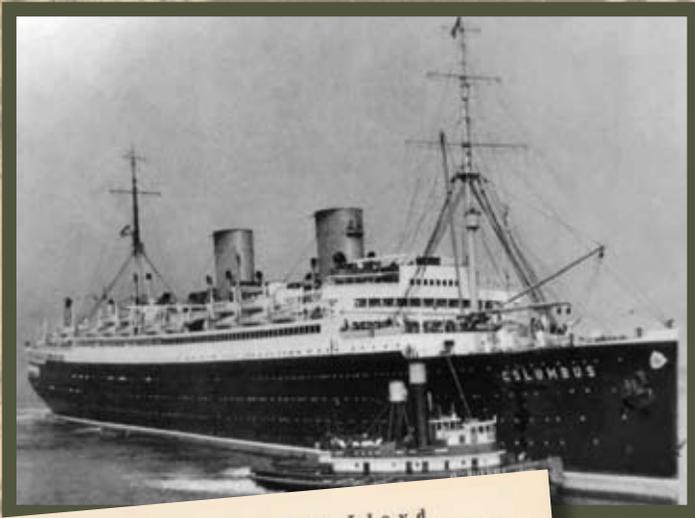


# German Sailors on the High Desert

## A WORLD WAR II GERMAN DETAINMENT CAMP AT FORT STANTON

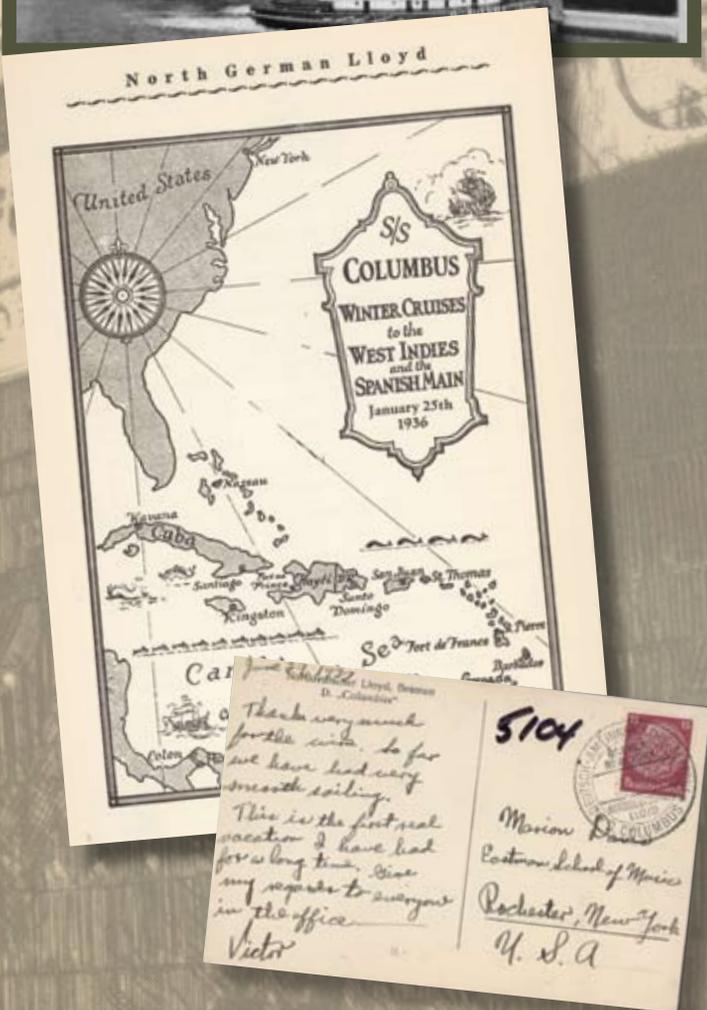
BY TOMAS JAEHN



Havana—"no city records a more stirring or romantic past, and none possesses a more charming present." Such was the advertisement in the 1936 *Caribbean Caravel*, the SS *Columbus*'s onboard newsletter. The SS *Columbus*, a German luxury liner, was the flagship of the German shipping company Norddeutscher Lloyd, which began cruising the Atlantic along the US coast and the Caribbean in the early 1930s.

