

Inside the Wire: Internment of Prisoners of War in Alabama during World War II – Lesson 1
(Suggested grade level: 6)

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Background Information:

- [“World War II POW Camps in Alabama”](#) is a general information article from the *Encyclopedia of Alabama* on the internment of POWs in Alabama during World War II. The teacher should use this as background information to help introduce the lesson.
- Information about life at the Aliceville Camp can be found at <http://bama.ua.edu/~garne003/>.
- Download and print copies of [WWII Prisoner of War Camp Holds History, Memories for Base Typist Rita Wells](#).

Overview of lesson:

This lesson is the first of two lessons on POW camps in Alabama. Using primary sources and digital media students will learn about POW internment in Alabama during World War II and its impact on the local communities.

Content Standards

[Alabama Course of Study: Social Studies](#) (Bulletin 2004, No. 18)

Sixth Grade: Content Standard #8

Content Standard: List key figures, significant events, and reasons for the involvement of the United States in World War II.

Sixth Grade: Content Standard #9

Content Standard: Identify changes in the American home front during World War II.

Eleventh Grade: Content Standard #7

Content Standard: Explain the entry by the United States into World War II and major military campaigns in the European and Pacific Theaters.

- Explaining Alabama’s participation in World War II, including the Aliceville Prisoner War (POW) camp.

[National Standards for History, 1996](#)

Standards in History for Grades 5-12 (p. 119)

Era 8 – Standard 3C

- Explain how the United States mobilized its economic and military resources during World War II.
- Explore how the war fostered cultural exchange and interaction while promoting nationalism and American identity.

Primary Learning Objective(s):

Using primary sources and digital media, students will learn about POW internment in Alabama during World War II and its impact on the local communities.

- Students will critically analyze a primary source photograph by:
 - Describing what is familiar and what is not familiar
 - Developing questions from the photograph
 - Determining where they could find the answers
 - Making inferences about the photograph
 - Evaluating the photograph for historical significance.
- Students will analyze an oral history interview from *The Jacksonville News* and recognize its connection to the event being studied.

Additional Learning Objective(s):

- Students will make Alabama connections to the events of World War II.

Time allotted: 45 minutes

Materials and Equipment:

- Map of Alabama (a free map may be obtained from the Alabama Highway Department)
- World War II POW Camps in Alabama Chart Assignment and Rubric (attached)

Technological Resources:

- Computer with internet access
- Digital projector and screen
- *PowerPoint* software
- Video-viewing software such as *Media Player* or *QuickTime*

Background/Preparation:

- Students should be familiar with World War II.
- Students should be familiar with efforts on the home front to support the war.

Procedures/Activities:

Engagement/Motivation Activity: Pose the question to begin the lesson: “What is a POW?” Give students a chance to respond. Project the photograph [“German prisoners marching to the POW camp from the train in Aliceville, Alabama.”](#) Guide a discussion using the questions* below:

- Describe the people in the picture.
- Describe the setting.
- Describe the activity in the picture.
- What things in this picture are familiar to you – things you already know about?
- What things in this picture are unfamiliar to you – things you do not know about or understand?
- What questions do you have about this picture?
- How could you find the answers to your questions?
- What are two inferences you could make from this picture?
- Why do you think this image is historically important?

*Questions taken from *Using Primary Sources in the Classroom* by Kathleen Vest.

Step 1	Read the article “WWII prisoner of war camp holds history, memories for base typist Rita Wells” from <i>The Jacksonville News</i> . Allow students to read the article in pairs and note five facts from the article.
Step 2	Lead a class discussion about the article using the following questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “What did you learn from the article that surprised you?” • “What did you learn that was descriptive of life in the United States during World War II?” • “What additional question(s) would you ask Rita Wells about her experience?”
Step 3	Project a list of POW internment camps in Alabama during World War II. (attached)
Step 4	On an Alabama state map, locate the four major POW internment camps located in Alabama: Camp Aliceville (Aliceville), Fort McClellan (Anniston), Camp Opelika (Opelika), and Camp Rucker (Ozark/Enterprise). Have students speculate why Alabama was chosen as a place to locate POWs during World War II. After discussion, share with students the following from the <i>Encyclopedia of Alabama</i> : “Army doctrine dictated that camps be built either at existing military bases or at sites distant from major cities and industrial centers, and military surveyors toured the state for suitable locations.”
Step 5	Pass out the attached World War II POW Camps in Alabama Chart Assignment and rubric.

Assessment Strategies:

Evaluate the World War II POW Camps in Alabama Chart Assignment using the attached rubric.

