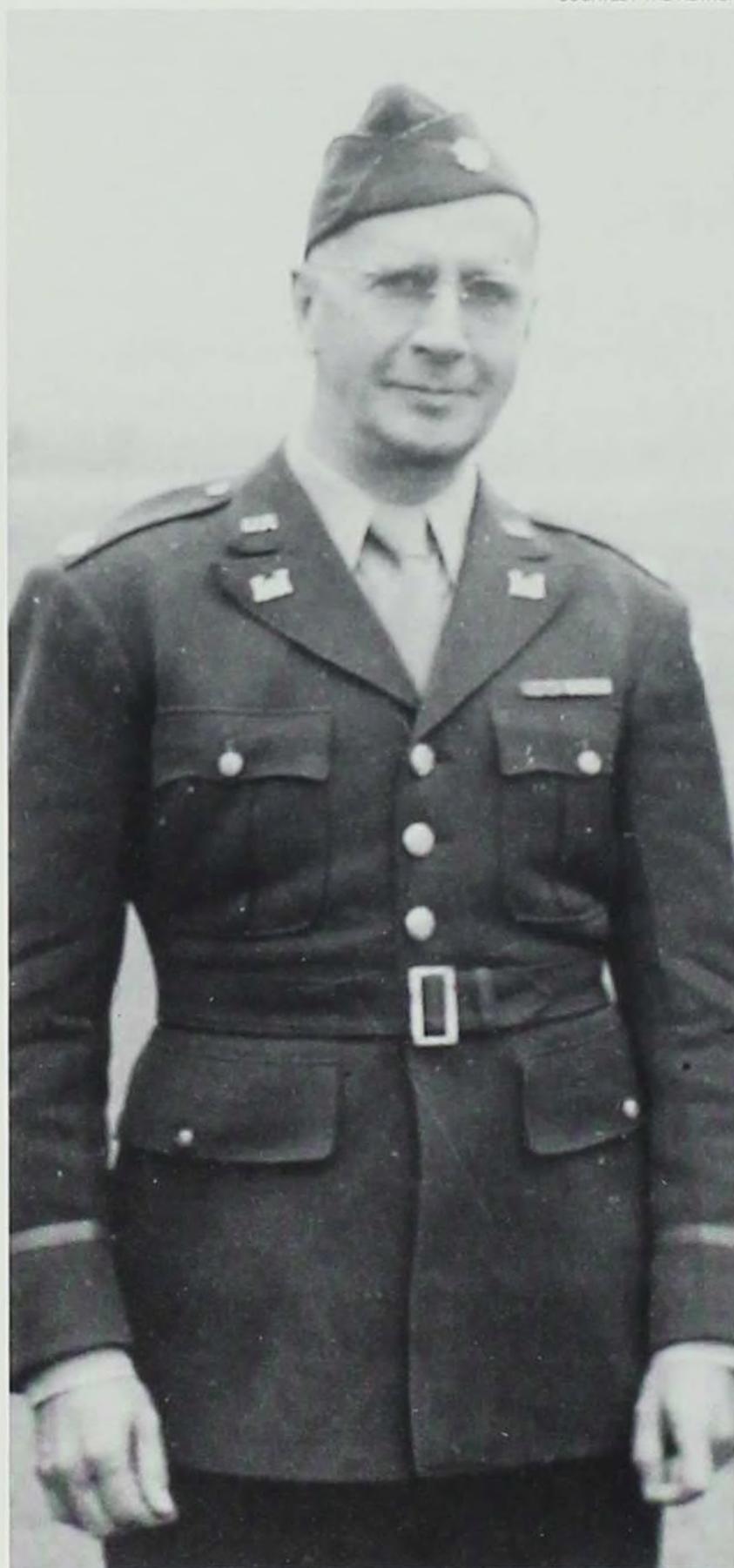
Just a year before, construction workers had been swarming over the 287-acre site, completing more than 170 buildings in what was now a veritable small city. The buildings were grouped into roughly four sections: the hospital area, a recreation area, the garrison area for Americans, and the stockade (which occupied about two-fifths of the camp site). Each of three compounds inside the stockade could hold up to a thousand prisoners of war (POWs). About 260 Americans assigned to the post occupied the garrison area. A 148-bed hospital served both prisoners and American soldiers.

The Algona camp served as a base camp. During its two years of existence, an estimated ten thousand captured Germans would be processed at the base camp. After processing, the POWs were assigned to various branch camps

Left: A Major Hutton makes an inspection tour on skis at the Algona camp for German prisoners of war.

in Iowa, Missouri, Minnesota, and the Dakotas. When free American labor was scarce, the POWs at the base and branch camps became a labor pool. POW work details helped cut timber, detassel corn, harvest peas, sugar beets, and potatoes, can foodstuffs in factories, and

COURTESY THE AUTHOR



Lieutenant Colonel Arthur T. Lobdell: "I spent three Christmases in German prisoner of war camp work. The first getting ready, the second Christmas on the alert to prevent a possible break and the third Christmas in an atmosphere of peace."

work on federal projects on the Missouri River.