Unfortunately, Havana's charm was not on the passengers' minds when they were ordered by the crew to disembark the German liner in Cuba's capital in early September 1939. On September 1, 1939, German armed forces had invaded Poland, and on September 3 Great Britain and France declared war on Germany. The Third Reich soon commanded all German ships to return to their home ports. The *Columbus*'s passengers, most of whom were from the United States, were sent home at the shipping company's expense, but the *Columbus* and its crew were in a difficult position. The British navy was maintaining a naval blockade in the Atlantic to prevent ships from leaving or returning to Germany.

After taking refuge in neutral Veracruz, Mexico, and refueling the ocean liner, Commander Wilhelm Dähne, the captain of the *Columbus*, decided on December 14 to make a run for Germany, attempting to break through the British blockade. The United States, still officially neutral, ordered the heavy cruiser USS *Tuscaloosa* to shadow the German ocean liner. By deliberately maintaining frequent chatter with the *Columbus*, which the British destroyer HMS *Hyperion* could monitor, the *Tuscaloosa* enabled the British to determine the position of the German ship. On December 19, 1939, the destroyer's roaring guns gave warning shots and sent up water fountains in front of the ship. Although the *Columbus* was a fast ocean liner,





capable of a maximum speed of twenty-two knots, it was no match for the British destroyer.

Captain Dähne's choices were limited: either scuttle the ship or turn it over to the British navy. While harboring in Mexico, the German crew had practiced many "dry runs" on how to quickly sink their ship. When the commander gave the order, everybody knew what to do: valves were opened, fires were set, and explosives were detonated in strategic places. The *Columbus* began to sink. Three sailors remained behind for unknown reasons, but all the rest followed the captain's ultimate order: "abandon the ship." Five hundred seventy-six crew members climbed into lifeboats and then watched from afar as the luxury liner of Norddeutscher Lloyd sank 12,000 feet to the bottom of the Atlantic.

It was left to the *Tuscaloosa*, whose crew watched the ship go down from a safe distance, to pick up the stranded German seamen. Officially neutral in the European conflict, the United States treated the Germans as "distressed seamen" with routine permission to remain in the country for up to ninety days. Great Britain allowed female staffers on the ship to return home, but except for a few humanitarian cases, the civilian sailors were denied permission to repatriate. A few individual attempts to repatriate via Italy and later Japan were hindered by the British navy.

---

**LEFT:** The *SS Columbus* was a luxury liner, taking tourists from East Coast port cities to the Caribbean. Photograph, brochure, and postcard courtesy of Tomas Jaehn.

