



PRISON CAMP SHOW—featuring "Queenie" (Lt. Leo Farber of Toledo, O.) and an "all-star" cast!

**EDITOR'S NOTE**—This is the last of a series of three articles by Lt. Leo W. Fisher, United States Army, on his experiences as a prisoner of war after he was captured in Tunisia.

By **LEO W. FISHER**

Written Exclusively for the Central Press and This Newspaper

ON THE MORNING OF JUNE 6, 1943, the barbed wire gates of Oflag 64, in Schubin, Poland, closed behind more than 300 American prisoners of war. A few months ago, in Africa, they had been fighting officers, leaders, but now . . .

In freight and cattle cars they had been transported up Italy, through Austria and Germany and now they had arrived here in this camp.

They stared about them at the stark desolate buildings. They tested the vermin-infested straw "mattresses" on their wooden bunks. Slowly and with despair, they began to set up house-keeping in their new "home."

Days passed and lassitude, the most dreaded disease of a prison camp, set in. Morale, like mercury in sub-zero weather, went down and down and down. Men paced listlessly.

One man kicked a stone around to pass time. The stone rolled under the barbed wire; the guard

raised his rifle, and the man sat down, discouraged. Another was counting the trees in the forest across the road from the camp.

Then the spirit that is American began to burn. Men looked upward and made plans. Col. Thomas D. Drake, senior officer and camp commandant (from Clarksburg, W. Va.) spoke to the men:

"We have been up-rooted from our various walks of life and cast into the strangest role," he said, "the hardest and the most pathetic role that ever confronts free men."

### "We Must Carry On"

"Whether we surrender to the role of a 'has-been' or a 'down-and-outer,' or develop and maintain character that will stand us in good stead all our lives, depends on the individual and the attitude of his comrades . . . we should remember that all difficulties and troubles, whether between individuals or nations, come from misunderstanding. We must carry on!"

The men listened, and went to work. Gardens were planted in order that a few vegetables might be added to the few ounces of German soup issued twice daily. Other activities sprang into being. The "Little Theater," I think, was one of the best organizations, one of the most hopeful in the camp.

I was not in Oflag 64 at this time, therefore I wish to credit Lt. Larry Phelan, of Montclair, N. J., for the story of the birth and growth of the "Little Theater" during that first year of the camp's existence.

Lt. Frank Maxwell, of Jersey City, N. J., was among the first to plan dramatic entertainments. He had once worked for Robert L. Ripley's "Believe It or Not" show and had learned showmanship from him.

On July 4, 1943, he produced a variety show, sans lights, stage or scenery. A poor substitute for real entertainment but it was a beginning and a good one.

That night, despite the bitter irony of the barbed wire and the watchful guards, the men celebrated Independence Day. Lt. Wilber Sharpe, of Lebanon, Ind., sang, "This is Worth Fighting For!" and he meant it.

A choir of 13 voices sang all of the old songs Americans love so well. The listeners closed their eyes and for a moment they were home, their loved ones close by . . . at peace. The program closed and

the men applauded and went to bed singing. Morale skyrocketed, and the "Little Theater" was born.

Soon, weekly entertainments were planned and produced. A humorous series of lectures, "Wednesday at 7:15," were started. Debates were held.

Men found a sudden advantage to their new life. For the first time in their existence, they had time to think. Here, they could take all the time they chose over the smallest issue and thrash it out.

By late August, when the camp was three months old, the American Young Men's Christian association was able to get some musical instruments into our hands. At first there was a trumpet, a guitar and an accordion.

A set of drums also arrived and Lt. Ken Goddard of Worcester, Mass., artist, actor, journalist and musician, went to work on those with low blood-pressure, and with great success.

The "Little Theater" needed a stage. The men looked around and with salvaged tin cans, bits of wire and string a "somewhat-of-a-stage" was built. As honey draws flies, so did the stage draw talent. Every man who had recited "Excelsior" in school became a potential Barrymore.

The orchestra had now grown to 13 pieces and the camp was a nightmare with the cacophony of drums and strings as musicians and "musicians" practiced for the first concert of prison life.

Lt. Robert Rankin, of New York City, was their composer-director and on the night of Oct. 21 the camp listened to truly "good" music. "The Merry Widow Waltz," "Fantasy" from William Tell and "Moment Musicale" were among the numbers played.

