



World War II Internment of a German-American Couple in Hawaii



Joseph B. Poindexter, Territorial Governor.

by Louis Fiset

Congress declared war on Japan December 8, 1941, one day after Japanese naval forces attacked Pearl Harbor. Three days later Germany and Italy declared war on the United States. Immediately, German, Italian, and Japanese foreign-born residents who had not become U.S. citizens became enemy aliens; individuals over the age of fourteen were subject to arrest and detention. Moreover, Hawaii came under martial law on the day of the attack, threatening U.S. citizens of German, Italian, and Japanese ancestry with the loss of their freedom.

Available knowledge in relation to internment of civilians in Hawaii centers on 561 Japanese aliens and Japanese Americans who represented a minuscule percentage of the Islands' population of 158,000 Nikkei.¹ However, eighty individuals, or 13 percent of the 614 German-born residents living in the Islands also were rounded



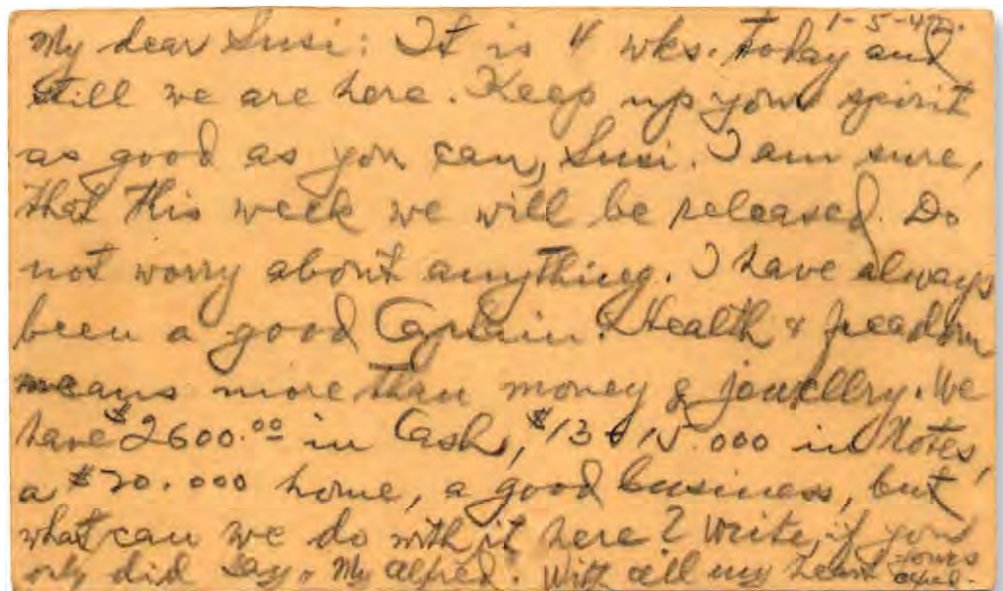
Left: Pouch mail from Alfred at Sand Island to Susan at the immigration station.

Below: Alfred's message referring to his four-week-old detention.

up, thirty-nine of whom were U.S. citizens by birth or naturalization. The internment correspondence between two married U.S. naturalized citizens, Alfred and Susan Schmidt (Smith), is the focus of this article.

In late afternoon the day of the attack, Hawaii's territorial Governor Joseph B. Poin Dexter placed the Hawaiian Islands under martial law and transferred all civilian powers to Commanding General of the Hawaii Department, Lieutenant General Walter C. Short. Major restrictions on the daily lives of all civilians included suspending the writ of *habeas corpus*, replacing civil courts with a military commission, and censoring communications — including the mail.

The military governor was given authority to intern, without recourse to the courts, enemy aliens as well as any U.S. citizens of German, Italian, and Japanese ancestry he suspected could pose a threat to the nation's security. For the next several weeks FBI agents, acting on warrants issued as early as December 8, set about arresting enemy aliens and suspicious U.S. citizens that intelligence agencies had listed for detention. Throughout the Islands detainees were brought to Oahu and confined in Honolulu, where they awaited the loyalty hearings whose outcomes determined their



freedom or internment.

While mail documenting Hawaii's martial law internment experience has remained scarce, an extensive collection generated by a German-American couple, Alfred and Susan Smith, provides an unusual account of one couple's internment in the United States. The collection consists of 160 covers postmarked from December 9, 1941 to December 29, 1943. This includes forty-six that they sent to each other during periods of separation. This article concentrates on the subset of covers highlighting Alfred and Susan Smith's movements between camps in Hawaii and on the mainland.