Extension:

- Have students research to determine the modes of transportation that were used to move the POWs from their theaters of battle to the POW camps in Alabama.
- Have students research and locate the satellite POW camps in Alabama.

Remediation:

- Students may be given additional time to complete the assessment.

Accommodation:

- Students with visual disabilities will be given preferred seating.
- At-risk readers will be paired with a strong reading partner.

Modification:

- Students with disabilities may choose their mode of expression (oral, written, or videoed) during the assessment portion of the lesson.



Four Major POW Camps in Alabama during World War II



German POWs being marched from train to Aliceville POW Camp

Camp Aliceville (Aliceville)

Camp Opelika (Opelika)

Fort McClellan (Anniston)

Camp Rucker (Daleville/Ozark)

Note – Twenty additional satellite POW camps were located throughout Alabama.

WWII prisoner of war camp holds history, memories for base typist Rita Wells



*Rita Wells shows the badge that she wore when she was a typist at Fort McClellan during WWII.
Photo: Anita Kilgore*

This week's Summer History Series takes us back to WWII and a prison camp that was right in our back yard.

Rita Wells has access to a lot of information about our nation's troops. All she has to do is turn on the television and watch the news. Troop counts, location, planned operations; It's all in the newscast. But it hasn't always been that way.

She used to work at Fort McClellan as a clerical typist during World War II. She said she chose that job because it was nearby so she could walk to work everyday. She said information is treated completely different back then than it is today.

"Secrecy was valued back then," said Wells. "But, now they tell how many troops we are going to have and where we are going to attack and when we are going to be there. That doesn't sound like war, that sounds like a game."

She said that not a lot of information got out from the base.

“We were discouraged from asking questions,” said Wells. “The element of secrecy was top priority then. Everyday on the radio they would say ‘loose lips sink ships’ and when we walked through that gate we were told to forget everything we saw, heard, or did that day as though it had not taken place.”

That is why she thinks many people in this area are surprised when they hear that the Fort was the home of a German Prisoner of War Camp.

“A lot of people in this area were not aware that there were German prisoners kept there. You would be surprised about the number of people...who do not know that,” said Wells.

Wells recently came forward with some stories and artifacts related to the camp. She has been asked to share them at this year’s German POW memorial service, but before that happens, she sat down with us to tell us about what life was like for POWs that ended up in northeast Alabama.

“I felt guilty telling all this. We were so drilled on secrecy, but I feel like this is history now, you know?”

Life on the compound

Fort McClellan was home to one of the largest German prisoner of war camps in Alabama.

A fence surrounded the entire base. Inside, Wells worked on base in the administrative offices. From her office, she could see a small hill inside the base. On top was the compound where 3,000 German POWs were kept. The compound was surrounded by another fence, similar to a chain-length fence, with barbed wire running along top. No one was allowed in besides the prisoners and guards.

Wells said that the thing she remembers most is all the different buildings that made up the compound.

“They had all sorts of things up there for them,” said Wells. “They had a library. They had a reading room and a classroom and a hobby shop.”

POWs were also given an allowance in order to buy things at the store inside the compound.

“They were paid 10 cents a day for an allowance,” she said. “That was three dollars a month. That sounds like a paltry sum, but back then you could get a huge chocolate candy bar for five cents...cokes were 10 cents. They had a little canteen up inside the compound and they could spend the money on what they wanted to.”

They could also work if they chose to, working on base as a grounds crew or with contractors outside the base with armed guards monitoring. Their pay was minimal however, most of it going to help fund the war.

“The government was short in manpower because all the able bodied men were drafted and sent to the war,” said Wells. “These companies would contract with the government for laborers and they were sent out to the logging companies, the lumber companies, the cotton farmers...all sorts of jobs where they needed common labor. The Germans hated to pick cotton.”

With the spare time, many of the prisoners took up different forms of art. Paintings, sketches and books were all made in the compound. While walking to the cafeteria one day Wells was able to hear some of the prisoners perform their art.

“They set themselves up an orchestra and played beautiful music,” said Wells.

The runaway prisoners

Wells shared a time she remembered where two of the prisoners made an escape.

German POWs were allowed to receive mail while on the compound, but the mail was screened first. According to Wells, censors would black out any parts of the letter that would be considered derogatory or harmful to get out. Message writers would often try to hide secret messages inside innocent looking letters by methods like using the first letter for every sentence, but censors would often be able to spot the codes.

However, one day a message got through.

“Somehow they got the message through that Hitler was supposed to have a ship in Argentina on February 2nd for any and all Germans who wanted to go back to Germany,” said Wells.