Lt. Jim Bickers, of Chicago, presented the next program a few days later. He aptly named it "Korn Products." It was a wacky comedy with the first "woman" to appear on the prison stage. Her fancy dress was a mildewed, reclaimed bed sheet; her hair, shredded twine, but notwithstanding her physical shortcomings the men fell violently in love with her . . . this "wolf" in "she's" clothing!

By now the camp was fully alive in various lines. A camp newspaper was beginning to get organized. I have told the story of this in a previous article. "Cooks" were putting their heads together to see what, if anything, could be made of the German "rations." A library began to function. Morale was high.

In November, Lt. Russ Ford, of Fayetteville, N. C., a baritone of excellent voice and organizing abilities, formed a glee club of 22 voices and presented his first show, "The Robert E. Lee Minstrels." The highlight of this show was "Queenie," a woman of extremely pliant virtues. "She" was Lt. Leo Farber of Toledo, O. It is safe to say that there was never before a strip-tease to equal hers!

Bets were high in the camp as to the end of the war, or as to the date of the invasion. The slogan of the camp became "Home by '44 or Rust!"

As the weeks went by and the war continued without an invasion the "Little Theater" hiked the sagging morale with the first three-acter, "Brother Orchid."

Lieutenant Maxwell again was the director and played the lead. It played for three nights and the final curtain rose and fell many times to the cheers of an appreciative audience.

As usual, costumes for this play were made of what one could find. Blankets doubled for robes, tea in German beer bottles served as high-powered liquors. The set was of scrap paper and paste and

string. Everything was cheap but the acting. Broadway could not have done better.

By now new talent was being captured and brought into the camp. New roles were created and plans were laid, but nature had different plans.

Winter came on like an Allied advance. Icy winds and powdery snow blew into the building freezing a gesture or a voice tighter than stage fright. Props were left standing with ice encrusting them until spring of 1944 should come and melt the scenery both indoors and out.

On Feb. 3, despite the still bitter cold, the "Little Theater" opened with Maxwell's fourth variety show, featuring Lt. Jim Koch, of Cleveland, O., and Lt. John Hannon, of Bedminister, N. J. The show broke the ice and drama was off to a new year behind barbed wire.

Late in February of '44, Lt. Howard Holder of Louisville, Ky., and Capt. R. Rossbach of New York city, put on a show, "It Will Be All Right on the Night."

The play was based on a group of actors who refused to learn their lines, trusting blindly to faith that it "will be all right on the night."

It was a howling appetizer for the more substantial "solid" drama which was presented early in March. "The Fourth Man" and "The Seventh Man" were two one-acters and gave the camp their first taste of horror plays.

Lieutenant Koch worked up "The Man Who Came to Dinner" and it was the biggest thing to hit the camp since the first issue of the Red Cross food parcels. Lieutenant Hannon played Sheridan Whiteside with Lieutenant Ford as Lorraine Sheldon . . . (a most WOOSome casting)!

The show ran until every man in the camp knew the lines as well as the actors.

### A Stage and Props

In April, the Young Men's Christian association delivered some lumber and electrical equipment to the "Little Theater" and Lt. Lou Otterbein of Bloomfield, N. J., and Lt. John T. Jones of Houston, Tex., with other willing workers, made a first class stage with lights and curtains and a number of props.

Some costumes came with this lot also, and a few real wigs for female impersonators were available. But the hardest thing still had to be made . . . false breast and hip pads for our "girls."

In May, Lieutenant Hannon produced "Three Men on a Horse." This comedy kept smiles on the faces of the prisoners for days. Then on June 1, "Petriified Forest" came to camp. Again, Lieutenant Maxwell rang the bell with a five-star performance. This show was still running when we got the news:

The greatest show in the world—D-Day—opened its first curtains in the gray misty dawn of June 6! Just one year to the very day since the camp was first opened! Our joy cannot be recorded—there are no words!

It was shortly after this that I left the camp en route for America and home. If these words convey in the slightest sense of the word, the gratitude and acclaim the men of the "Little Theater" deserve, then my job is done.

They, more than any other factor besides letters from home kept the prisoners' minds whole and facing a brighter future. Most of these men are still in Germany. I pray for their safety first, and my second prayer is one of gratitude.

No man who enjoyed the fruits of their labor will ever forget this lighter side of a harrowing, black experience.

The End