The POWs provided significant labor in these areas, and as a rule they were hard workers and easy to manage. The Algona camp commander, who also supervised the branch camps, would later acknowledge that the Germans were "well trained in military courtesy," "unusually clean," and "well disciplined." At the Algona camp they had their own seventy-acre garden, fifteen-piece orchestra, chorus, and dramatic club. Indeed, by December 1944, Algonans had settled into a reasonably relaxed and cordial relationship with their nearby, albeit unusual, army post with its fifteen hundred German prisoners of war.

THEN, THREE DAYS before Christmas, the camp commander, Lieutenant Colonel Arthur T. Lobdell received two tips (one from outside the camp, the other from inside) that prisoners were planning a mass escape on Christmas.

Lobdell, a World War I veteran, and a former Nebraska highway engineer, was known as a firm but not harsh commander. By now he was used to coping with the many problems of a prisoner-of-war camp. Since he had arrived at Algona in June 1944, eight escapes had occurred. Each escape involved only one or two POWs at a time, however, and no one had been at large more than five days. These were minor episodes when compared with the prospect of an organized breakout of a large number of Germans.

Lobdell and his staff had little doubt that the threat was real. They estimated that at least 20 percent of the POWs were dedicated Nazis who were capable of planning a major escape. They knew, too, that the Germans' morale had been boosted by the news of Hitler's successes in the Battle of the Bulge. The Americans were guarding their prisoners under a policy explicitly described as "calculated risk"; they used the smallest number of soldiers possible to manage the captives, about one American to twenty or twenty-five Germans. Therefore, it was imperative that measures to thwart an



A flag-lowering ceremony at the Algona base camp, 1945. About 10,000 POWs were processed through the camp during its existence; most were sent on to branch camps supervised by the Algona commander Arthur T. Lobdell.

uprising be designed carefully and secretly. The commander wanted to avoid alarming the community, tipping off the planners of an escape, and endangering other prisoners from retaliation if the planners suspected a leak.

ALTHOUGH Lobdell intended to use force if necessary to prevent an escape, no preparations were evident. Outwardly, camp routine did not seem to change. POW work details off the post continued as usual. In both the stockade and the garrison, preparations continued for a pleasant celebration of the Christmas season. The two evergreens at the camp entrance and two Christmas trees in front of the post theater-chapel twinkled with colored lights. A local

newspaper, *The Kossuth County Advance*, printed a photograph of an elaborate, twelve-foot-wide crèche built by a German POW. On December 22, twelve German actors supported by a forty-voice choir gave four performances of a Christmas pageant for their fellow POWs.

Saturday afternoon, the 23rd, a Christmas party complete with a Santa Claus was held in the Officers' Club for the children of Americans stationed there. The next day, Christmas Eve, officers and enlisted men and their families enjoyed a Christmas dinner at the club.

After the meal, however, the women and children were escorted quickly off the post. All married officers and enlisted men living in Algona (the camp lacked housing for these men and their families) were ordered to remain in camp that Sunday and for several days afterward. Because these men were directed to say

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A POW works in a truck garden. The county agricultural agent in Crookston, Minnesota, acknowledged that without POW labor, 90 percent of the potato and sugar beet crop would "still be in the ground. Farmers were well satisfied."

absolutely nothing to their families about the crisis, their wives and children were baffled and upset at having to spend Christmas Day alone. Some complained to Colonel Lobdell's daughter, Jean Harrington, who was living in Algona with her father and mother while her husband served in the South Pacific. But Lobdell, obeying his own order of secrecy, had shared nothing with his daughter, so she could not give the unhappy women any explanation for the absence of their husbands.

At the camp, the guards off duty were organized into rifle squads and kept on the alert in their barracks and in the guard building. The guard towers around the camp were fully manned, and patrols around the compounds

