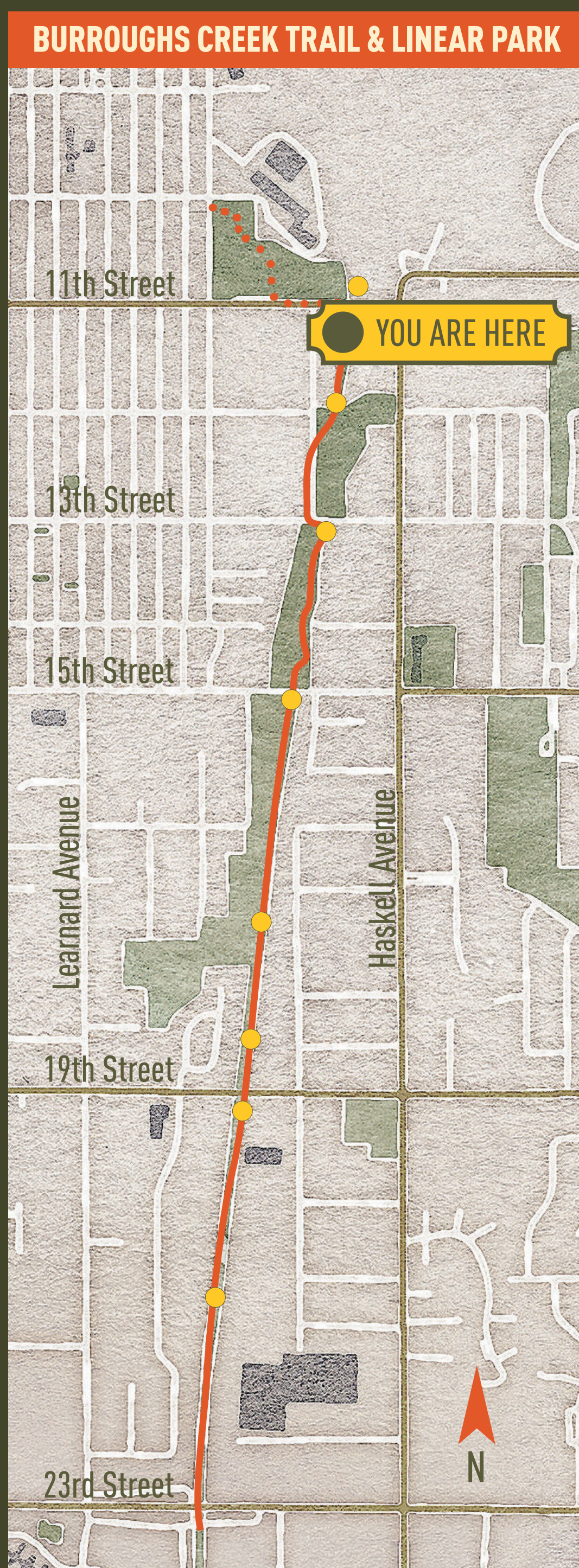


PRISONERS ON THE PRAIRIE



Some 300 German POWs spent the waning days of World War II at Camp Lawrence located less than a block from this spot

During World War II, the United States shipped more than 370,000 prisoners of war to these shores. The total included 336,000 Germans, 40,000 Italians, and 1,500 Japanese who had been captured in North Africa, Europe, on islands in the Pacific, and on the high seas.

They were housed in some 670 camps, more than a dozen of which were in Kansas. One of those – a branch installation known as Camp Lawrence – was located near Haskell Avenue and East 11th Street, little more than 500 feet east of what is now the northern terminus of the Burroughs Creek Trail.

In compliance with the 1929 Geneva Convention, the POWs in American custody were fed, housed, clothed, provided medical care and otherwise treated the same as American soldiers. Bringing POWs to the United States made sense for several reasons. Scarce cargo space on American ships would not be

used for providing supplies and provisions for POWs held abroad. Additionally, the POWs could be transported here on otherwise empty US supply ships returning from foreign battlefronts.

