

BEHIND THE BARBED WIRE



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.

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 accordian.

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 cacaphony 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, pre-

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)!