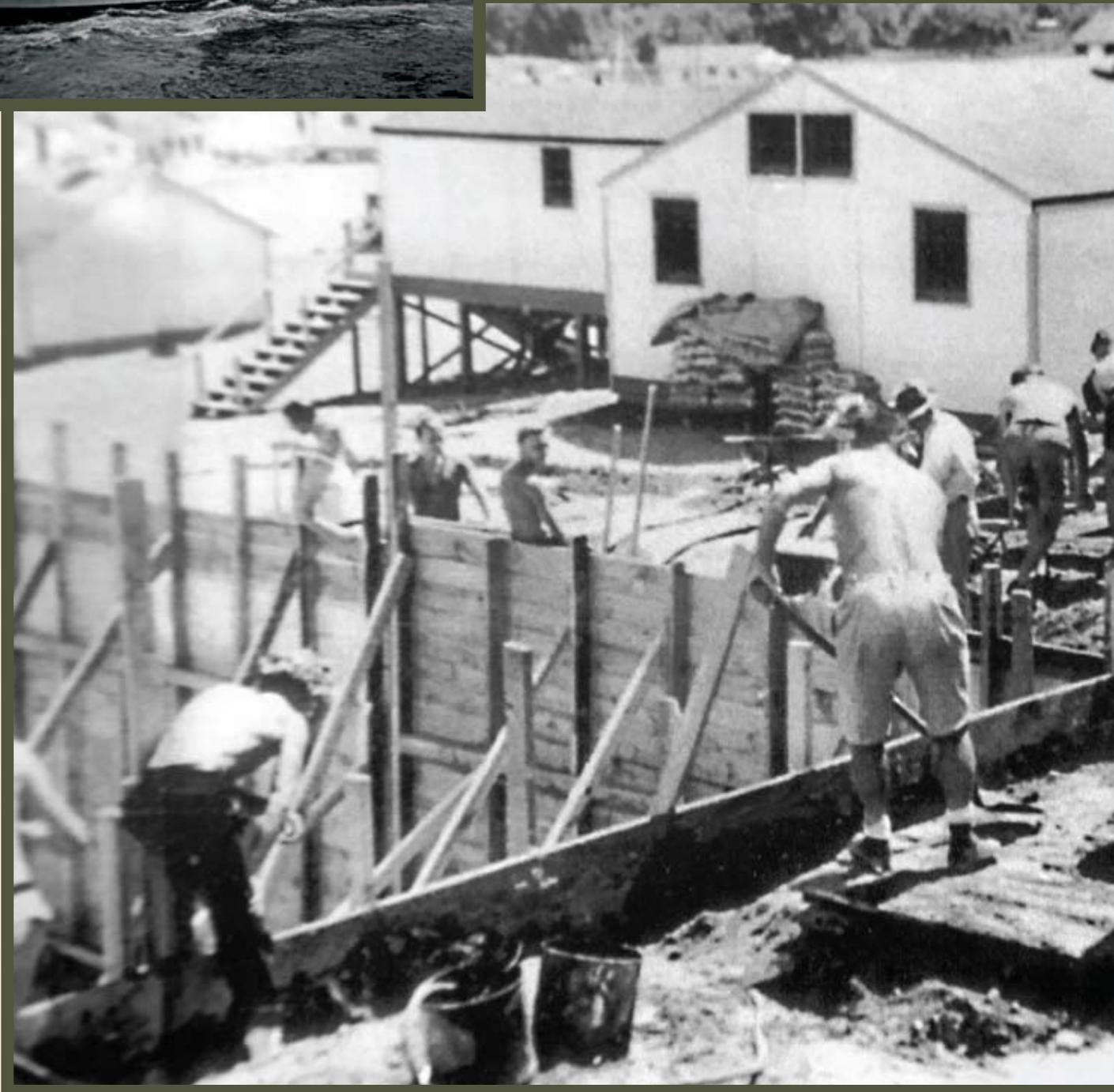
**ABOVE:** The German crew escapes the burning *SS Columbus* by ladders and lifeboats. These photographs were taken by sailors, and appeared in the January 1, 1940 *Life* magazine. Courtesy *Life* magazine and James J. McBride.





**LEFT:** The *USS Tuscaloosa* rescued the German sailors from their sinking ship. Commodore Harry Ascher Badt was recognized in contemporary reports as the Jewish officer who rescued sailors from Nazi Germany. Courtesy Esther Badt Balsamo and James J. McBride.

**BELOW:** With impressive engineering skills the German sailors built themselves a swimming pool in the New Mexico desert. Courtesy Immigration and Naturalization Service and James J. McBride.



Britain's refusal to let fighting-age Germans return home put the United States in a legal dilemma. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover intervened with a "list of charges [against the German seamen which] ranged from fanciful to puritanical" (as reported by John Joel Culley in *Prologue*). After months of legal maneuvering between various US agencies, and stays by the sailors on Ellis Island and then Angel Island in San

Francisco Bay, the decision was made in August 1940, with the assistance and acquiescence of Captain Dähne, to move the remaining crew of about 400 German sailors to Fort Stanton, New Mexico. It was an isolated place, far from urban centers and nothing like the glamorous port cities between which these sailors and crew had sailed for years.

Fort Stanton, seven miles northeast of Capitan, had a colorful history before it became home to the German detainees. Named after Captain Henry W. Stanton, who was killed in a skirmish with Apache Indians in 1855, Fort Stanton was at the heart of the US Army's campaigns against Apaches and Navajos. Abandoned in 1861, it was reoccupied in 1863 and turned eventually into a resident military post housing the famous Buffalo Soldiers in the late 1870s. During the waning years of the nineteenth century, Fort Stanton soldiers saw their share of conflicts in the Indian wars and the Lincoln County War. Until 1896, when it was vacated, at one time or another it had hosted famous and infamous people like Billy the Kid, Kit Carson, and John "Black Jack" Pershing. In 1899 Fort Stanton became a Merchant Marine hospital (later renamed to United

**...the location  
ensured that any  
pro-Nazi activities  
would be isolated  
in this rather lonely  
part of New Mexico.**

States Public Health Service) for merchant marine patients suffering from tuberculosis.

