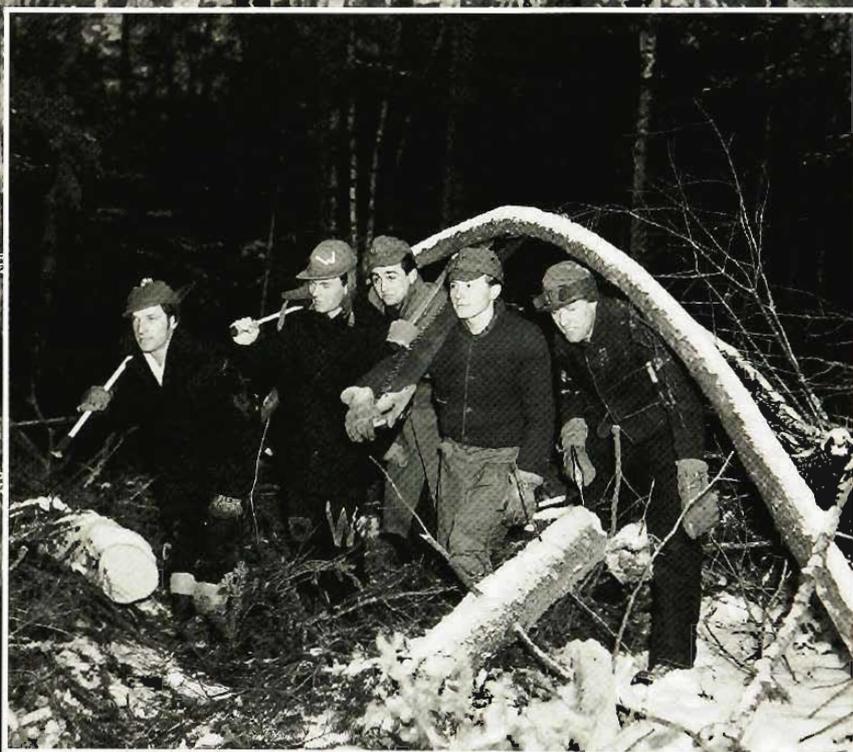


# MINNESOTA'S 1944 PW ESCAPE



Down the Mississippi  
in the *Lili Marlene* #10

**GEORGE H. LOBDELL**

ABOVE: Prisoner-of-war laborers with logging tools  
in the woods near Deer River, March 1945

Americans on the home front during World War II were always aware that a war was being fought. In 1944, however, residents of Minnesota's Cass and Itasca counties had new, tangible evidence. Enemy soldiers arrived in their neighborhoods—but not as conquering invaders. Daily, northwoods citizens watched U.S. Army trucks driving along county highways, transporting German prisoners of war (PWs) to logging sites where their labor would alleviate the acute wartime shortage of American timber workers. While the memory of captured enemy troops in Minnesota has faded in the intervening half century, their presence in 1944 was a vivid reminder of the reality of war.<sup>1</sup>

The first prisoners assigned to work in Minnesota's timberlands arrived in Cass County near Remer on January 31, 1944, when an American lieutenant and 18 guards escorted 37



Snowshoe sign at the entrance to the Bena camp, 1944, including the seven-pointed-star emblem of Seventh Service Command, Omaha. Building in background is probably camp headquarters

German privates to the former Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp south of town. A similar camp near Bena was activated a few days later, and in April, 131 German PWs and their guards settled in at the old CCC camp at Cut Foot Sioux Lake, 23 miles north of Itasca County's Deer River. By the end of the year these two counties hosted more than 700 wartime captives and 70 American soldiers.<sup>2</sup>

The PW camps at Remer, Bena, and Deer River (and one established at Owatonna in March) were satellites or branches of the base camp at Concordia, Kansas. In June these satellites were transferred to the jurisdiction of the new base camp at Algona, Iowa, which had all the facilities

of a complete army post and compounds that would house 3,000 PWs. By the end of the branch-camp system in December 1945, the staff at Algona headquarters had supervised 20 such establishments in Minnesota. Many of these were located in the agricultural and food-processing regions in the southern counties and in the Red

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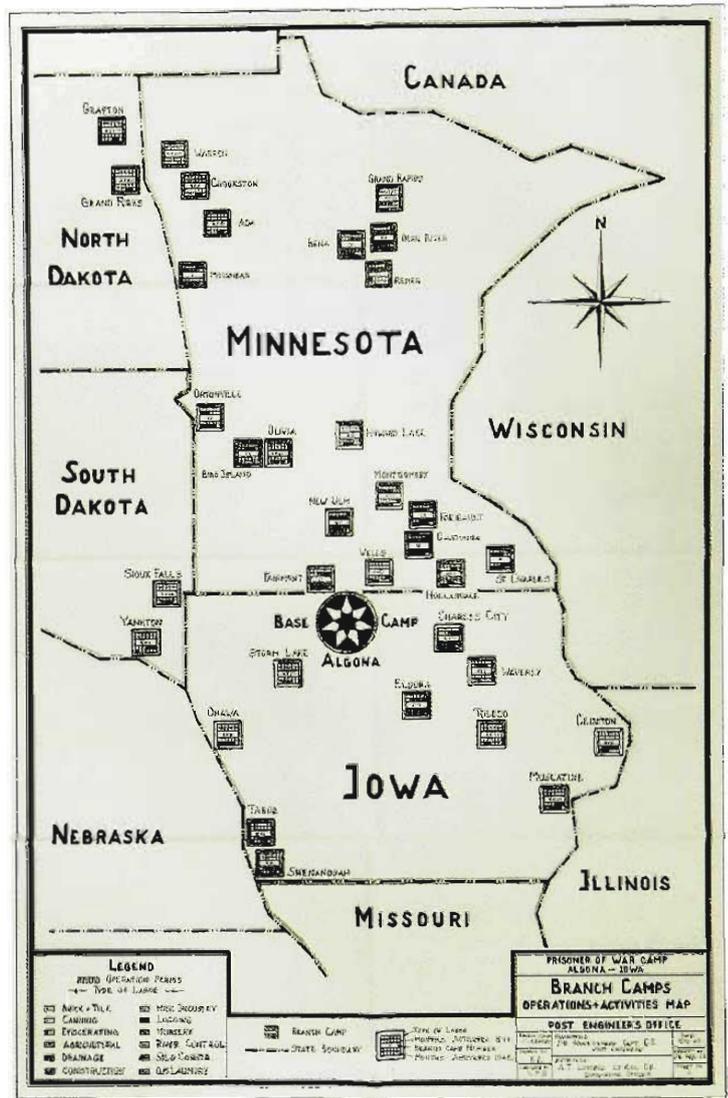
<sup>1</sup> For a thorough exposition of PW labor in Minnesota, see Edward J. Pluth, "Prisoner of War Employment in Minnesota During World War II," *Minnesota History* 44 (Winter 1975): 290–303.