Only two POWs got the message, and they prepared a plan to escape. One day, on a work detail to a logging company in Aliceville, the men set their plan in motion.

While at work, two POWs began to fight. The altercation caused such a commotion that both guards assigned to watch over the group had to be called over to stop the men from fighting. Little did the guards know that the fight was staged and provided enough of a diversion for the two escapees to sneak out into the woods.

“Everything worked out fine until a thunderstorm came late that afternoon, about dark,” said Wells.

“Lightning, thunder and everything and they were soaking wet out there in the woods. They spotted what they thought was a deserted little farm house in the clearing, so they thought they would get up in that farm house to get dry.”

The men hurried inside, seeking shelter from the weather. Inside, they started to wring out their clothes and beat their shoes to get the mud off of them. The men thought they could finally relax; however the barn was not as deserted as they thought. The men made enough noise to wake up the owner of the barn and his wife.

“The old farmer heard the noises and got up and got his shotgun and walked out there,” said Wells. “He started asking them questions, and of course, they couldn’t speak English and he couldn’t speak German. So, he sent his wife to the nearest phone, which was a mile away in the rain and called the sheriff. The sheriff got out there and he couldn’t make any sense out of them either.”

The sheriff eventually noticed the symbol ‘PW’ stenciled on their clothes signaling to the sheriff that these were run-aways from the POW camp.

“He saw that and he decided they must be from Fort McClellan so he called the commander and told him

of the two prisoners,” said Wells. “The commander said ‘you must be mistaken, none of ours are missing.’ But after he gave them a few more facts, they put a team together to come down and sure enough they were our prisoners.”

The men were taken back to camp and given the maximum punishment: solitary confinement with only bread and water to eat.

A sad goodbye

Wells continued to work at the base, serving in different ways up to the end of the war, when the base closed down the POW compound. Those same people she heard played the beautiful music were now being sent back to their home.

“Two of them (in the orchestra), at the end of the war, applied to stay in the United States, but according to the Geneva Convention they were not allowed to. They were to be shipped back to their original home,” said Wells.

In fact, many of the prisoners had gotten used to life in America and wanted to stay. Before leaving, some of the POWs found their way to Wells, someone they saw around the base often. They gave her homemade art and books as a gift.

“That was their going away present to me,” said Wells. “They had put a penciled note on a tablet. It said that they would like to stay but they needed to go home and they thanked us for all the kindness we showed them while they were here.”

The gifts are now artifacts that tell a story of a time long passed. Wells has been asked to tell more of her stories and to show off her artifacts at this year’s POW Memorial Service that will take place on November 21st. She hopes to shed light on the history that took place in our back yard.

“Sure they were enemies, but they were fighting for their country just like our guys were fighting for our county,” said Wells. “They were people. I considered them friends,”

Read more: [Jacksonville News - WWII prisoner of war camp holds history memories for base typist Rita Wells](#)

World War II POW Camps in Alabama Chart Assignment

Student Name _____

Based on the lesson today, predict what life was like for POWs interned in Alabama during World War II by completing columns one and two of the chart below. The third column will be completed after the second lesson on Alabama POW camps is completed.

	Predictions	Facts leading to Predictions	Actual Conditions in POW Camps
Work			
Leisure			
Housing			
Food			
Prisoners' Perspective on Imprisonment			
Guards' Perspective on Prisoners			

Rubric for Chart

	4 points	3 points	2 points	1 point
Understanding	Student responses clearly show attentiveness to the reading and discussion during class.	Student responses show moderate attentiveness to the reading and discussion during class.	Student responses show little attentiveness to the reading and discussion during class.	Student responses demonstrate a lack of attentiveness.
Reasons for Predictions	Predictions are clearly based in facts.	At least three of the predictions are fact-based.	One or two of the predictions are fact-based.	Student predictions are not fact-based.
Critical Thinking	Student responses show insight and critical thinking.	Student responses show some insight and critical thinking.	Student responses show little insight and critical thinking.	Student responses show a lack of understanding and analysis of evidence.
Effort and Time	Student responses show good effort and wise use of class time.	Student responses show moderate effort and use of class time.	Student responses show a poor use of class time and little effort towards completing the chart.	Class time was poorly used resulting in an incomplete chart.
Accuracy of Content for Actual Conditions	Actual conditions reported are accurate and detailed.	Most of the conditions reported are accurate and detailed.	Few of the conditions reported are accurate and detailed.	None of the actual conditions reported are accurate.

Total _____