



Buffalo 'Tales



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LETTERS FROM BEHIND THE WALL

by Margaret Stines Nielsen

The Phelps County Museum has in its library a scrapbook, given to them by Donna Brink Reid of South Australia, which contains letters from a German POW who worked on the Charles P. Brink farm near Buda in 1945. The letters and Donna's comments summarize the experience of Donna and her family with Paul Freydank and his son Helmut.

In 1993 a German reporter wrote of Nebraska,

We have travelled for hours but the horizon is still only a thin line, straight as drawn by pen and ruler and still in an unreachable distance . . . the wind blows unhindered over the flat countryside creating its own surprises and giving to the people living here a sense of unexpected change.¹

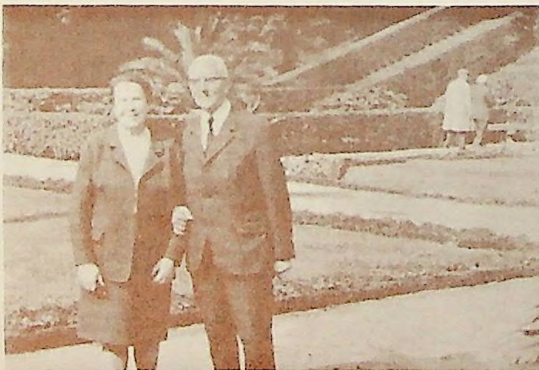
This is no doubt the impression of German prisoners of war who were brought to Camp Atlanta from 1943 to 1945. In 1945, 300 of these prisoners were housed in the Kearney Military Academy where they were available for hire. Lieutenant A.Y. Napier said they "reacted better to work orders and had more freedom to express their opinions" than before. There were no more "straight-arm salutes." If a prisoner died he was given full military honors except for Nazi flags.²

In the summer of 1945, Charles (Chick) Brink contracted for four of the prisoners to work on his farm. He picked them up every morning and returned them to the Academy at night. They were given a meager lunch and Chick was instructed not to give them additional food.

Orba Brink said, "They told Chick not to feed them but they didn't tell me." The prisoners were very appreciative of the farm dinners they received.

Paul Freydank, the overseer, who spoke "understandable" English gave orders to the other three. They irrigated, cleaned out the tree rows and did general farm work.

(Continued on Page 3)



Mr. and Mrs. Paul Freydank in Potsdam, Germany

WITH THE SOCIETY

A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT:

We are well into the new year of 1995. Time does pass quickly when the winter weather is as nice as we are having.

We have had some good news come to us in the way of some matching funds. You can read more about this in this issue of Buffalo Tales.

At our most recent board meeting we tried, to some degree, to solve the problem we have for space at our museum. It is, however, the consensus of the board that a new multi-purpose building is needed to solve space problems. In fact, if anyone would like to bless the museum with a nice financial gift, just get in touch with any board member!!!

Larry K. Nansel, President

See Your Dollars Grow and the Boyd House Restored

The Buffalo County Historical Society has been offered a Challenge Grant by an anonymous donor. The Challenge Grant will provide one dollar for every two dollars contributed to the Society toward the restoration of the Boyd House. Now is the time to make your contribution toward this worthwhile project.

MEMORIAL RECEIVED from

Dr. R.L. and Kathy Link, in memory of Lillian McGregor.

NEW LIFE MEMBERS

Glenn and Susan Underhill, Riverdale

NEW BASIC MEMBERS

C.R. Rundstrom, Kearney

Beverly Rasmussen, Kearney

Sally Davidson Edsill, Kearney

NEW SUPPORTING MEMBER

Marjorie Knerl Walton, Norwalk, CT

1995 SUPPORTING MEMBERS

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Walt & Lois Wilken

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of Kearney

James R. Ganz, Gibbon

Marcella Hadenfeldt, Shelton

Alma & Wilma Harder, Gibbon

Dale & Ilia Wright, Elm Creek

Everett and Mable Harvey, Gibbon

Lance Hehner, Pleasanton

Mr. & Mrs. Richard Nutter, Gibbon

Mr. & Mrs. Martin J. Maul, Riverdale

Mr. & Mrs. Leroy A. Walker, Gibbon

Virginia Schars, Omaha

Dwight & Lois Adams, Bozeman, MT

Cris D. Hehner, Overland, MO

Jeanne Erickson Johnson, Gowanda, NY

John D. McQuarrie, Denver, CO

Rogers Ritter, Charlottesville, VA

John D. Ball, Los Altos, CA

Paul, a civil engineer, was very capable. He later mentioned at least twice, "the time I fixed your electric pump."