<sup>2</sup> Karl C. Teufel, ed., "The History of Camp Concordia from Site Survey to Inactivation," typescript, 1945, p. 50–53, in Records of the Office of the Provost Marshal General, Record Group 389, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.; Camp Algona, "Labor Report," Branch Camp Memorandum #36, Dec. 13, 1944, p. 4, Algona Prisoner of War Camp Records (APWCR), Arthur T. Lobdell manuscript collection, in author's possession. Lobdell, Algona's last commanding officer, saved the papers when the camp closed.

River Valley. The high point in the state's PW activity came in September 1945, when 13 branch camps holding 3,480 Germans operated concurrently.<sup>3</sup>

At first, northwoods residents expressed some concern about the possibility of PW escapes, since the camps were lightly guarded. Their fears diminished, however, when months went by with no escapes in either Cass or Itasca counties. In place, of course, were the army's standard deterrents, such as barbed-wire-topped fences and prisoner clothing marked with the bold letters "PW." In addition, the American guards discouraged any notions the Germans may have had about escaping with stories about a surrounding wilderness inhabited by timber wolves, bears, and dangerous Indians.<sup>4</sup>

By October 1944, however, Bena prisoners Obergefreiter (corporal) Heinz Schymalla and Obergrenadier (private first class) Walter Mai, who had been in Minnesota since February, had seen enough to know that they need not be concerned about wild animals or Indians. Schymalla, 22 years old, had been a laborer before joining the German army. The slight, fair-haired corporal had been captured by American forces in Tunisia in May 1943. Mai, aged 21, had been a farmer and also was taken in Tunisia that May, although by the British. A year and a half later, their worries about the war situation in Europe eclipsed any concern they had about the possible dangers of their environment. American authorities believed that neither prisoner understood English, but Schymalla apparently could speak a few words and phrases. He also read enough English to understand from the camp's *New York Times* subscription that allied victories threatened Germany on all fronts. The Russians were on the outskirts of Warsaw and driving through East Prussia. Almost all of France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and a part of the Netherlands had been liberated from Nazi occupation. An American division had crossed the German frontier and was about to attack Hitler's Siegfried Line in the Rhineland. Germany's desperate plight was confirmed when a letter from home told



Poster showing approximate location of Algona's 34 branch camps, 1945. Hand coloring in the coded squares denotes each camp's duration and the labor accomplished there.

Schymalla that his 60-year-old father and a brother had been drafted into military service.<sup>5</sup>

How should a good German soldier respond to such unhappy news? Schymalla concluded that it was his duty to escape his captives and return to

<sup>3</sup> Teufel, ed., "History of Camp Concordia," 53; Seventh Service Command, "Prisoner of War Labor Report," Sept. 15, 1945, p. 3, and War Department Manpower Board (WDMB), Form 9, "General Inventory and Appraisal Report," Camp Algona, Feb. 20, 1945—both APWCR.

<sup>4</sup> Gunnar Norgaard, assistant executive officer at Camp Algona, interview with the author, Aug. 21, 1993, notes in author's possession; Robert Devore, "Our Pampered War Prisoners," *Collier's*, Oct. 14, 1944, p. 57; *Grand Rapids Herald-Review*, Oct. 11, 1944, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> "Transcript of Testimony Taken at Hearing at Prisoner of War Camp, Algona, Iowa, 4 November 1944, Re: German Prisoner of War Heinz Schymalla, 7WG51280," p. 1. APWCR, hereafter cited as Schymalla Testimony; *New York Times*, Oct. 1-5, 1944; *Duluth Herald*, Nov. 2, 1944, p. 14.



*PWs in marked clothing loading logs on a sled near Deer River, 1945*

help his homeland fight its battles. When he discovered that his good friend, Walter Mai, had reached the same conclusion, the two began to plot a getaway.<sup>6</sup>

**T**he Bena compound was commanded by World War I veteran Captain Clifford Jenner and staffed by 16 American enlisted men. From the camp's stockade near the south shore of Lake Winnibigoshish, German prisoners were trucked to the nearby forests, where they

earned 80 cents a day in canteen coupons by cutting timber for Minnesota's pulpwood factories. That October, the lightly guarded installation where Schymalla and Mai and 206 other Germans were interned was one of ten branch camps in Minnesota. In all, Algona's commanding officer, Lt. Col. Arthur T. Lobdell, Corps of Engineers, was responsible for a complement of 372 Americans who guarded and administered 2,612 captured Germans at the Iowa base and its branches.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> "Transcript of Testimony Taken at Hearing at Prisoner of War Camp, Algona, Iowa, 4 November 1944. Re: German Prisoner of War Walter Mai, 7WG14600" p. 1, 5. APWCR, hereafter cited as Mai Testimony; Schymalla Testimony, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Camp Algona, "Financial Statement," Branch Camp Memorandum #31, Nov. 9, 1944, and WDMB, "General Inventory and Appraisal Report"—both APWCR.