The Schmidts married in Germany in 1932 and moved to the East coast of the United States the next year. Alfred worked his way west to San Francisco as a roofing supply salesman, and the couple eventually arrived in Honolulu



Lieutenant General Walter C. Short.



Correspondence between Alfred and Susan while confined in separate quarters at the Sand Island Detention Camp.

in 1935 where later Alfred established his own roofing business. Susan stayed at home as a housewife. Naturalized in May 1940, the Schmidts changed their name to Smith.

Based on allegations of sympathy to the Nazi cause, arrest warrants for Alfred and Susan were issued on December 8, 1941. They each received a hearing at Fort Shafter before a board of officers and civilians convened to determine if one or both should be interned. A court record documenting Susan's hearing on December 23, 1941 contains witness allegations of anti-Semitic remarks, devotion to Hitler, and a preference for speaking German in public.²

Alfred, the operator of a successful Honolulu roofing and paint business on the eve of the war, was arrested on December 8, then removed to the Sand Island Detention Camp in Honolulu, at the head of Honolulu Bay. On December 18 Susan was taken from the couple's home at 2825 Park Street to the immigration station in the Ala Moana area of Honolulu, a short distance from Sand Island. The couple's ordeal

as internees, spent mostly in separate camps or isolated from one another in fenced off areas within the same camp, ended with their release on parole two years later.

On January 5, 1942 Alfred penciled a postcard to Susan, which was carried by pouch outside the mail stream from Sand Island to the immigration station. The message, referring to the day of his arrest, reveals the couple's ample financial resources:

It is 4 wks. today and still we are here. Keep up your spirit as good as you can, Susi.... Health & freedom means more than money & jewelry. We have \$2,600⁰⁰ in cash, \$13-15,000 in notes, a \$20,000 home, a good business, but what can we do with it here? Write if you only did say "My Alfred."

This and all known correspondence between the Smiths were examined by military censors at the Sand Island Detention Camp and often bear censor markings including a simple "OK" or single line "OK at contact office," applied in manuscript or by rubber stamp.

The first week of February 1942 found Susan transferred from the immigration station to the Sand Island Detention Camp where male and female detainees, single or married, were quartered in separate areas. An example of the within-camp correspondence between Alfred and Susan, then housed in different sections, is illustrated. Although they lived only yards apart, the letter traveled through the postal system. Two identical "OK" censor markings suggest examination by the military censor both going and coming.

After two weeks of confinement at Sand Island, on February 20 Alfred was taken from Honolulu under guard and transported by ship to the mainland for an unknown inland internment destination. One of eight contingents of trans-

ferees from Hawaii, this first one consisted of 199 passengers, all male: 171 Japanese, 24 Germans, and 4 Italians. On March 1 the ship docked at the Angel Island Quarantine Station, in San Francisco Bay.

Shown is one of three known letters Alfred wrote to Susan during the group's five-day stay at Angel Island, from March 1 to March 6. Each cover bears an Angel Island postmark of March 9, three days following his departure from the Bay area. He probably wrote them over several days,



Alfred to Susan from Angel Island Quarantine Station before departing for an unknown inland internment camp destination.

handing the letters over in unsealed envelopes for censorship and subsequent placement into the mail stream. Because the free frank privilege for prisoner of war and internee domestic mail would not be authorized until the following November, Alfred franked each letter with postage.

While en route by train, Alfred learned of his ultimate destination: Camp McCoy, a military installation in Wisconsin. There, with his Hawaii cohorts, he would remain in confinement for two months. His correspondence with Susan indicates her presence at the Sand Island Detention Camp throughout the period.

In a postcard postmarked March 15, midway through his mainland internment, Alfred lamented:

Still I am here. I wired yesterday to Washington & trying all to have explanations why we have been interned.... Susi, dearest, I cannot believe it that I am here. Why? Please try as I do — take it. Always thinking of a clear release. I shall then find you, my dearest Susi.

An air mail envelope from Alfred postmarked April 17, 1942 survives. After examining the unsealed letter, an English language military censor at Camp McCoy applied the rubber stamp boxed marking, then sealed and placed it in the mail stream. Next it was forwarded to the Chicago field censor station, where civilian censor 3092 opened the letter for re-examination before returning it to the mail stream. At the Sand Island destination it was passed by a censor yet a third time (manuscript censor marking) before being handed over to Susan. As on many of his letters, Alfred highlighted his U.S. citizenship status in the return address, the status that soon would lead to his return to Hawaii.