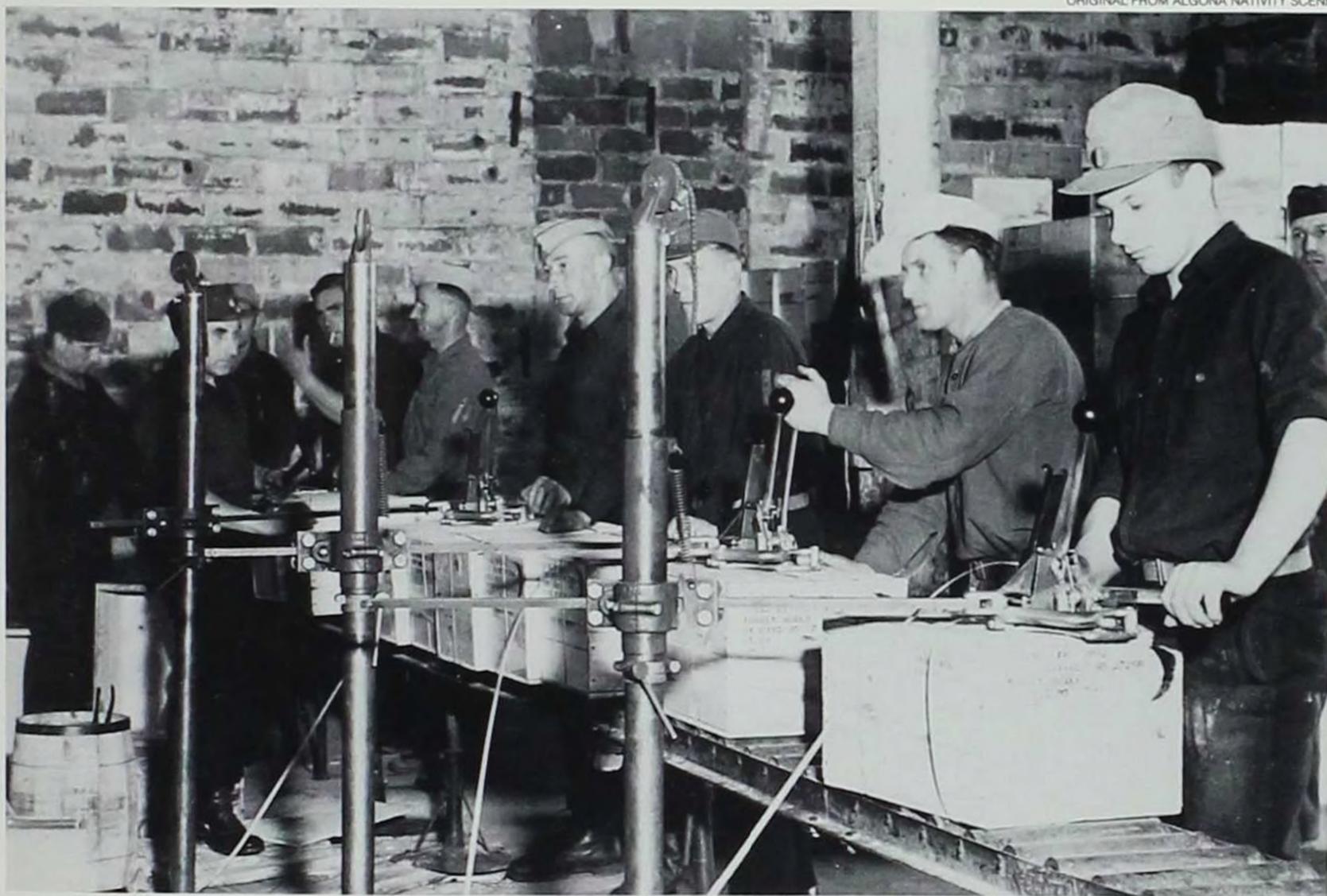
were ordered to inspect the chain link and barbed wire fences carefully.

A heavy machine gun had been set up inside post headquarters, and another concealed in a nearby building. The first gun was sighted to fire across the street and into the theater-chapel, a building outside the stockade but used by the POWs on occasion.

The Americans believed that if any large-scale breakout occurred, it would happen as the POWs were leaving their Christmas Eve midnight service in the theater-chapel. "We had previously given permission to the Germans for separate services, first Protestant and followed by Catholic on Christmas Eve in the American chapel," Lobdell wrote some months later. Lobdell didn't intend to revoke that permission. But he did intend for any plotters of an escape to realize at the last min-



This photograph is labeled only "Capt. of German Army." Note the letters PW on the pants of the man on the left.



POWs from the branch camp at Fairmont, Minnesota, pack crates. In 1945 alone, 430 POWs also helped pack 900,000 cans of corn for Marshall Canning Co. plants in Marshalltown, Grundy Center, Waverly, Hampton, Ackley, and Roland, Iowa. "Manpower has certainly been a problem this year," a company executive wrote Lobdell. "We could have used conveniently more prisoners of war than we have on contract."

ute that a breakout would be met forcefully. His intentions were carried out.

"We used Germans for firing our stoves in camp," the colonel recorded, "and when the German fireman came into headquarters just before midnight, . . . he saw our machine gun mounted in the dark with an American Crew around it." Lobdell continued, "It should be said to the credit of that German soldier that he stoked his two fires, looked us over, said nothing, went out and over to the American chapel where the Germans were having their meeting. We figured that was the best way of getting across to the Germans our preparations in case they had anything planned."

The colonel was right. The message was apparently delivered. When the midnight service was over, the prisoners filed out of the theater-chapel, lined up in their regular formations, and then marched peacefully back to their compounds. The crisis was over.