The decision to bring the *Columbus* crew to Fort Stanton was driven in part by the fact that structures from an abandoned Civilian Conservation Corps camp were adjacent to the fort, a hospital was nearby, and the location ensured that any pro-Nazi activities would be isolated in this rather lonely part of New Mexico. Thus, Fort Stanton became the first United States civilian internment camp of World War II. In late January 1941, under the watchful eyes of Border Patrol officers, the first contingent of thirty-nine German seamen detained Southern Pacific Railroad railcars in Carrizozo, the





**The German detainees** worked on construction and agricultural projects at Fort Stanton. New Mexico Magazine Collection, Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Neg. No. HP.2007.20.320.

seat of Lincoln County. A small crowd of town folks watched their arrival. Dressed in civilian clothes, the seamen quickly continued their trip to Fort Stanton. Captain Dähne and his senior staff assigned bunkmates and job responsibilities. The camp needed accommodations, and the Germans went to work to prepare for the soon-to-arrive additional detainees from the *Columbus*. They constructed four barracks, a kitchen, laundry, mess hall, lavatories and washrooms, shops, officers' quarters, and a medical dispensary. A little less than a month later, forty more Germans arrived at Fort Stanton and joined in constructing workspaces for the barbers, tailors, and other specialized crewmen who had staffed the *Columbus*.

On March 17, 1941, the remaining 331 *Columbus* seamen arrived at Fort Stanton. After months in the United States, many detainees were homesick. In an interview with James McBride, one sailor, Rolf Kahlbenn, recalled that “we were in a way disappointed” by the desolate landscape surrounding Fort Stanton. At the fort, the American guards and German detainees lived together under similar conditions,

but authority was clearly divided. The Americans maintained the outside organization, and the Germans, under the command of Captain Dähne, controlled the inside of the camp.

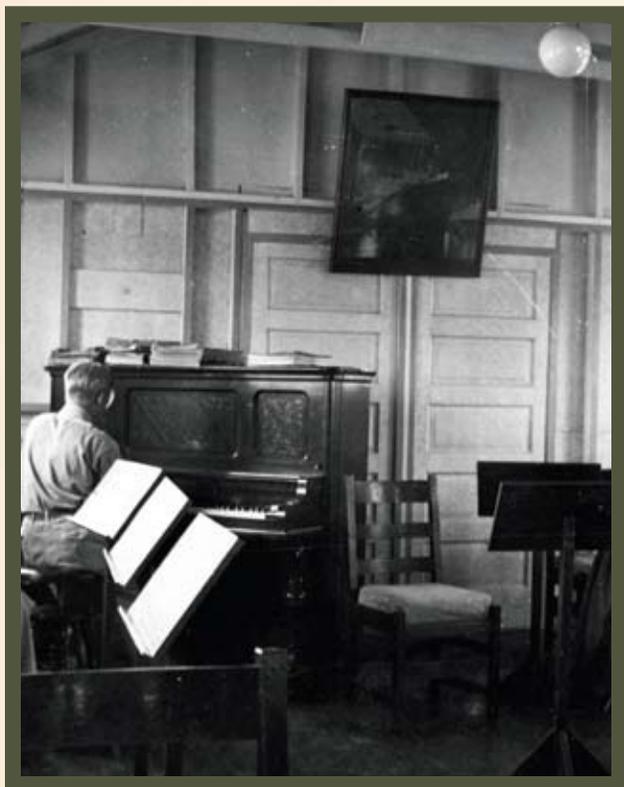
To keep the detainees occupied, Captain Dähne ordered them to get the camp tidy. The men painted buildings, planted trees, grew gardens, and landscaped the entire camp grounds. Whitewashed rocks marked the foot paths and roads; trees and bushes were transplanted from the nearby hills. They tried to make their place as homey as possible. The seamen built one-room cabins with small garden plots along the Rio Bonito, where, during their time off, they would read, relax, play cards, or pursue other hobbies. Except for the extraordinary circumstances of internment, these activities were not unlike relaxing weekend activities back home in *Schrebergärten* (tiny community garden plots established for recreational use on the fringes of larger cities).