One other factor became increasingly important as the war dragged on. The Geneva Convention permitted POWs to be put to work as long as they were paid and the assignments were not war-related or dangerous. This meant that POW labor was available for agriculture-related work, either on the farm or in the processing of foods.

By 1944 there was an acute labor shortage in American agriculture, primarily because so many farm boys had gone off to war – Kansas alone had contributed 195,000 draftees and enlistees to the armed forces.

Exacerbating the situation was the fact that those who remained could receive

higher wages from the war industries. In this part of Kansas, one could make more money working in the Sunflower Ordnance Plant near DeSoto than working on a farm.

Anyone using POW labor would pay the federal government the prevailing wage to help offset the cost of housing and feeding the POWs. The government would then pay the POWs 80 cents per day, of which half went into a savings account. The employer would pick up the POWs at the camp in the morning and return them in the evening. Some also fed them at noon while others brought them back to camp for lunch. The POWs wore either blue denim uniforms or cast-off military uniforms with a stenciled PW on the back, sleeves, and trouser legs.

For eight months in 1945, some 300 of these German POWs working largely in the fields and food processing plants of Douglas County, called Lawrence home.

GERMAN PRISONERS OF WAR GET HERE

U.S. Army Convoy, Heavily Guarded, Reached Lawrence Today

LABOR FOR LOCAL MEN

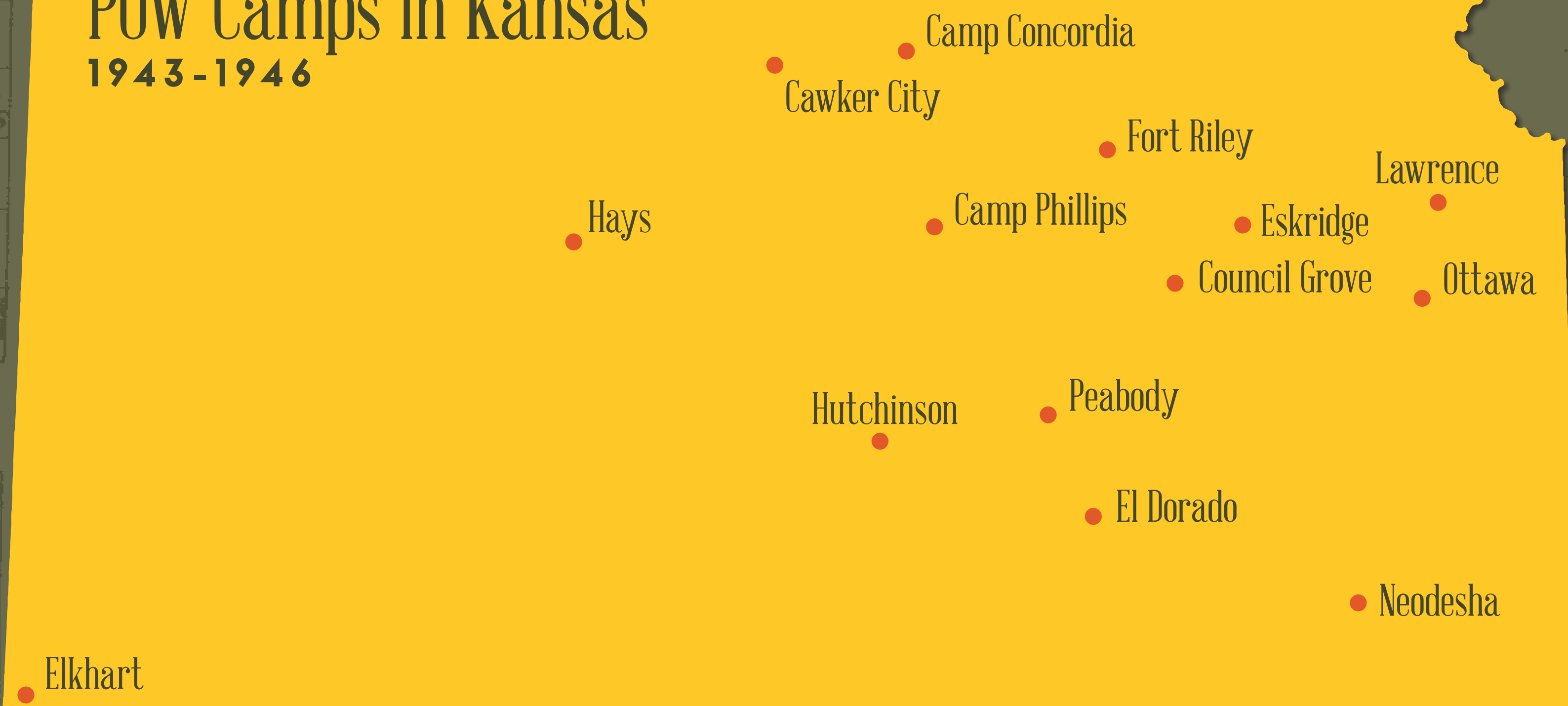
A U. S. army convoy of some two dozen vehicles came down Massachusetts street from Fort Riley prisoner of war camp shortly after noon today, carrying more than a hundred German prisoners of war who are to be used here for labor at local industries and on farms. The prisoners appeared to be a husky, healthy lot, and young.