Lobdell, a World War I veteran of the Meuse-Argonne campaign in France and, after that war, a Nebraska highway engineer, was recalled to active service from the army reserves in 1941. In December 1943 he was chosen to command a new prisoner-of-war base camp at Clarinda, Iowa, and six months later was transferred to Algona when that camp needed new, strong leadership. A firm but not harsh commander, he insisted on military discipline for his men and no nonsense in the handling of PWs. Through frequent inspection trips and daily contacts by letter and phone, his presence was felt constantly throughout the Algona branch-camp system. He made it clear to Americans and Germans alike that the Geneva Convention of 1929 governing the handling of PWs was the wartime bible for him and every member of his command.<sup>8</sup>

Under that convention, escape by a PW was not a crime but, rather, a breach of discipline punishable by not more than 30 days' confinement, 14 of them on a diet of bread and water. Apparently, knowledge of such penalty was no deterrent to the two Afrika Korps veterans, Schymalla and Mai, as they planned their escape.<sup>9</sup>

The two PWs had the sympathy of many of their barracks mates, but these comrades agreed, as Schymalla later put it, "A general prison break . . . could have serious consequences." While their fellow soldiers declined to join the escape effort, their conspiracy of silence was an important aid. The two Germans had to overcome many obstacles that their American captors had designed to make a successful escape difficult.<sup>10</sup>

First, Schymalla and Mai had to deal with the problem that their clothes were marked "PW" in large letters, revealing their identity to anyone who saw them. They knew, however, that the extra clothing kept in the camp supply room often was unmarked. Somehow, they managed to obtain some of these plain garments and store them out of sight. So far, so good.<sup>11</sup>

Next, they needed provisions. Each day they saved food from their field lunches and mess-hall

meals until they had accumulated about 30 pieces of bacon, two pounds of sausage, and unmeasured amounts of sugar, butter, and other provisions. They saved bread, including donations from their comrades, until they had four loaves. Finally, they fashioned a slingshot, in hopes of killing small game to supplement their food supply. The two men seemed to have little understanding of how long these meager rations would last.<sup>12</sup>

How would they get to Germany from northern Minnesota? Three small maps that they discovered in a dictionary seemed to provide useful guides. Schymalla and Mai knew they were in Minnesota—that was no secret. They also knew that the Mississippi River passed through nearby Lake Winnibigoshish, and their tiny charts showed them that this river flowed south to the Gulf of Mexico. If they could follow the Mississippi to New Orleans, they believed they could find a ship bound for some neutral European port or Mexico and from there sail for home. (Apparently, they did not know that Mexico was at war with Germany.) The assumptions that led the men to such hopes were absurd, but their small maps apparently gave no understanding of the distances involved or of the obstacles they would meet. Naively, they continued making plans.<sup>13</sup>

If they were to follow the Mississippi, they reasoned, it would be easier to travel by boat than on foot. During the previous summer, Bena prisoners had been allowed to build about a dozen small, flimsy vessels from the scrap lumber left from construction projects. These craft were used to reach deep water for swimming but had little other utility. Schymalla and Mai managed to hide one of these, the *Lili Marlene* #10, in the rushes along the lakeshore. Now, if they could make a successful getaway, they believed they could paddle down the river by night, hide and rest during the day, and eventually reach New Orleans.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, the two conspirators secretly packed bags and a suitcase with blankets, pillows, clothes, and extra shoes and boots. They also included an amazing number of small items such as a chess

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<sup>8</sup> *Lincoln Star* (Nebraska), Nov. 2, 1965; Camp Algona, "Statement of Policies and Procedures," Branch Camp Memorandum #8, July 11, 1944, APWCR.

<sup>9</sup> League of Nations, *Geneva Convention of July 27, 1929, Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War*, Chapter 3, "Penalties Applicable to Prisoners of War," Art. 50, 54, 55. A mimeographed copy of the Geneva Convention was produced at Camp Algona and distributed to every American soldier and civilian serving there and at its branches.

<sup>10</sup> Schymalla Testimony, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Capt. Theodore Franklin to Commanding Officer, PW Camp, Algona, Nov. 13, 1944, APWCR. Sent to the branch camps to inspect the marking of PW clothing, Franklin found some unmarked garments at Bena.

<sup>12</sup> Schymalla Testimony, 3; Mai Testimony, 2; *Grand Rapids Herald-Review*, Nov. 8, 1944, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Mai Testimony, 3; Schymalla Testimony, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Schymalla Testimony, 3; Mai Testimony, 4; Lobdell to Commanding General, Seventh Service Command, Dec. 5, 1944, APWCR. "Lili Marlene," a popular German wartime ballad, was a favorite tune of Afrika Korps soldiers.

set, cigarettes, a cigarette-rolling machine, matches, a dictionary and other books, shoe polish, pills "for fever and headache," and shaving supplies. Surveying their accumulated goods, they realized they could not carry everything when they made their break, so they watched for a chance to sneak some gear to the boat ahead of time.<sup>15</sup>

They knew the compound gate was left unlocked until 10:00 P.M. to allow the PWs working in the kitchen, shops, and motor pool outside the stockade to go and return from their evening tasks. The night before their escape, they waited until the one patrolling guard was out of sight and stole out of the gate with some of their luggage. The next night the two prisoners made a second stealthy trip to the *Lili Marlene* #10 about three hours before bed check.<sup>16</sup>

Schymalla and Mai chose the night of Saturday, October 28, for their getaway. The bed-check count of prisoners on Saturday was at 11:00 P.M.: on Sunday morning no count was made, since no work parties left camp. The conspirators reasoned that if they could escape after Saturday's check, they would have that night and part of the next to travel before their absence was detected.<sup>17</sup>

That evening they went to bed wearing their unmarked clothes concealed under their blankets. At 10:45 P.M., Captain Jenner and American guards toured each barracks, counting as they went. When all were accounted for, the guards locked the stockade gate for the night.<sup>18</sup>

About half an hour later, Schymalla and Mai stole silently out of their quarters to the fence

along the eastern boundary of the camp, which was next to a wooded area. After the lone guard passed, they spread apart strands of the woven wire fence, scooped away some earth underneath, shoved the luggage they were carrying through the hole, and crawled to freedom undetected. Skirting

the camp, they made it safely to Lake Winnibigoshish and loaded their remaining gear into the already heavily burdened boat.<sup>19</sup>

To their surprise, they found that the loaded *Lili Marlene* #10 scraped the shallow lake bottom when they added their own weight to that of the cargo. They then took off their shoes and socks and waded into the chilly lake, pushing their boat. By the time they reached deep water and climbed into the vessel, their feet felt almost completely frozen. Although the daytime temperature had reached an unseasonable 72 degrees, it plunged to 33 degrees in the night. In spite of their discomfort, they paddled the frail craft

quietly along the lake's southeast shore for about five miles before their aching feet and approaching dawn forced them to land. They spent Sunday, October 29, hiding in a secluded spot, drying wet clothing and sleeping. The first stage of their escape was a success.<sup>20</sup>

Schymalla's and Mai's disappearance from the Bena camp was not betrayed by their comrades and was not discovered by the Americans until 9:45 P.M. that Sunday. When a ranking German sergeant, the PWs' camp liaison, made a preliminary bed check and



Lt. Col. Arthur T. Lobdell, 1944

<sup>15</sup> Schymalla Testimony, 3; Mai Testimony, 2; Norgaard interview.

