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Fountain Hill Native Endures Five Months as a WWII P.O.W.

(Pennsylvania Military Museum, J. Gleim, Museum Curator)



Photo of Wooden Spoon, MM88.1.1.



Photo of ID Tag, MM88.1.2.

This wooden spoon and identification tag belonged to Private First Class LeRoy Schaller of Fountain Hill, Pennsylvania. Schaller enlisted in the Army in 1942 but was not called to active duty until May 1943. He arrived in Europe in June 1944 as part of a replacement division. In November 1944, Schaller was assigned to Company B, 110th Infantry, 28th Division. He joined the company in the middle of the Battle of Hurtgen

Forest and recalled that nearly all the unit were replacements, as many of the original members had either been killed or wounded. The fighting was so fierce and so constant that he remembers little of what took place there.

By December 15, 1944 Schaller's unit had entered Marnach, Luxembourg. The Battle of the Bulge was beginning. Schaller and his men took up positions inside the town but were quickly overrun by advancing German forces. Schaller and his men were taken prisoner. They were marched with little food and water to Stalag IXB, a prison camp in Bad Orb Germany, thirty miles northwest of Frankfurt.

The German military established Stalag IXB in 1939 on the grounds of a World War I training camp. The camp originally held French, Belgian, Czech, British, and Serb POWs. By 1941, Soviet POWs were held there as well. Early in the war, conditions in the camp were good and it complied with the rules set forth by the Geneva Convention; the facility had a good hospital, meals provided by a convent attached to the camp, and a library that was open to prisoners.

By the time Private Schaller arrived in December 1944 with more than 900 other Americans captured during the Ardennes offensive, the situation at Stalag IXB had deteriorated significantly. The camp was well over its capacity of 25,000 men and staff were not prepared for the arrival of more prisoners. The wood and tarpaper barracks were in poor condition and had enough bunks for only half the occupants. There was no bedding or blankets. Men slept on the floor, or shared bunks. Firewood rations were enough to heat the building for one hour per day.

Schaller received the metal identification tag in camp. The tags were likely provided by the Red Cross. As they arrived, camp guards stripped the men of gear and any excess clothing they carried, leaving some with no coats or sturdy shoes. Men could fill in a postcard to their families notifying them of their status. They received no mail in camp.

Food was limited to meager helpings of potatoes and soup made from rotten greens. At least 1000 men lacked any kind of eating utensils at all. The wooden spoon Private Schaller had was carved for him by fellow inmate William Simpson and was his only utensil. Swiss "Protecting Power" inspectors and members of the Red Cross visited the camp and demanded conditions be improved, but nothing changed. Transportation breakdowns across Germany halted the delivery of all but one shipment of Red Cross aid packages.

Schaller remained in Stalag IXB until the camp was liberated by the 106th Reconnaissance Group, 44th Infantry Division on April 1, 1945. During his time in the camp, he lost almost forty five percent of his body weight. Many of the men were too weak to walk, and several became ill or died from eating too fast after liberation. Schaller and the rest of the American POWs were evacuated to Camp Lucky Strike near Le Havre, France where they recuperated for a time before returning to the United States.

After his return home, Mr. Schaller recalls still being too weak to stand without something to pull himself up on. He struggled to regain the coordination to write. Once he recovered, Schaller pursued degrees in forestry and horticulture and worked as a research forester. Mr. Schaller has spoken numerous times about his wartime experiences, helping to ensure the legacy of the "Greatest Generation" is not forgotten.