The transport trucks carrying the prisoners were interspersed with jeeps bearing machine guns, and there were other vehicles bearing armed guards.

A sudden stop of the convoy caused one to ram into another just in front of the Journal-World building. The rear truck was laid out by a smashed grill that caused the fan to strike. It was rolled out of line and the rest of the convoy proceeded to the prison compound site at

[Image Credit: Kansas State Historical Society]

POW Camps in Kansas 1943-1946



Largest Branch Camp. Of the World War II-era POW camps in Kansas, three were main facilities – Fort Riley, Camp Concordia, and Camp Phillips – and the rest were branch camps. Of the branch camps, Camp Lawrence was the largest with 320 prisoners. By March 1945, a five-acre site along the AT&SF right of way northeast of 11th Street and Haskell Avenue had been secured for the Lawrence installation, which would be a branch camp of Fort Riley. The camp would consist of a barbed wire perimeter, a mess hall, a building for the showers and latrine, and the guards' quarters. The POWs were housed in six-man tents with wooden pallets for floors. The war in Europe ended on May 7, 1945 but the German prisoners continued to work into November. The last POWs left Lawrence on November 17, 1945. There were no deaths or reported escapes during their time here.

MAY USE PRISONER OF WAR LABORERS

Local Help Shortage Can Be Eased by Bringing Germans Here

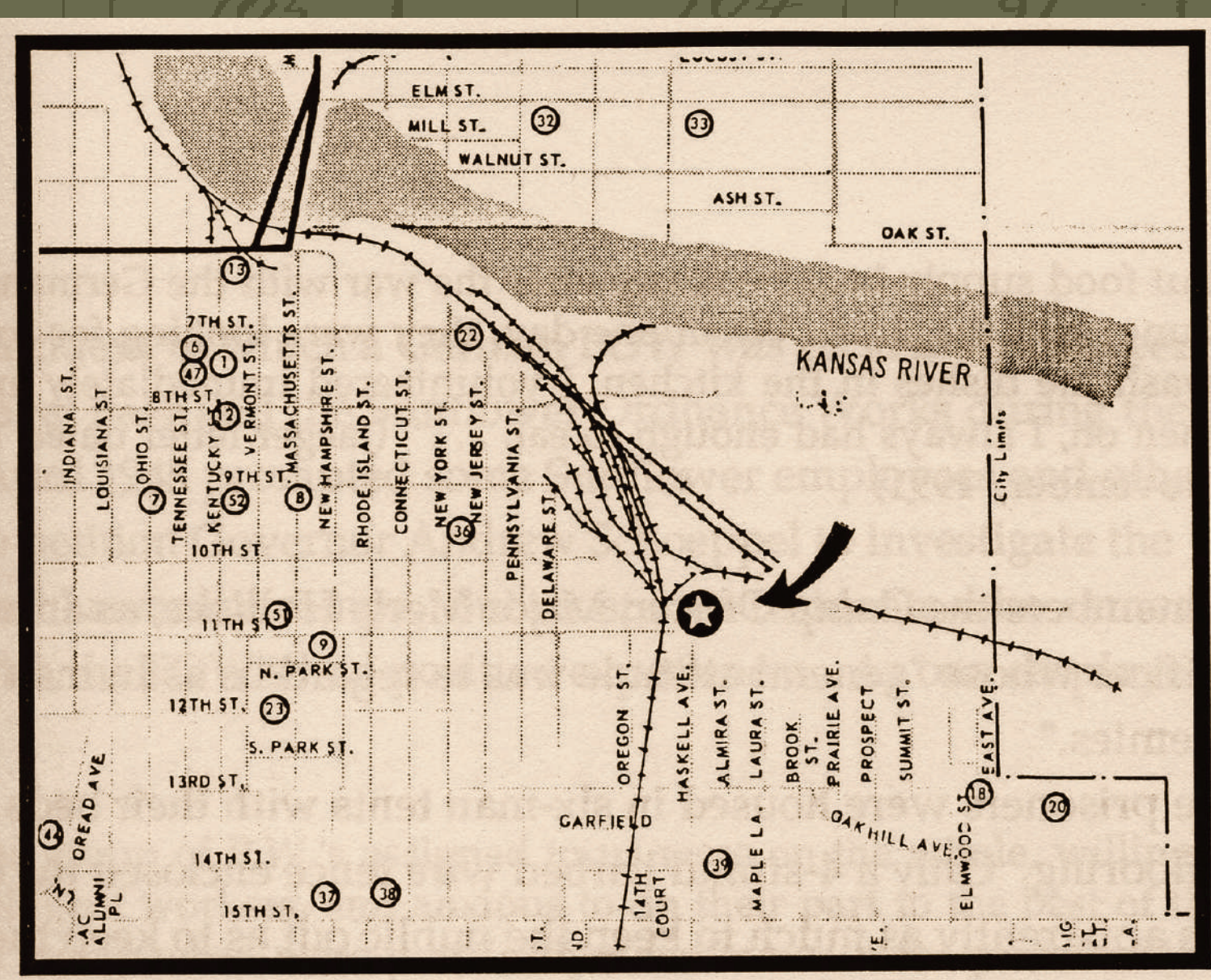
HUNT CAMP FACILITIES

The possibility of bringing German prisoners of war to Lawrence to enable farmers and others to get the important food production job done this spring and summer, was discussed at a joint meeting of interested employers at the Chamber of Commerce rooms yesterday afternoon. Acute labor shortage makes the move advisable, it was explained at the meeting.

At the meeting the principal group was members of the Kaw Valley Potato Growers. Also present were representatives of the J. W. Small company, the Cerophyl Laboratories, and the Columbus Foods corporation.

The consensus of opinion at the meeting was that German prisoners of war in this country are able and willing to work and should be utilized to ease our labor shortage, just as American boys who are

[Image Credit: Kansas State Historical Society]



[Image Credit: Douglas County Historical Society, Watkins Museum of History]