<sup>16</sup> Mai Testimony, 2; Schymalla Testimony, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Schymalla Testimony, 1-2; Lobdell to Commanding General, Dec. 5, 1944; Capt. Clifford Jenner to Commanding Officer, Algona PW camp, Nov. 29, 1944, APWCR.

<sup>18</sup> Schymalla Testimony, 2; Lobdell to Commanding General, Dec. 5, 1944.

<sup>19</sup> Schymalla Testimony, 3, 5; Mai Testimony, 2; Lobdell to Commanding General, Dec. 5, 1944.

<sup>20</sup> Schymalla Testimony, 4; Mai Testimony, 3; *Grand Rapids Herald-Review*, Nov. 1, 1944, p. 4.



PWs in barracks at the Remer camp, 1944, similar to the sleeping quarters at Bena

reached Mai's bed, he found a note instead of a soldier. "Our Fatherland, Our Homeland are now in a very difficult position and need all available sons," Mai had written, "and therefore we will try to arrive at our homeland." Then, in a transparent attempt to send search parties to the north and west, Mai had continued, "I remind you that the Behring [*sic*] Strait is frozen all the year round. Across this is our ally [Japan]. I hope that we will reach our destination." He concluded by promising, "We will not create any sabotage," and wishing "for the whole camp in Bena for the future the best." The note was signed, "Your comrades, Mai and Schymalla." Schymalla's bed, of course, was also empty.<sup>21</sup>

The sergeant hurried to Captain Jenner with the letter and the startling news that the two PWs were missing. Jenner first ordered all of the guards out of bed to search the camp thoroughly and make certain that the prisoners were not hiding in some part of the installation. In May 1944, two German PWs had escaped from detention cells in Algona, but, much to the embarrassment of Lobdell's predecessor, the missing men were

found hiding in a camp latrine. Aware of this episode, Jenner did not want to sound any alarm prematurely. It took 45 minutes to determine that Schymalla and Mai really were gone.<sup>22</sup>

Jenner then ordered Bena's escape plan into action. The guards, organized into patrols, searched the nearby roads and woods. Jenner called the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Minneapolis, then phoned the sheriffs of the nearest counties and the Minnesota Highway Patrol. Finally, he notified Lobdell in Algona of the escape and the actions he had taken.<sup>23</sup>

That night, while law officers converged on Bena, Schymalla and Mai were paddling north-eastward once more. When they reached the outlet of Lake Winnibigoshish, they received their first surprise. A dam blocked their way to the Mississippi River. It took them two hours to carry their supplies and boat around the dam and across the road below before they could start paddling down the narrow, twisting river. The temperature that night dropped to 24 degrees.<sup>24</sup>

Just after dawn, as they neared Little Winnibigoshish Lake in the fog, they heard a motorboat nearby, so they pulled to shore and escaped being spotted. Schymalla hid their supplies along the riverbank and was out of sight when two fishermen in a canoe glided by and saw Mai. "They gave me a peculiar look," he recalled later, "but they did not bother me." Luck was still with them, and they decided to stay the rest of the day in their new hiding place as the search for them moved into high gear.

The previous midnight, Itasca County's sheriff, William Crisp, was the first law officer to reach Bena. At 2:30 A.M. FBI agents appeared, and several other officers arrived before dawn. Each received a complete description of the escapees, and the FBI agents, who were given photographs of the two missing Germans, told Jenner that they would take care of managing the newspaper and radio publicity.<sup>25</sup>

A property inventory revealed nothing missing from the Bena camp except the escaped PWs' belongings. The boats were checked, but because Jenner believed he had counted only nine when he assumed command of the camp the previous month, his present count indicated none were

<sup>21</sup> Mai and Schymalla to "My dear Sergeant" (English translation prepared for disciplinary hearings), Oct. 29, 1944, APWCR. Mai was mistaken about the Bering Strait; it rarely, if ever, freezes.

<sup>22</sup> Lobdell to Commanding General, Dec. 5, 1944; Maj. Carl P. Mayer to Commanding Officer, Camp Algona, June 1, 1944, "Investigation of the Escape of Prisoners of War," APWCR.

<sup>23</sup> Lobdell to Commanding General, Dec. 5, 1944.

<sup>24</sup> Here and below, see Mai Testimony, 3; *Grand Rapids Herald-Review*, Nov. 1, 1944, p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> Lobdell to Commanding General, Dec. 5, 1944; *Grand Rapids Herald-Review*, Nov. 1, 1944, p. 1; *Duluth Herald*, Nov. 2, 1944, p. 13; *Minneapolis Star Journal*, Nov. 2, 1944, p. 18.

gone. Army and civilian authorities, therefore, missed the important clue that Schymalla and Mai were traveling by water.<sup>26</sup>

The two fugitives made their greatest progress, approximately ten miles, the night of Monday, October 30. As the temperature bottomed out at 30 degrees, they moved along the shore of Little Winnibogishish Lake, down the Mississippi, under the bridges of U. S. Highway 2 and the Great Northern Railroad to a bend in the river about a mile south of Ball Club Lake. From Tuesday night into the early hours of Wednesday, they continued undetected for perhaps eight miles more, as Minnesota's early November daytime weather reverted to more normal clouds, wind, and cold.<sup>27</sup>

By Tuesday the Americans at Bena and local authorities were baffled. Schymalla and Mai had already set an embarrassing record for days absent without recapture. Had they made good their escape? FBI agents and several other lawmen returned to Bena Tuesday afternoon to review search plans and strategize. Then, Jenner left for Algona to brief Lobdell.<sup>28</sup>

Wednesday was a bad day for Schymalla and Mai. The night before, they had probably navigated White Oak Lake, as both later related that they had crossed a lake in such a severe storm that travel in their tiny boat was nearly impossible. A wind-driven snowstorm on Wednesday made the weather so miserable that they decided not to travel that night.<sup>29</sup>

Thursday night they moved on again but journeyed no more than four or five miles because of the storm. They camped in the dark, and when dawn came on Friday, November 3, Schymalla



WALTER MAI



HEINZ SCHYMALLA

## Nazis Still Are Hunted

Search is still under way in northern Minnesota today for these two Germans, who escaped from a prisoner of war camp at Bena, about 28 miles west of

*Bulletin about the escape.*

Duluth Herald.

