During World War II, the United States shipped more than 520,000 prisoners of war to these shores. The total included 336,000 Germans, 10,000 Italians, and 1,504 Japanese who had been captured in North Africa, Europe, or islands in the Pacific, and on the high seas.

They were housed in some 400 camps, more than a dozen of which were in Kansas. One of these—a branch installation known as Camp Lawrence—was located near Haskell Avenue and East 11th Street. Little more than five feet east of which is the southern terminus of the Bourough Creek Trail.

In compliance with the 1929 Geneva Convention, the POWs in American custody were fed, housed, and provided medical care and otherwise treated the same as American soldiers. Bringing POWs to the United States would have made sense for several reasons. Scarce cargo space on American ships would not be used for providing supplies and provisions for POWs left abroad. Additionally, the POWs could be transported here on otherwise empty US supply ships returning from overseas theaters.

One other factor became increasingly important as the war dragged on. The Geneva Convention permitted the POWs, so far as to work as long as they were paid and the assignments were not unrelated to war. 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. The situation was primarily because so many farm boys had been called into the service. Kansas had contributed 195,800 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. As a result of Kansas, one could make more money working in the Sunflower Ordnance Plant near DeSoto than working in the fields.

Anyone using POW labor would put 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 wartime account. The employer would pick up the pay and the POWs at the camp in the morning and return them to the camp in the evening. Some officers also fed them at noon while others brought them back to camp for lunch. The POWs wore civilian clothing except for camo uniforms with a stenciled PW on the back, sleeves, and crotchet legs.

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

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