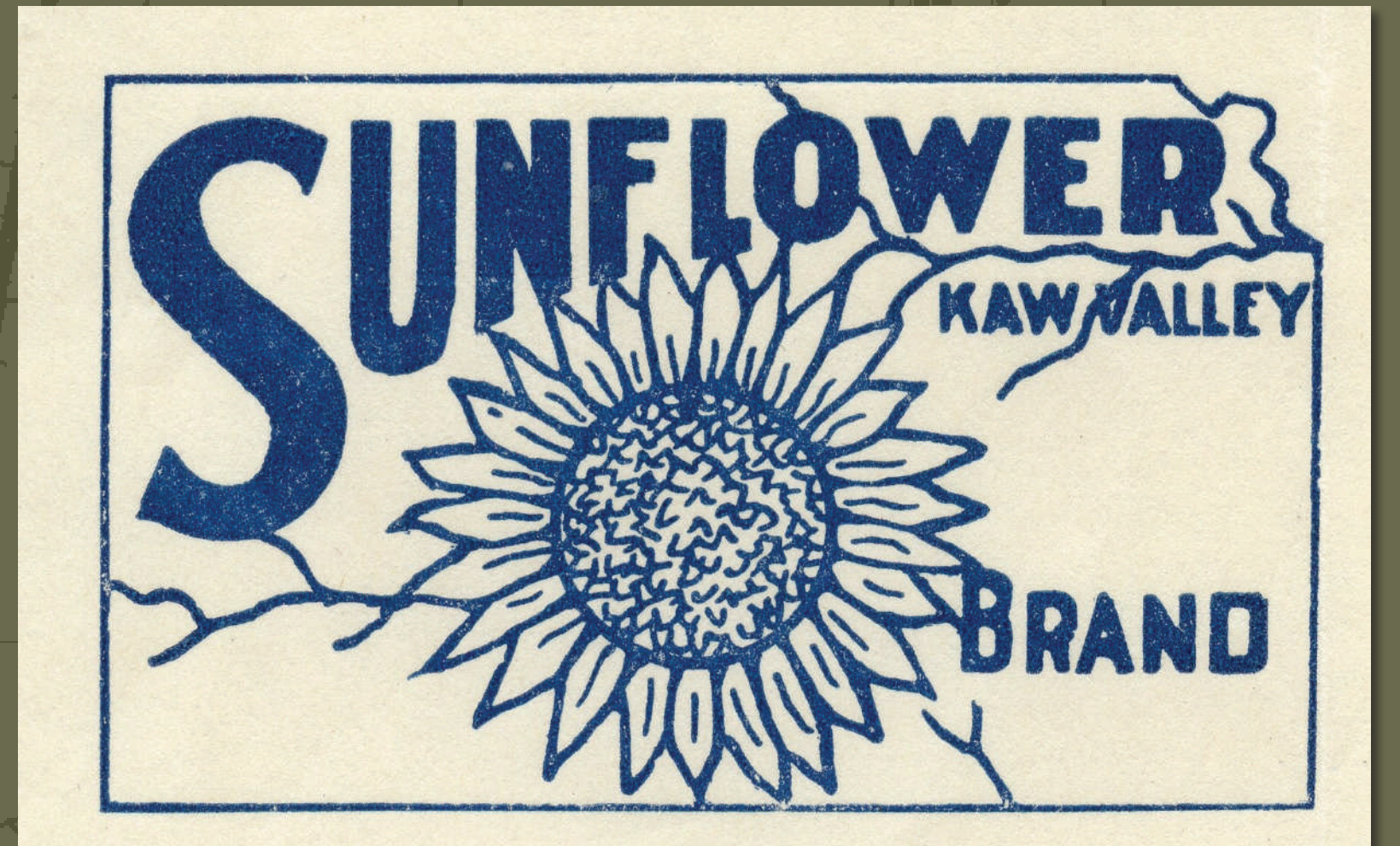
No Nazis. The first ten POWs arrived in Lawrence on March 29, 1945. They were tasked with preparing a camp for 300 POWs. On April 30, 1945, the same day Adolf Hitler committed suicide, a convoy of 24 vehicles transporting 100 POWs and their guards arrived from Fort Riley. As the convoy approached 8th and Massachusetts streets, the traffic light changed causing one of the trucks to stop suddenly, resulting in a minor collision with the truck following immediately behind it. (Oddly, the same thing happened in November at the same corner as the POWs were leaving.) The German POWs housed in Lawrence were veterans of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's elite Afrika Korps, but all hard-core Nazis had been screened out. For the first several weeks after their arrival the weather was rainy. With the Kaw River at flood stage, several POWs were assigned to patrol the levee and fill sand bags. The weather, however, did not stop curious citizens of Lawrence from walking past the camp to get a look at these German soldiers. Some even contended the US Army guards were there to keep the girls away.