To bring relative normalcy to this disconcerting situation, Dähne obtained some farmland for the detainees, where they produced vegetables and potatoes—enough for the camp plus surplus that they were allowed to sell on the open market for

profit. Because Germany and the United States were still officially at peace, the detainees were allowed—with permission from the guards—to go to Capitan, the nearest community, take hikes into the mountains, or stroll along the Rio Bonito. Occasionally, when additional medical attention was needed, detainees were able to travel sixty miles to Roswell, the only good-sized town nearby.

Dähne was able to purchase older Model T Ford trucks to start a driving school, and daily training was conducted both in the classroom and on the driving field. The camp operated its own library with books in English and in German purchased from farm and arts and craft surplus sales. In lieu of a camp newspaper, Dähne aired short newsclips in the evenings over a loudspeaker system. Some detainees later remembered well the weekly movie and classes in European languages.

The social center of the camp was the canteen, where the men could purchase cigarettes, candy, cakes, ice cream, and other personal items as well as soft drinks and even home-brewed beer (two bottles per day was the official limit). Special orders, with the canteen staff as go-between, provided the detainees with seeds, chickens, and other “exotic” items.



**The detainees enjoyed music,** weekly movies, and language classes. New Mexico Magazine Collection, Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Neg. No. HP.2007.20.322.

## PRISONERS OF WAR AT ROSWELL, NEW MEXICO

**I**n May 1943, Roswell, New Mexico, became home to about 4,000 German prisoners of war and an administrative base camp to many more who worked and lived on farms across southern New Mexico under Roswell's supervision. Camp Roswell was the first World War II POW camp outside the southern part of the United States. Initially, many New Mexicans were agitated by the idea of German POWs among them. While the presence of the Fort Stanton detainees triggered only an occasional newspaper article, Roswell citizens wrote concerned letters to their senators and the local newspaper urging that the prisoners be safely contained. Unlike the detainees at Fort Stanton, who worked voluntarily and, in a limited sense, for profit, the POWs at Camp Roswell were required to work and were paid an hourly or daily wage that did not compete with the federal minimum wage. Because most unions representing carpenters, plumbers, and miners considered POW laborers a threat to their profession, the prisoners, with few exceptions, worked in agriculture and on ditches and acequias. Did the Fort Stanton detainees and the Roswell POWs have any contact with each other, or even know about each other's presence in New Mexico? None of the sources consulted for this article record any interaction between these two groups of Germans. ■

The sailors built a swimming pool fed by spring water and maintained by a purifying system designed by the seafaring detainees. During the fall of 1941, the camp conducted its own Olympiad, using tennis courts, a soccer field, and tracks that the seamen built for recreation. In short, the Germans adjusted to their situation as best they could, and their camp resembled a small, well-functioning town. Germany's diplomatic representative in the United States, the Swiss legation, and the International Red Cross, which occasionally inspected the camp for any violations of the Geneva Convention (to which both the US and Germany were signatories), were mostly satisfied with the detainees' facilities and morale.



One observer pointed out that, aside from the shared tasks of communal living, the seamen operated with the same organizational structure at the camp that they had had on board the *Columbus*, with each man retaining his rank and duties. The cooks cooked, the tailors sewed, the barber cut hair, and the members of the ship's orchestra gave concerts, while the senior officers administered and maintained the camp, with Captain Dähne serving as the official contact to the American camp administration.

This relatively harmonious way of life all changed on December 9, 1941, two days after Pearl Harbor, when Germany declared war on the United States. Any hopes that the detainees may have harbored of being home by Christmas were dashed. For two long years since the sinking of their ocean liner, the seamen had longed to go home, but with the United States entering the war, the German seamen turned from detainees or "distressed seamen" into alien enemies, bound to remain in the United States for the foreseeable future. The commander of the Western Defense Command ordered wire fencing to enclose the camp, guard towers erected, guard dogs brought in, and the compound covered by floodlights. And although the Germans declined the

administration's request to help build the detention center, it was operational as a prison by early February 1942.