November 2, 1944

and Mai discovered they had stopped within sight of a farmhouse. They sneaked away without being seen and for the first time decided to travel during daylight.<sup>30</sup>

About noon, when the two PWs arrived at the confluence of the Mississippi River and Jay Gould Lake, they turned by mistake into the lake. As they paddled their crude boat past a lakeside resort, its owner, J. G. Shoup, saw them. Wondering who they were, he decided to row after them.<sup>31</sup>

Finding the men shortly after they had landed and were beginning to roast some sausage for lunch, Shoup asked if they were fishing. Schymalla replied in very limited English that they were not fishing but just resting. "Finally, the man in the boat said he was going home," Mai related later, "but we were very suspicious." They had good reason, for as soon as Shoup reached home, he called the sheriff's office in nearby Grand Rapids and reported his encounter with the two strangers.<sup>32</sup>

Fearing that they had been discovered, Schymalla and Mai decided to abandon the *Lili Marlene* #10 and set out on foot. They repacked essential supplies into small, easily carried bundles and started hiking. They had walked only about a quarter of a mile when they were startled by

the sound of an automobile stopping on a nearby road, and they immediately scurried into some dense bushes.

The two fugitives watched nervously from their hiding place as Deputy Sheriff Otto Litchke and Grand Rapids Chief of Police George

<sup>26</sup> Lobdell to Commanding General, Dec. 5, 1944; *Grand Rapids Herald-Review*, Nov. 1, 1944, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Schymalla Testimony, 4; Mai Testimony, 3; *Grand Rapids Herald-Review*, Nov. 1, 1944, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Here and below, see Mayer, "Investigation of the Escape," 1-3; "Payments Made on account of Escaped PWs," undated memorandum; sworn statement of S. Sgt. Ernest L. Mattord, Nov. 28, 1944, p. 1, 2—all APWCR.

<sup>29</sup> Schymalla Testimony, 4; Mai Testimony, 3.

<sup>30</sup> Schymalla Testimony, 4. Available weather reports recorded almost one-half inch of snow in Duluth; *Duluth Herald*, Nov. 3, 1944, p. 15.

<sup>31</sup> *Grand Rapids Herald-Review*, Nov. 8, 1944, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> Here and below, see Mai Testimony, 3, 4; Schymalla Testimony, 4.

O'Clock got out of the car, leaving a third man, John Murray, a former state highway patrolman, to guard the vehicle. The officers started a cautious search through the woods and passed within 15 yards of the cold and tired escapees without seeing them.<sup>33</sup>

Neither of the men wished to have their bid for freedom end by being shot, so they held a brief whispered conference. "We realized that we couldn't get very far with all our luggage," Schymalla recalled. "In front of us was a policeman and . . . behind us a car . . . [that] had a policeman," Mai testified later. "We figured we did not have much of a chance because we were surrounded." They quickly decided that there was only one thing to do: surrender. The deputy sheriff and police chief were startled when German-accented voices suddenly shouted, "Hello! Hello! We are here." They wheeled around to see the two PWs emerging from a clump of bushes with their hands high above their heads.<sup>34</sup>

**S**chymalla and Mai and their parcels were driven to the county jail in Grand Rapids, five miles away. The sheriff then notified the FBI and army authorities that the missing PWs were in custody. The jail quickly became the meeting place for those who had been tracking the escapees. Bena's supply sergeant and interpreter, Frank Moucha, helped FBI agents interrogate the captives and recorded the first account of their plans to escape down the Mississippi to New Orleans. When Lobdell was informed of their capture, he ordered that the errant PWs be escorted to Algona without delay.<sup>35</sup>

The next afternoon each escapee was brought before a disciplinary hearing board presided over by the commanding officer. "My name is Lt. Col. Lobdell," he stated tersely in opening each session. He then identified his executive officer, the camp's judge advocate (legal officer), an interpreter, a recorder, and the senior German sergeant who served as the representative of all prisoners of war.<sup>36</sup>

Since the sessions were not court martials, the proceedings were not in the form of a trial. Lt.

Nicolas V. Midey, the judge advocate, conducted most of the questioning in a direct way. Each German readily admitted that he had escaped from the Bena camp about 11:30 P.M. the night of October 28. Each claimed he felt it was his duty as a soldier to escape and return to Germany. When asked, "Did you ask any other German prisoners whether or not they wanted to go with you or your comrade?" Mai lied and answered, simply, "No." The question to Schymalla was, "How many of them [fellow PWs] did you talk to about going out with you?" He replied, "I can't give out that information, because it would only get them in trouble." Midey did not pursue the matter.<sup>37</sup>

With the help of a large map of the Bena-Grand Rapids region, the prisoners described in detail their plans, their escape, and the events of their five-and-a-half-day journey. Though they were questioned separately, the two accounts were remarkably alike, and the few discrepancies were apparently the result of memory lapses, not collusion. Midey's interrogation established that neither man was armed, neither had any American money, and no citizen had helped either man in any way.<sup>38</sup>

One matter did puzzle the board, however. Did the fugitives seriously plan to make their way to Japan, as Mai suggested in the note to his sergeant? When testifying, Mai implied that Japan was their initial goal, but because of their nearly frozen feet on their first night out, "We changed our plan so we can get south to a warmer climate."<sup>39</sup>

When Midey asked Schymalla, "Where did you and your comrade plan to go after your escape?" the German replied, "We wanted to follow the Mississippi as long as possible and go to Mexico or get a neutral boat down there." Midey then asked Schymalla how they planned to travel abroad without passports. The German, apparently surprised by the question, answered in a confused fashion that soldiers needed no passports and, besides, they might have stowed away on a ship. When Midey asked, "Why did he [Mai] say in his letter that you were going over the Bering Strait?" Schymalla's answer was evasive and confused. "We wanted to cross that first because we

<sup>33</sup> *Grand Rapids Herald-Review*, Nov. 8, 1944, p. 1. Mai Testimony, 4.