The men had been drafted into the army and were not Nazis but they were careful what they said because of the chance of informers in the ranks. Although Germany had been defeated they still had not heard anything about their families. The Brinks remembered him as a "nice" man. Paul was drawn to the Brink's twins, Donna and David. He had a son about their age and was interested in all their activities.

After the war Paul was transferred to Indianola and then back to Atlanta.

On September 11, 1946 he wrote to the family by Prisoner of War post from Yorkshire, England.

Dear Mr. Brink,

One year ago when I was working with you on your electric pump, I didn't believe that I would be here in England . . . I have pretty good news from home but I don't know when I shall go there again. I . . . send my best greetings to you and all your family.

Sincerely, P. Freydank

On September 10, 1950 Paul and his son both wrote from Potsdam, Germany. I hope you can remember that time in summer 1945 when I was working with you. Now . . . I am teaching my boy English and he would like to learn more of your language by corresponding with an American boy of his age. Therefore I take the liberty of writing this letter which will be mailed in the American sector of Berlin, for here in the Soviet zone we have better to keep secret our correspondence to the United States. Our present authorities don't like such correspondence but we hope that things will change. Thanking you beforehand for your kind answer P. Freydank

Helmut wrote

Dear Mr. Brink,

When my father came home from captivity of war two years ago he told me about his work in Nebraska. He also told me that you suggested me to correspond with your son . . . should be very glad if you would give your permission for such correspondence and I hope your son will agree with me and accept my suggestion. (Unfortunately) only learn Russian at school . . . I am nearly fifteen years old, frequenting high school since eight years. I should be very glad to get your son's answer . . . Yours sincerely,
Helmut Freydank



Dave, Orba and Donna Brink



**Donna Reid and Helmut Freydank
in Berlin, 1990**

The Brinks responded enthusiastically. Paul's next letter was written on December 21, 1950.

I was very glad to receive your answer so quickly . . . In May 1948 I was repatriated and at once got a job as an architect. At present I am . . . manager of building operations in my home town . . . I can't earn enough money by it so that my wife is working now in an office . . . You will hear by radio . . . that there is a great difference between east and west. Here in the eastern zone they are speaking so much about democracy and are farther off than ever before.

As Dave wasn't a letter writer Donna soon took over the correspondence. About once a month Helmut would go to the home of Elise Redlich in West Berlin to receive her letter and would write her in return. The letters often told of political matters and the difficult living conditions. Donna tried writing in German but, feeling Helmut's progress in language was so superior to hers, she gave up.

In 1953 Paul wrote "To Family Brink . . . it will not be possible for us to come to Berlin as much." and he thanked Donna for her letters. In July, 1953 Helmut's mother, who worked near the bridge, wrote that the border was closed. A few days later it was opened again.

In 1957 Paul wrote apologizing for his long silence. "There is an old truth. "Who excuses excuses?" He had a good job at the "People's Own Building Office" . . . I try to prevent accidents." He liked it because it was free from politics.

In 1958 Paul wrote the Brinks to inquire about Donna. Helmut hadn't received a letter from her for a long time. He was wondering if he had said something which had offended her. Her parents replied that she had been somewhat preoccupied.

Donna received a degree in Fine Arts from Kearney State College³ and was working in Denver where she met Don Reid, a Rotary exchange student from Australia, who was attending the Colorado School of Mines. In 1958 they were married, went to Australia by ship, then traveled across the country by train and plane to Derby. From there they drove in a four-wheel drive vehicle for eight hours over twenty-seven dry river crossings to a mining exploration camp. Their first home was a WWII army surplus tent. Every two weeks one of the team went to Derby for mail and supplies.

After getting settled Donna resumed her correspondence with Helmut. He was surprised to learn that she was in such a remote part of the world but understood her delay in writing.

Helmut became a translator of ancient languages at the Pergamon Archaeological Museum in East Berlin, specializing in the translation of the Cuneiform script into German. He knew six ancient languages and five or six modern. Helmut talked of trying to leave the eastern sector, as many of the professionals were doing, but he felt that the country could only be saved from within.

In 1961 the Berlin Wall was built; Helmut and his family could no longer go to West Berlin. He thought they could write directly but the authorities might be suspicious of this sudden link with Australia. Helmut would send an article which had been published and, if received, she would write to the address he sent. Donna's letters should sound as if she were commenting on the publication. "We know the practices pretty well. I could not utter any political judgment". From then on they wrote mostly of their work, avoiding anything political.

