The “Model POW Camp” of Fort McClellan…where thousands of German POWs were interned during WWII

 No soldier likes the uncertainty of captivity in the land of the enemy. Yet it is an inescapable facet of war.

 World War II became the most vicious conflict mankind has yet seen in its global reach, devastation, and casualties. It spawned record numbers of dead and wounded, as well as those whose spirits were broken and whose souls were seared. An estimated minimum of 60 million people, both military and civilian, died. Hundreds of millions of others had their lives drastically interrupted or irrevocably changed.

 Among the untold millions of prisoners – soldiers, sailors, airmen, and medical personnel, as well as political, ethnic, and cultural civilians, and the unwanted and unloved – who were held against their will, some 435,000 came to America to be interned for the duration of the war. The majority were German.

 They were the lucky ones, though they may not have realized it at the time.

 They entered a sprawling country, a land of bounty ready to greet them with a friendly curiosity and treat them with a degree of humanity they could not have imagined, a nation with no “ethnic cleansing” concentration camps, no pogroms, no death squads.

 More than 600 detainment centers – some small and temporary, others large and permanent – throughout the United States stood ready to accommodate them.

 Of the dozens of major POW camps, only a handful achieved the superior recognition of being well-run and well-regarded, presenting minimal problems and eliciting commendations from all concerned. One, in particular, received repeated high marks from international inspectors and personnel on both sides of the enclosure – captive and captor alike.

 The Fort McClellan POW Camp, in Anniston, like the main U.S. Army training post to which it was attached, became a model facility. From the Spanish architectural idiom of the buildings to the beautifully landscaped lawns and gardens, the scenic meandering stream to the arched pedestrian stone bridges, the main post was the envy of military installations around the nation. Its POW camp could not be expected to boast of the same features; it was, after all, a containment facility. Yet it managed a neat appearance far better than many other such holding pens.

 More important, McClellan’s German prisoner-of-war camp was spared a heavy influx of intensely ideological captives, whether supporting or vilifying the governing philosophy of Germany’s Third Reich. Throughout its nearly three-year existence, the camp saw no reported prisoner-on-prisoner executions (which stigmatized other camps) and few escape attempts, inmate strikes, and suicides. The American administrators sought to educate the prisoners, occupy their time with wage-paying work, and encourage their pursuit of artistic and athletic pastimes.

 Whether by design or chance, McClellan’s camp held remarkably talented writers, musicians, artists, artisans, and athletes connected to one another by the common thread of the uniform they word. Two of the artists – Albin Sagadin and Herbert Belau – left behind a series of highly personal murals decorating the walls of the American Officers Club – unique among POW camps. And McClellan still holds a cemetery, with annual memorial services, for POWs ranging from privates to a general.

 For virtually all the thousands of intersecting lives at this “model camp,” as it was frequently called, their time together became memorable, even pleasant. For them, McClellan became, in the words of one person, “a nice break in a nasty war.”

Next Installment: Why German POWs happened to come to Alabama and Fort McClelllan.

This installment is taken from *The Fort McClellan POW Camp: German Prisoners in Alabama, 1943-1946* by Jack Shay, whose parents were stationed at Fort McClellan during the war. It was published in 2016 by McFarland & Company. It is available from the publisher (800-253-2187 or customerser@mcfarlandpub.com), or from Amazon or any bookstore.