

SCOTTSDALE MEMORIES

Papago POW camp lived harmoniously with Valley

The tail end of the 1930s saw the U.S. Army Cavalry leave today's Papago Park, where it had been headquartered for many years. World War II broke out soon thereafter.

During the war, from 1943 to 1945, hundreds of German and Italian prisoners were housed in barracks in a prisoner of war camp north of McDowell Road, east of the familiar Papago Buttes. High fences and barbed wire ran north, almost to Thomas Road.

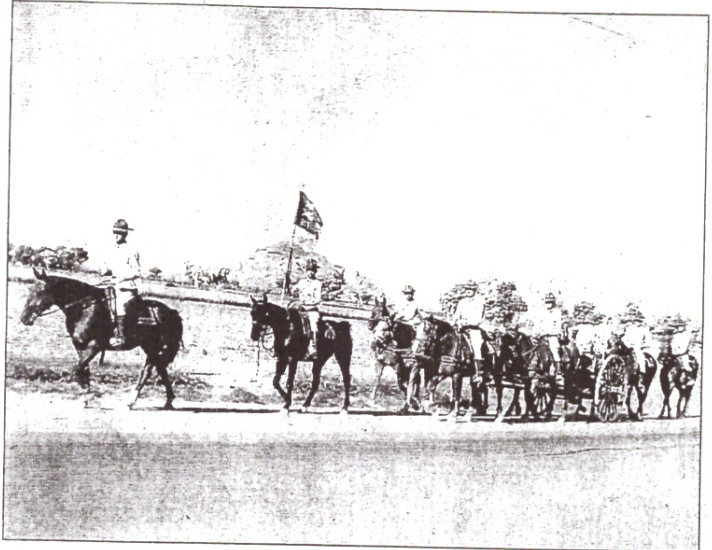
Today, homes sit on the old prison site, along with some baseball fields, a blood bank and an Elks Lodge. The building used today by the Scottsdale Elks is one of the barracks that was used to house prisoners of World War II.

In general, the POWs and community at-large got along well. Most of the prisoners, though not all, were non-commissioned men. They spent their days cleaning irrigation ditches for 10 cents an hour. The going rate was a dollar, but they got their room and board for free. Besides, how many prisoners of war were being paid anything?

One story that sticks out in my mind involved an unbroken pinto horse belonging to the William Schrader family. One day, a truckload of prisoners were clearing an irrigation ditch near what was known as Schrader's Pond.

A German prisoner spotted the pinto horse asleep, standing beside a fence. When no one was looking, he scaled the fence, planning to take a joy ride. The surprised horse had other ideas. It began bucking wildly before running into a thicket of mesquite.

When the hapless prisoner emerged, his shirt was torn and his arms and legs were bleeding from dozens of minor scratches and scrapes. The guard took the injured man to the nearby Schrader house, where Mrs. Schrader gener-



Members of the U.S. Army Cavalry ride by the Papago Buttes in 1938. The area soon became a POW camp.

Scottsdale Historical Society



PAUL MESSINGER

ously offered to clean his wounds.

When she was done, he was as good as new. Everyone had a good laugh.

While for most POWs it was irrigation ditches by day, it was for all POWs motion pictures by night. The prison camp had an auditorium where inmates were shown American movies. Walter Jennings, a civilian guard, would let me and my friend, Willie Duncan, sit in the back of the theater on show nights. It was me, Willie, and a room full of prisoners.

As I think back today, I wonder whether similar POW camps elsewhere operated in such harmony. The only exception was a brief escape by a cadre of German U-boat officers on Christmas Eve. Every one of them was recaptured.

After the war ended, the camp became a Veterans Administration hospital, where hundreds of soldiers received care. During my college days

as an *Arizona Republic* auto driver who delivered bundles of newspapers to an army of young carriers, I finished my route by going room to room at the "Papago" VA Hospital selling newspapers to the wounded GIs.

The hospital eventually was moved to Seventh Street and Indian School Road in Phoenix (now the Carl T. Hayden VA Medical Center). And several decades later (in the 1990s), a small group of former German prisoners (then in their 70s and 80s) traveled back to Scottsdale to reminisce over days gone by.

By the time they arrived, only a couple of the original buildings remained. I was fortunate to meet some of these men on the occasion of their first and only return visit to the site of the Scottsdale POW camp they once called home.

Raised on a local dairy farm, former Scottsdale city councilman (1971-76), state legislator (1979-85) and honored oral historian, Paul Messinger founded Messinger Mortuaries in 1959. Local history buffs can reach Messinger at (480) 860-2300 or (480) 945-9521.