By August 1943 the camp held 652 German detainees, having absorbed over time seamen from German ships that had met a fate like that of the *Columbus*, and a small "Segregation Camp" for difficult detainees. The camp continued its internal organization under Captain Dähne but saw itself turn into a pro-National Socialist (Nazi) detention facility. Those of anti-Nazi persuasion were transferred elsewhere. The camp administration had always sensed that the crew of the *Columbus* had pro-Nazi sentiments, but it wasn't clear if their attitudes were simply nationalistic feelings about the *Vaterland*. The *Columbus* detainees had arrived during a time when Hitler's Germany was ascending, whereas later arrivals, disillusioned by years of war, had a different perspective. The camp administration did not attempt to Americanize the strong-willed Wilhelm Dähne and his crew, but rules changed, and many were added for the former distressed seamen, now considered alien enemies, at Fort Stanton. Day passes were highly regulated, lights-out requirements implemented, and curfew hours enacted, and the seamen's access to salvageable items at Fort Stanton was severely restricted. The long internment and the flux of



**OPPOSITE LEFT:** The detainees' dining hall at Fort Stanton. New Mexico Magazine Collection, Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Neg. No. HP.2007.20.321.

German seamen coming and going based on their political points of view took their toll on the detainees. There were occasional minor squabbles, and the camp experienced one major fight among the Germans over Nazi allegiance. Some of the troublemakers were sent to the brig; others were quickly transferred out of the camp. There were also occasional escape attempts. Detainees climbed fences, walked off work details, or dug tunnels, but all escapees were promptly caught and returned to camp. The futility of these escape attempts became apparent once the escapees left the camp: they were clueless about where to go when faced with the high mountains, forbidding deserts, and open spaces; for the sailors this was a landscape where, in the words of Gertrude Stein, “there is no there there.”

The Fort Stanton internees had to wait until the end of the war to return to Germany. Not all made it, though. Four seamen are buried at Fort Stanton: two died during a trichinosis epidemic in the camp, one seaman hung himself, and one was murdered (charges were dropped after it was determined that all participants were highly inebriated during what turned out to be a simple disagreement). Upon armistice, on May 8, 1945, the Germans prepared for their long trip home, and on August 27 the last internees left Carrizozo, leaving behind a small number of Japanese internees from the Japanese Internment Camp in Santa Fe to dismantle the site. On October 10, 1945, the camp was officially closed and ownership returned to the US Public Health Service.

**LEFT/BELOW:** The ruins of the gymnasium, which the internees built next to their swimming pool, remain at Fort Stanton today, with the original inscription, “Erbaut 1944” (“Built 1944”), over the door. Photographs by David L. Tremblay.



All that remains of the German camp are three rundown shacks, four grave sites, and the ruins of the gymnasium and the pool built by the Germans. Few remember today that 400 German seamen of the *SS Columbus* spent five years at Fort Stanton waiting to return home. ■

**Tomas Jaehn** is a historian who works as archivist and librarian at the Fray Angélico Chávez History Library.

### Investigate and Explore Fort Stanton

This essay concludes our three-part series on Fort Stanton. The entire series is online at [elpalacio.org](http://elpalacio.org). Fort Stanton is open for visitors, and the museum includes exhibits on the German internment camp. The camp site and the ruins of the swimming pool and gymnasium can only be visited with a tour guide. For information call the museum at 575-336-1436.

**Sources:** Very little has been written about the *SS Columbus* crew's time at Fort Stanton. This essay relied on Wilfred McCormick, “Anchors Away,” *New Mexico Magazine* (June 1941), and a few contemporary newspaper articles (*New York Times*, *Lincoln County News*, *Roswell Daily Record*, *Albuquerque Journal*). Secondary sources drawn on were James McBride's thesis, “The Internment of the *SS Columbus* Crew during World War II” (1996); his subsequently published photo documentary, *Interned: Internment of the S.S. Columbus Crew at Fort Stanton, New Mexico, 1941–1945* (2003); John Joel Culley's “A Troublesome Presence: World War II Internment of German Sailors in New Mexico” (*Prologue*, winter 1996); the Fray Angélico Chávez History Library's clipping file on Fort Stanton; and various German and English online sources such as Radio Bremen TV's documentary information on the *SS Columbus*.