[Image Credit: Douglas County Historical Society, Watkins Museum of History]

"The best workers I ever employed." The POWs were employed in the harvest of potatoes, peas, and beets. They were also used in the processing of these foods. Columbus Foods had a contract for C-Rations, and the POWs canned peas for this contract. The W.J. Small Company deployed POWs for the dehydration of alfalfa, while Cerophyl Laboratories used POWs to help manufacture cereal grass tablets and powder for agriculture and medical uses. A small number of the POWs served as cooks and in administrative jobs at the camp. By all accounts the POWs were quick learners and good workers. One of the farmers, Oscar Broers, stated that the POWs had "done an excellent job" and "were the best workers I ever employed." It was reported that the farmers could not have gotten the pea crop in without the help of the POWs. The POWs knew that if they did not work or were insubordinate they would be sent back to Fort Riley and would not receive the 80 cents a day pay.

[Image Credit: Ron Sobold, Press International]



[Image Credit: Douglas County Historical Society, Watkins Museum of History]

Help Wanted. In April 1944 the Cerophyl Laboratories, W. J. Small Company, and Columbus Foods needed workers. They approached Frank Blecha, head of the Kansas Office of Emergency Farm Labor, about establishing a POW camp in Lawrence to supply the necessary labor. There was no action and by February 1945, these three companies and the Kaw Valley Potato Growers Association had a meeting with the Lawrence Chamber of Commerce and a representative from Fort Riley. Cerophyl Laboratories and W. J. Small Company asked for 100 POWs from April to November, and Columbus Foods indicated a need for 100 workers during the pea harvest. The Kaw Valley Potato Growers Association sought 200 for the potato harvest.



[Image Credit: Ron Sobold, Press International]