In the meantime, he had received no letters from Susan since before his departure from Hawaii. On March 24 Alfred sent an anxious message on a postcard:

No reply to my cable so far. Where are you cannot understand why we are not told about our wives in detention. Nearly 6 wks. without hearing from you. Oh,



To Susan from Camp McCoy. Alfred identifies himself as "U.S. Citizen."



Typical censor marking applied to internee mail by military censors at Camp McCoy.

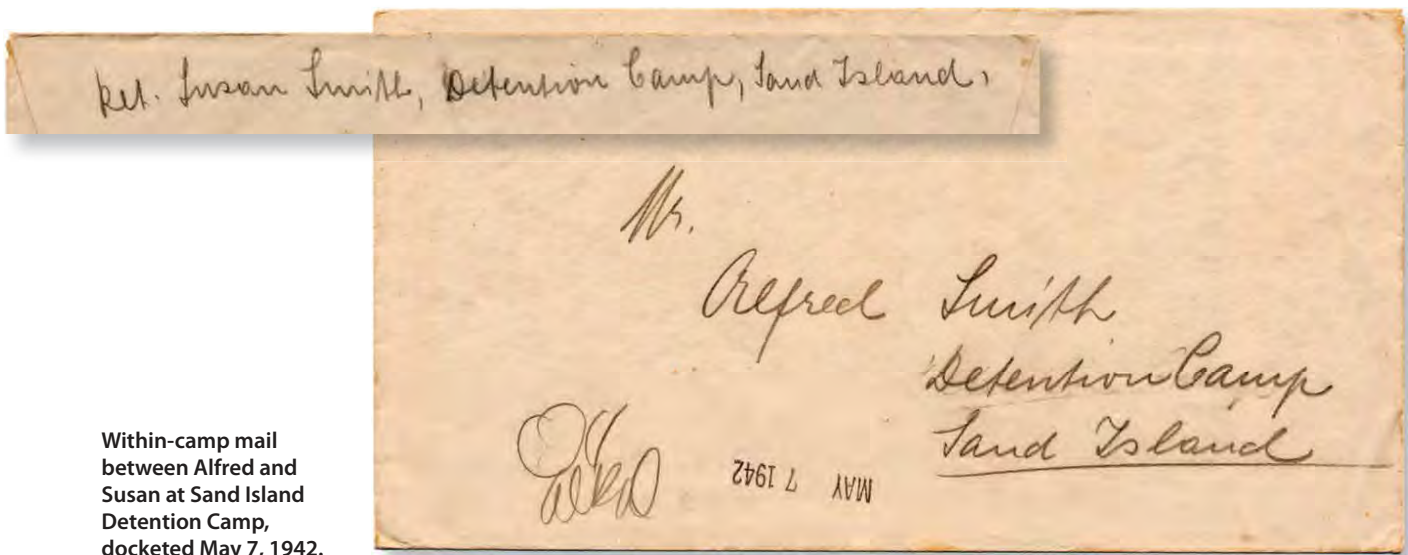
I feel so bad about it. Today is just another day.

After Alfred cabled an Easter greeting on April 6, Susan responded with three letters from "Detention Camp, Sand Island." The last was postmarked April 24, two weeks before Alfred's departure from Camp McCoy and return to Sand Island.

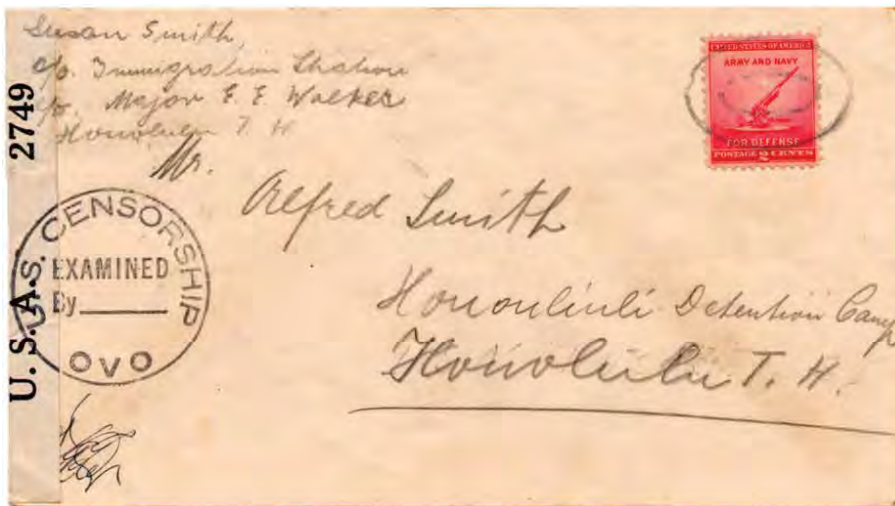
This move occurred because in the absence of martial law the U.S. Government had no authority to intern U.S. citizens on the mainland. A *habeas corpus* case had been filed on behalf of one of the German American internees. A successful outcome would ensure release of all thirty-three Hawaii-resident U.S. citizens of German, Italian, and Japanese ancestry then interned on the mainland. Therefore, in May 1943, with the Hawaiian Islands still under martial law, all internees were returned to Sand Island where legally they could be kept under lock and key.