<sup>34</sup> Mai Testimony, 4; Schymalla Testimony, 4.

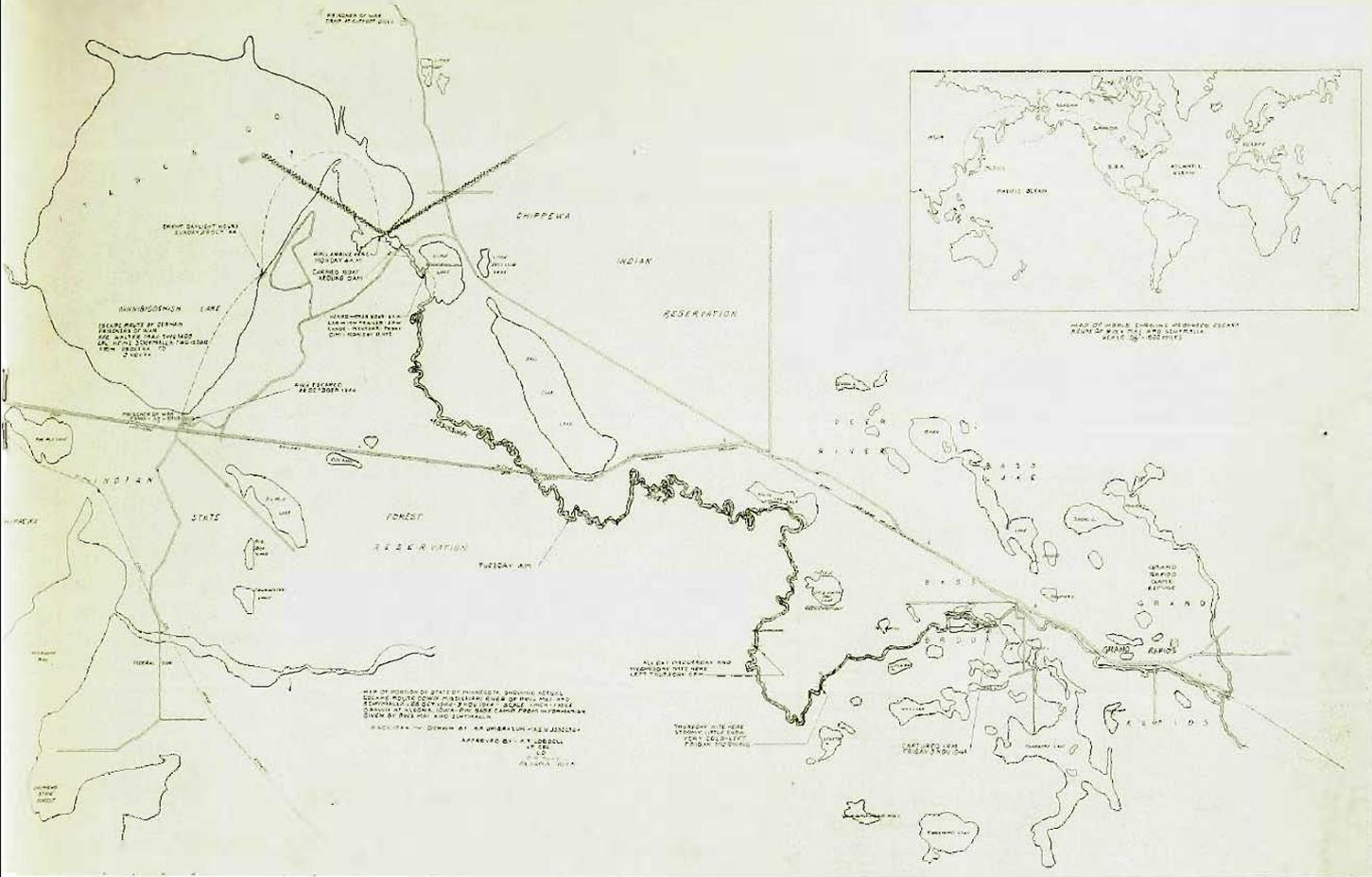
<sup>35</sup> Mai Testimony, 6; Schymalla Testimony, 6; sworn statement of T/4 Frank Moucha, Nov. 21, 1944. APWCR. There was some tension among the Americans at the Grand Rapids jail. The only army officer in the region, the commander of the Remer camp, apparently irritated the FBI agent and differed with Moucha over where and when the PWs' possessions were to be inventoried.

<sup>36</sup> Schymalla Testimony, 1; Mai Testimony, 1.