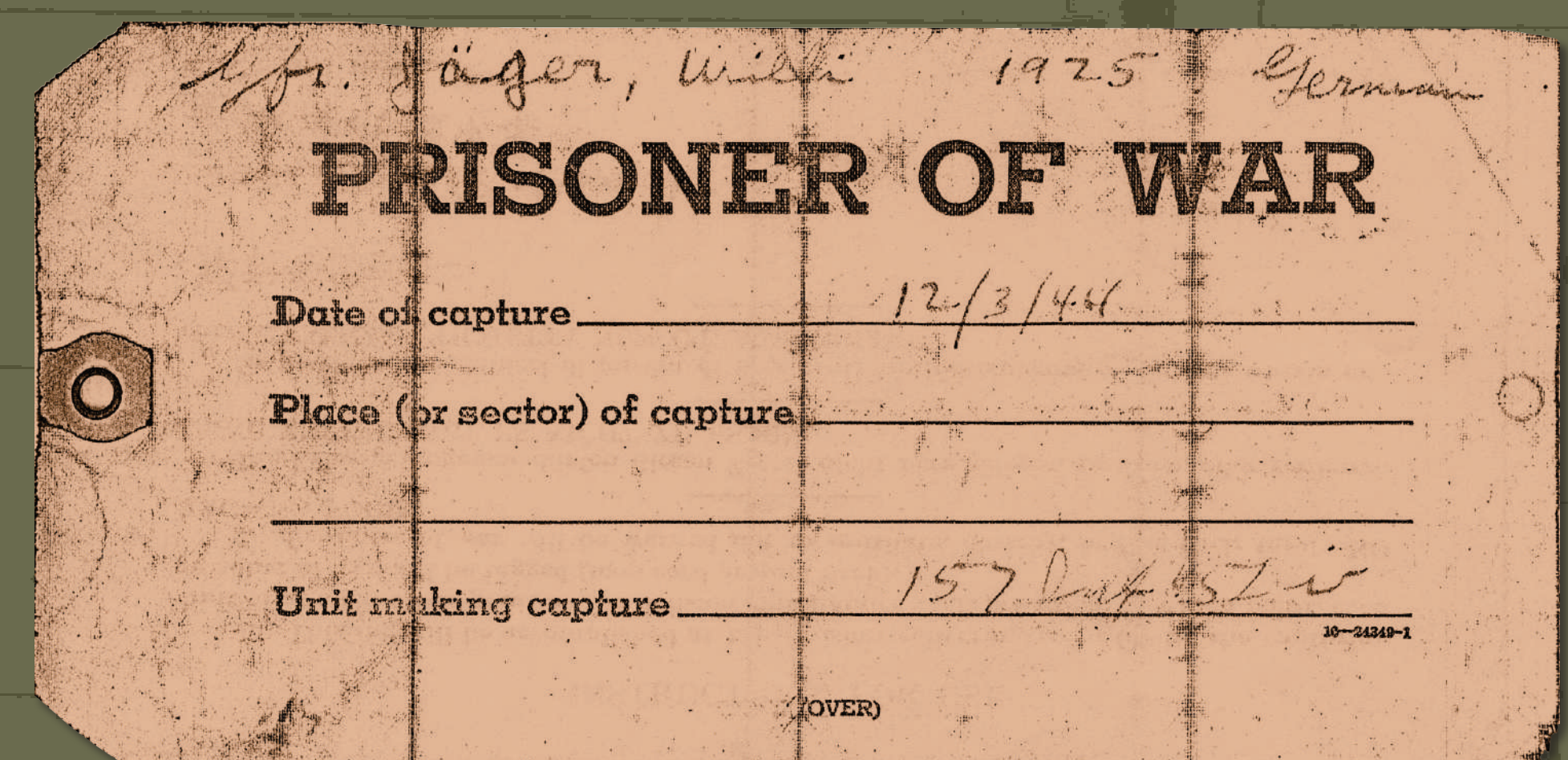
[Image Credit: Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas Libraries]

Danforth Duty. Even though the primary jobs for POWs were in agriculture, a handful of Germans performed other tasks. During much of Camp Lawrence's existence, 15 POWs worked under guard on the campus of the University of Kansas for the Department of Buildings and Grounds. Besides planting trees, trimming bushes, and digging ditches, the stone masons in the group helped build Danforth Chapel. The stone masons discovered that the limestone being used was too hard to shape and upon their recommendation a different limestone was found and adopted. The students at KU liked to stop by and watch the POWs at work. All of this attention was a distraction to the POWs and caused a work slowdown. An article in the *University Daily Kansan* asked the students to leave the POWs alone or else the POW labor would be lost.



[Image Credit: Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas Libraries]

Lost Legacy. Once the POWs returned to Fort Riley the camp was abandoned. A small radio-crystal manufacturer used the buildings until the early 1950s. The buildings then sat empty and became dilapidated and overgrown with weeds. On October 11, 1987, what was left of the camp was destroyed by fire.



[Image Credit: Douglas County Historical Society, Watkins Museum of History]

"We were treated like humans." Throughout the war there were charges about the supposed "coddling" of the POWs. Several investigations took place and each time it was found that the lodgings, food, and liberties provided to the POWs were in accordance with the Geneva Convention. That was certainly the case at Camp Lawrence. As one POW put it, "We were treated like humans, not caged up like an animal." Noted another in a letter written to the *Lawrence Journal-World* nearly 46 years after his release, "I want to express my thanks to all of the Americans who were kind to us, who didn't treat us as enemies or Nazi criminals but as humans. In the long run, this was a much better way to make us friends of the Americans, working better than any re-education."