Susan from Sand Island Detention Camp to Alfred at Camp McCoy.



Within-camp mail between Alfred and Susan at Sand Island Detention Camp, docketed May 7, 1942.



Susan, from the immigration station in Honolulu, to Alfred at the Honouliuli Detention Camp.



Incoming mail addressed to Alfred at Sand Island Detention Camp, forwarded to the home in Honolulu where he and Susan would return after their release.

Upon his return to the Sand Island Detention Camp, Alfred and Susan were again quartered separately for a short time, and their within-camp correspondence resumed. An example from Susan to Alfred was censored locally and docketed May 7, likely the day Alfred returned to the camp.

A gap in the correspondence exists following this letter, for the camp administrator soon relaxed regulations permitting the few married couples under his jurisdiction to live together on the women's side of the camp. While the Smiths were themselves childless, young children of interned couples were allowed to visit and stay with their parents on weekends.

On March 1, 1943 the Sand Island camp was shut down, because most detainees by this time had been transported to the mainland for internment. Those who remained, among them U.S. citizens including Alfred and Susan, were sent to a newly erected internment camp situated a few miles northwest of Honolulu, near the town of Ewa. The camp, located in Honouliuli Gulch, its namesake, also held a few Japanese prisoners of war from the Pacific Theater. Alfred was removed to this new camp in mid-February, two weeks before the Sand Island facility closed. Subsequently, Susan was returned to the immigration station in Honolulu where she began detention fifteen months earlier. However, soon they were reunited at Honouliuli and remained together for eight months until their release.

During their separation, Susan sent at least one letter from the immigration station to the Honouli-

uli Detention Camp. Although the postmark is mute, common on outgoing Hawaii internee correspondence, it was probably mailed early in March 1943. It shows both military censorship (manuscript) and censor markings applied by a Honolulu field censor station examiner.

In November 1943, while together at the Honouliuli Detention Camp, Alfred and Susan received welcome news of their impending release from custody with placement on parole for the duration of the war. This order permitted the Smiths to return to their Honolulu home on Park Street.

An air mail letter postmarked at Fresno, California on December 29, 1943 reflects this change in their status. Sent to Alfred at the Sand Island Detention Camp, it was forwarded to the couple's Park Street address. This cover concludes the philatelic story of the Smiths and their internment under martial law in Hawaii.

What stigma the Smiths may have suffered as a result remains unknown. Their arrests were based on suspicions of sympathy with the Third Reich. The accusers, perhaps neighbors, personal enemies, anti-Nazi German Americans, or other Honolulu acquaintances, never were called as witnesses to swear to their allegations at the couple's loyalty hearings. Alfred and Susan's incarceration may have been based on hearsay or fueled by the understandable hysteria of the time. In the end, the Smiths were U.S. citizens, and

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Acknowledgment

The author thanks Dickson H. Preston for his helpful suggestions on an earlier version of the manuscript.

Endnotes

1. For an account of interned Hawaii residents of Japanese ancestry see: Louis Fiset, *Detained, Interned, Incarcerated: U.S. Enemy Noncombatant Mail in World War II* (Chicago: Collectors Club of Chicago, 2010).
2. Schmidt (Smith), Susan Auguste Subject File of Civilian Internees, Hawaii, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD (copy in the author's possession.)

The Author

Louis Fiset has been collecting postal history of non-combatants during wartime for more than thirty years and has exhibited widely. He is the author of *Detained, Interned, Incarcerated: U.S. Enemy Noncombatant Mail in World War II*, (2010).

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