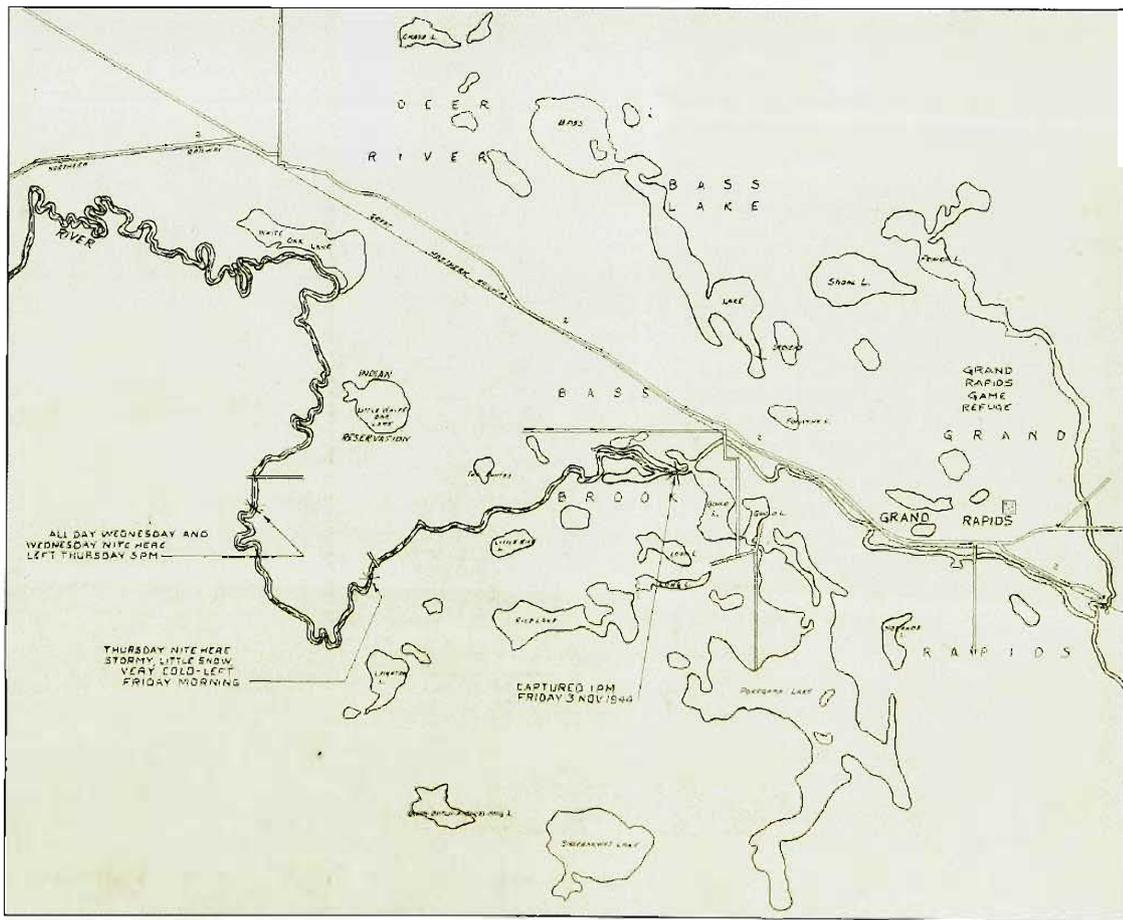
<sup>37</sup> Mai Testimony, 2; Schymalla Testimony, 2, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Schymalla Testimony, 4, 5; Mai Testimony, 2, 3, 4.

<sup>39</sup> Mai and Schymalla to "My dear Sergeant," Oct. 29, 1944; Mai Testimony, 3, 6.



ABOVE: Map of Schymalla's and Mai's escape route down the Mississippi and point of capture. Exhibit 5 in the report sent to Seventh Service Command headquarters, Omaha.



RIGHT: Detail showing and describing the prisoners' Wednesday- and Thursday-night stops and the area of capture.

## PW ESCAPES FROM THE ALGONA SYSTEM

Looking back in November 1946 on his experience as a prisoner-of-war camp commander, Arthur Lobdell observed, "One of the things we had worried about most was escapes. Actually it was one of the least of our worries."

During the two years that Camp Algona was operating, records show that 18 Germans left confinement without permission—the euphemism for an escape—in ten separate incidents. Since more than 10,000 PWs were part of Camp Algona's census during that time and all of the fugitives were caught, usually soon after their escape, Lobdell's retrospective judgment seems fair.

✦ *May 20–24, 1944. Algona.* Karl Braun and Harry Schippman dug out under the camp's fences about 11:00 P.M. Their absence was not detected until four days later, when they were captured by civilian authorities 16 miles away near West Bend. Braun and Schippman would not have established their "freedom" record if not for a seriously flawed system of counting prisoners. Algona officials were not aware the men were missing despite two civilians' calls about unescorted PWs.

After Braun and Schippman were confined in the camp guardhouse, they were released by fellow PWs and hid for a day in a stockade latrine before being recaptured. This embarrassing episode contributed to the replacement of Algona's commanding officer by Lobdell.

✦ *May 30–31, 1944. Algona.* Alois Stephan apparently escaped through a culvert under the camp's fences after the evening PW count. He turned himself in early the next morning to an

Algona pool-hall proprietor who was sweeping his sidewalk.

✦ *July 2–3, 1944. Algona.* Kurt Vogt and Ernst Backaws escaped after the evening count; their absence was discovered the next morning. Search parties were dispatched and civilian authorities were notified. A farm boy spotted them and, with his father, captured them in a cornfield before police and army guards arrived.

✦ *July 9–10, 1944. Fairmont, Minnesota.* Albrecht Gick and Leo Scheltner were sentenced to 20 days confinement, 7 of them on a diet of bread and water, "for leaving camp and for irregularities in their correspondence." Details of their misdemeanors are lacking, but the sentence was standard for such an escape.

✦ *September 24–25, 1944. Fairmont.* Alfred Dill walked away from camp unnoticed about 11:00 P.M. He was apprehended by civilians two hours later, rowing a boat on a nearby pond.

✦ *October 28–November 3, 1944. Bena.* Heinz Schymalla and Walter Mai escaped under Bena's fence, establishing a record of five days away from confinement. The best planned and most dramatic of all escapes from the Algona system, this adventure generated unusually complete documentation.

✦ *November 1, 1944. Faribault.* Robert Strache and Alfred Oligmuller were coworkers in the camp's canteen. Cleaning up after midnight and partially drunk on seven or eight bottles of 3.2 beer, they decided to "go over the fence" with no particular object in mind. They were returning to camp two hours later when they were arrested by local police.

✦ *January 13, 1945. Owatonna.* August Heulle walked away from camp about 9:00 P.M. His absence was detected at bed check and a search was underway when, about 11:00 P.M., he returned on his own.

✦ *April 27–28, 1945. Bena.* Kurt Touey and Joachim Starkoff escaped under Bena's fence after dark; their absence was discovered at bed check. Apparently, they wished to avoid being separated from each other in a transfer scheduled for the next day. They were apprehended about six miles south of camp.