HAD GERMAN prisoners actually conspired to escape from Algona's camp? The evidence is mostly circumstantial. Nazi troublemakers would have enjoyed creating a disturbance on the American home front at the same time their comrades in Belgium were enjoying success in the Battle of the Bulge. Near Phoenix, Arizona, that Christmas Eve, twenty-five German navy POWs did escape through a cleverly dug tunnel and caused a great deal of anxiety and excitement in the Southwest. Other POW camps also reported disturbances.

The best piece of direct evidence of an Algona escape plan came to light the day after Christmas. An American guard, Private First Class George L. Jobe, voluntarily reported: "On the morning of the 26th of December about 0745 to 0800 I was in the latrine . . . I overheard a conversation held by four (4) P.W.[s]." Jobe had heard one prisoner ask,



POWs stack wood at the Algona base camp, June 1945. Fifteen percent of the POWs processed through Algona worked as loggers from Minnesota branch camps. From a POW letter home: "Work is the best medicine and sometimes I even have the feeling that the time of captivity will not pass by completely useless."

"Why didn't anything happen?" Another had replied, "They would have killed all of us."

Neither Private Jobe nor anyone else knew that by the time he wrote his brief report, a conversation of a different nature had taken place — one that would portend a dramatically different Christmas season in 1945.

ON CHRISTMAS DAY — the morning after the midnight crisis — Lobdell and some of his staff made an inspection tour through the stockade. In the hospital the Algona Garden Club had provided small evergreen wreaths tied with red ribbons for each patient's breakfast tray. Then, in one POW mess hall, the colonel came upon the unusual crèche that had appeared the week before in *The Kossuth County Advance*. He

was impressed by both its artistry and its Christian devotion. He asked to speak to the German soldier responsible for the display and was introduced to Sergeant Eduard Kaib. At the time neither man could have foreseen the formal but gentle friendship that would develop between them.

Twenty-seven-year-old Eduard Kaib had been, in his own words, "the chief of decoration" for a department store in Hirschberg, Silesia, when he was drafted into the German army in 1939. As a wireless operator, he was wounded during the Stalingrad campaign. Kaib was sent to France to recuperate and was captured near Cannes in August 1944, when the Americans invaded southern France. When he arrived at the Algona, Iowa, camp in September, he was so ill with gastric ulcers that he was hospitalized immediately.

According to the Geneva Convention governing the treatment of prisoners of war, ser-

geants and soldiers of higher rank could not be required to work. But Kaib volunteered for light duty while he was recuperating and put to use his civilian talents as a commercial artist. "I helped embellish the church and camp," he wrote years later, "and when Christmas [1944] was near, I decorated the dining room with the Christmas tree and small nativity scene."

If he thought of his twelve-foot-wide crèche as "small," it was because he already had in mind a similar, but much larger project, should he still be in Algona during the next Christmas season. He described his new plan to Captain Gunnar A. Norgaard, the American assistant executive officer in charge of recreational and cultural activities for the prisoners. Captain Norgaard then shared Kaib's ideas with Lobdell.

Some time later, Kaib remembered, Lobdell "called me into his office and we had a long talk there." During this conversation, Kaib outlined his ideas for a larger, more elaborate nativity scene for Christmas 1945. To his delight he found the colonel was not only interested but strongly supportive. Kaib prepared a detailed proposal.

Kaib's planning sketch depicted a circular *Zuschauerraum* or audience area, surrounded by a *Stadt Scene* (town scene) on the left, the *Krippen Scene* (manger scene) in the center, a *Schäfer Scene* (shepherd scene) to the immediate right, and *Hlg. 3 Könige mit Orientl. Gefolge* (the Magi with Middle Eastern retinue) coming from the far right. Kaib had designed this magnificent diorama for a room forty feet wide, thirty-three feet deep, and twelve feet high. The seventy-five figures were to be one-half life size and include thirty-three people, four angels, and thirty-eight animals.

Lobdell shared Kaib's proposal with others on his staff, especially the chaplain, Captain Traugott G. Herbener. Herbener, an American Lutheran pastor, spoke German, and this ability coupled with his religious interest in Kaib's project made him a valuable champion

of the enterprise. He and Norgaard would earn special thanks from Kaib for their support when the nativity scene was completed.

Understanding that the project would be expensive, and knowing that army regulations forbade Kaib's use of government funds, Lobdell made it clear from the beginning that money for the undertaking had to come from the Germans' own savings. POWs earned only eighty cents credit a day and could not be paid in cash. Their earnings accumulated in trust



ORIGINAL FROM ALGONA NATIVITY SCENE

Captain Gunnar Norgaard (right) was an American officer in charge of cultural and recreation programs for POWs. Kaib had confided his plan for a much larger scene to Norgaard, who then shared it with Lobdell.