In 1972, while planning to visit Nebraska with their two children, the Reids inquired as to the possibility of visiting Helmut. He sent them his phone number and told them to call from West Berlin. When they did he told them to come to the Friedrichstrasse checkpoint by surface train, and he would meet them in East Berlin. They were late in starting out and took a taxi to the checkpoint where they had to hand over their passports; when nothing happened, after a half hour Don demanded the return of their passports. They walked through the gate with no problem. On the other side it was "spooky": few people except for armed guards, empty buildings with obvious bomb damage, and no Helmut. They learned that this was "checkpoint Charlie" and they were on the wrong side of the Friedrichstrasse. Forced to walk half a mile to the railroad checkpoint, they found Helmut waiting. Going back to their hotel that evening, they returned the next day when Paul had come from Potsdam to see them. Although the flat was small and hot their hosts pulled the curtains and advised them to talk quietly. When they were on the street they were told to do nothing that would attract attention to them. Paul died in 1974 at the age of seventy-three.

When the Reids returned in 1990 the Wall was down and everything was very different; they were able to move around freely. They went to Potsdam on a ferry crowded with Germans. Boats had not been allowed before the unification of Germany because they were a means of escape.

Last summer, Don Reid attended a convention in Prague after which they returned to Berlin again before visiting Donna's parents, who had moved to Blair, Nebraska, and their son Mark in Kearney.⁴ In Berlin a sense of realism had replaced the euphoria of 1990. Some people felt they were dominated by West Germany. But there were obvious signs of reconstruction, such as new factories and road repair. Helmut is now on the staff of the Free University of Berlin, continuing the same work.

Donna in commenting on her long friendship with the Freydanks wrote I remember Paul Freydank when he was working on our farm and was pleased to meet him again in 1972 in his country. He had been caught up in a war he didn't want, then had to return to a country where there was little freedom for him and his family. He longed for a change in government but didn't live to see it. I am grateful to him for starting my correspondence with his son—hope I remembered to thank him.

NOTES

1. "When Holdrege Was Camp Atlanta", by Jurgen Koar, printed in *Tagesspiegel*, a German newspaper sent by Helmut.
2. *Prisoners of the Plains*. Glenn Thompson
3. Donna had an exhibit at MONA in the summer of 1993. Her specialties are painting on rice paper, collages and "found" sculpture (many of them mine artifacts). She has followed Don, a mining geologist, to many different locations. At one time they lived in the mine manager's house at Gwalia, where Herbert Hoover was the first manager. They set up a museum about the mine, with a section about Hoover, and were instrumental in saving the remains of the mine and the town.
4. Mark is Music Director and announcer at Hits 106. The Reid's daughter Kerry lives in Adelaide and is a free-lance designer for theater sets and museums, she is also an actress.

SOURCES

Interview with Chick and Orba Brink, May, 1994; Interviews with Don and Donna Brink Reid, July 1994; Further notations by Donna Reid, August 1994; translation of "When Holdrege Was Camp Atlanta", Jurgen Koar; "A German POW working on a farm in Nebraska led to a friendship and correspondence which continues today," Reid scrapbook in Phelps County Museum; *Prisoners of the Plains*, Glenn Thompson; Letters by Paul Freydank, loaned by Donna Reid; *Holdrege Daily Citizen*, Special Edition, "Camp Atlanta Remembered", October 7, 1993. Pictures are from the Brink-Reid collection.

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 \$200.00 husband and wife.

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Officers (1 year term)

President Larry Nansel
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 Treasurer Mardi Anderson

TRAILS & RAILS MUSEUM

The Christmas Tree Walk is history. Although the weather did not cooperate as well this year as some years (we were closed one day) it was a success. We had good attendance, over 100 members and friends were hosts in the buildings plus those who decorated the beautiful trees. Each year I think they are nicer than the year before but they were exceptional this year. The good food that was donated went out almost as fast as it came in. A great big thanks to everyone who helped. The Thank You Coffee on Monday was well attended and gave us a chance to enjoy each of you.

The garden project under the leadership of Carol Bosshardt has received a grant from the National Gardening Association. We have received a listing of some of the materials which will be furnished and it will be great.

Our WANT LIST for 1995 includes a new flag to fly on days we are open and a mannequin for the Conductor's Uniform which has been donated.

—Margaret Hohnholt, Volunteer Director

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