✦ *August 15–16, 1945. Owatonna.* Werner Meinel, Peter Fritz, and Volker Schweda walked away from camp individually during the evening several days after the end of World War II. Each PW visited the county fair. Meinel rode the ferris wheel, bought a sandwich, and played a game machine before he was arrested by civilian police. Fritz and Schweda were picked up as they returned to camp about 2:00 A.M.

It will never be known how many PWs slipped away for short periods of freedom and returned to their quarters undetected. After the war, Meinel moved to the United States, became an American citizen, and had a successful career as a commercial artist and photographer. During the 1980s he revealed that he had also escaped from Camp Algona one August evening in 1944 and met an American secretary from the camp's hospital. She and her brother drove him around the city and returned him to camp; he sneaked back in undetected.

Schweda, who also was caught going to the Owatonna fair, admitted that he had stolen out of camp and returned twice without being detected. One PW at the St. Charles, Minnesota, branch camp would have concealed his three Sunday trysts with an American woman had he not come down with a venereal disease. Such unnoticed, unauthorized round-trip excursions by PWs were, however, the exception, not the rule.

had no passport," he replied. When asked, "Where in Japan?" Schymalla could only say, "Closest place so that they could return me home." Midey gave up at this point, leaving Lobdell and others wondering if Japan had ever really been the escapees' goal.<sup>40</sup>

At the end of the hearings it was obvious that the two PWs had not anticipated the many problems they would face on a long journey, whatever their destination. The board members saw that the prisoners' realistic planning had gone no further than the successful getaway from the Bena camp.

<sup>40</sup> Schymalla Testimony, 5, 6.

At the conclusion of testimony by each escapee, the hearing was closed and the case discussed. Each prisoner was then brought back into the room, and Lobdell announced, "My decision is to punish you 30 days in confinement with 14 continuous days on bread and water. The period of restricted diet . . . to begin upon receipt of notification from the post surgeon that you are physically able to withstand this restricted diet."<sup>41</sup>

When asked, "Do you have anything to say?" Schymalla, in a display of soldierly responsibility, answered, "I accept my punishment and hope that none of my comrades at Bena receive any punishment due to my escape." Mai, however, was defiant and snapped, "I want to see the Red Cross to see whether they can change the sentence." To this, Lobdell replied, "You will serve the sentence starting immediately."

**W**hile Schymalla and Mai served their time in Algona's guardhouse, a postscript was added to the story of their misadventure. The PWs' escape, which the FBI had publicized widely in Minnesota, embarrassed Lobdell's superiors at Seventh Service Command headquarters in Omaha. Though they realized that Schymalla and Mai had received the maximum penalty allowed under the Geneva Convention, they felt the two Germans deserved additional punishment. "Inasmuch as it would appear that subject prisoners of war committed larceny of a boat," the chief of the prisoner-of-war branch in Omaha wrote Lobdell, "information is desired regarding what action . . . is contemplated with respect to their trial for such an offense."<sup>42</sup>

In response, Lobdell sent Lt. Midey to Bena to gather evidence on which to base a criminal

case. Midey's mission was a futile one. He reported back that there was "no evidence as to the source or ownership of the scrap lumber used to build the *Lili Marlene #10*," nor could he determine satisfactorily any value of the boat. After listing other legal difficulties, he declared "that all of the elements constituting larceny . . . cannot be established" and recommended that no charges be preferred against Schymalla and Mai.<sup>43</sup>

Whether or not those two adventurous PWs ever knew of this last chapter of their caper is not a matter of record. But with the acceptance of Midey's conclusions by his superiors, the chronicle of their great escape came to an end.

During their escapade, Schymalla and Mai had been free for five and a half days, had traveled more than 50 twisting miles down the Mississippi River, but when captured were only 35 miles from their camp at Bena. New Orleans was still 1,400 miles away and Tokyo at least 6,000 miles distant.

They had been defeated in their bid for freedom by Minnesota's cold weather, limited food supplies, and their colossal misunderstanding of the distances and difficulties they faced in a hostile countryside alerted to their presence. Recapture was not only the fate of the 11 other Minnesota PWs who made a bid for freedom in 1944 and 1945 but also of all but a handful of the 2,222 German PWs who escaped from their confinement in the United States during World War II. While Schymalla and Mai were gone longer than any other Minnesota PWs and most German PWs who escaped in America, the odds were against them, and in the end they lost. They simply were not destined to be twentieth-century versions of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Here and below, see Schymalla Testimony, 6; Mai Testimony, 6. Mai's attempt to involve the Red Cross reveals his ignorance of appeal channels. The Red Cross had no authority over disciplinary or judicial sentences; the Swiss Legation served as the protecting power for German PWs in the United States. In any case, his hearing and sentence followed the provisions of the Geneva Convention; Mai would have received no relief from the Swiss.

<sup>42</sup> Lt. Col. W. L. Wolcott, Chief, Prisoner of War Branch, Seventh Service Command, to Commanding Officer, PW Camp, Algona, Dec. 7, 1944, APWCR.

<sup>43</sup> 1st Lt. Nicolas Midey to Commanding Officer, PW Camp, Algona, undated [ca. Dec. 11, 1944], APWCR; Lobdell to Commanding General, Seventh Service Command, Dec. 12, 1944, APWCR.

<sup>44</sup> Lobdell's files contain transcripts of hearings, reports, and newspaper clippings confirming the escape of 11 other German PWs from Minnesota branch camps during 1944 and 1945 (see sidebar, p. 122). Only the Schymalla-Mai case merited a folder of its own. On PWs elsewhere in the country, see *New York Times*, Nov. 27, 1947, p. 32; Arnold Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America* (Chelsea, Mich.: Scarborough House, 1991), 146. The last missing German PW escapee was accounted for in 1985 when he "surrendered" to Krammer, a professor at Texas A & M University; see Georg Gaertner with Arnold Krammer, *Hitler's Last Soldier in America* (Briarcliff Manor, N.Y.: Stein and Day, 1985). Chapter 4 of Krammer's *Nazi Prisoners of War* is an essential essay for anyone researching German PW escapes in the United States during World War II.



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