

THE ALGONA NATIVITY SCENE

A Christmas visit to the internationally known NATIVITY SCENE of Algona, Iowa, is a custom that many people in Iowa and surrounding states have established for their families and continue each year. It may be difficult. . . but imagine being thousands of miles from home at Christmas time. Your country is at war and you are a prisoner in a foreign land. This was the situation for 3,200 men in the Prisoner of War Camp near Algona in 1944, during World War II.

Eduard Kaib was an architect in his private life and a non-commissioned officer in the German Army when he was sent to Camp Algona in the fall of 1944. With Christmas approaching, Eduard was lonely and felt the isolation deeply as he thought about home, family, church services and happy festivities of the holiday. These feelings prompted him to build a small Nativity Set. The figures were made out of soil, baked in an oven to harden them, then placed in a twelve foot wide scene. Camp Commander, Arthur Lobdell, viewed the Set on display in the prisoner's quarters and was very impressed. Later he called Kaib to his office for a long talk. During the discussion, the commander asked Eduard to consider building a larger Nativity Scene, which would be funded by the prisoners.

Work began in January of 1945. Kaib and five friends worked many long hours to create the sacred designs. They are made of concrete over a wire and wooden frame. There are 60 one-half life size figures, many finished with hand carving in plaster. The SCENE has considerable intricate detail and is highly realistic.

The infant Jesus lies in a straw-filled crib in the center of the SCENE, with Joseph, Mary and kneeling shepherds on either side. Wise men approach the manger with their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Behind them, camels are led by their drivers while shepherds are seated around a campfire listening to the glad tidings from the angels that, "A Savior has been born in Bethlehem". The town of Bethlehem appears in the background.

The project was finished and ready to display for Christmas of 1945. It was set up at the Camp West of Algona where it was easily accessible for the public to view. A tradition had begun.

The people of Algona were very impressed with the beauty of the NATIVITY SCENE. When the war ended and the Prisoner of War Camp disbanded in 1946, the Junior Chamber of Commerce requested the SCENE remain and be made a permanent exhibit shown each Christmas. Mr. Kaib and his co-workers helped reassemble the figures in a new location, a building repaired and repainted for this purpose. Lighting was installed and a heating plant added.

The Men's Club of Algona First United Methodist Church have been caretakers of the SCENE since December of 1958. They received legal sponsorship in 1963 and provide attendants during the Christmas season. A new frame structure was built on the northwest side of the Kossuth County Fairgrounds located on the south edge of the city. The new building was made possible by contributions from church members and other friends in the community. Many hours of labor were contributed by the Men's Club. A display room was added in 1994 to better show the many artifacts and publications.

The story of the SCENE and the inspiration behind it, has been printed in many national magazines and newspapers, told on television and radio and related from person to person throughout the years. Several thousand people visit the SCENE each year, and have come from all 50 states and many foreign nations. By arrangement with Kaib and his friends, no charge is made for admission. The cost of maintaining and improving the SCENE comes from donations.

Although Eduard Kaib and his co-workers returned to their homes in Germany in 1946, they remained interested in the SCENE. Werner Meinel returned in 1964 to satisfy a longing to again stand on the ground where he had been a prisoner. In 1968, Algona hosted the Kaib family during the Christmas season. Eduard's son, Norbert, returned to Algona in June, 1985.

A new story behind the Scene surfaced in August, 2006 when Ingrid Hazleton of Port Arthur, Texas came to Algona to visit the place where her father, Horst Wendlandt, had been a POW and helped build the NATIVITY SCENE. Mr. Wendlandt, age 96, lives in Kerrville, Texas. Ingrid brought pictures and articles from Texas newspapers detailing his story. After she returned home, Horst sent the story, written in his own words, which is on display at the SCENE. He tells of working in a vegetable canning factory in Blue Earth, Minnesota and Frank Miller's dairy farm near Laurens, Iowa. Horst relates the day Mr. Miller told him his only son had been killed fighting the Japanese and that he wanted Horst to return to the dairy farm to work after the war. **Frank also stated that if things worked out well, he would treat Horst as he would his own son and would will his farm to him upon his death.** However, this didn't happen because Horst chose to go to Texas with his wife and family to be near his mother and sister. **This is another example of what happened many times – he came as an enemy and left as a friend.**

The Camp Algona POW Museum opened in July, 2004. There is a wide variety of exhibits that will heighten your interest in this era of Algona's treasured past. A visit is highly recommended. To get an overview of these **two separate entities**, visit the Museum website at: pwcamp.algona.org

The NATIVITY SCENE Committee and the Camp Algona POW Museum Committee were pleased to host Eduard Kaib's 17 year old granddaughter, Lorenza, in July, 2009.

She was surprised to learn how much our community treasures his beautiful gift. A CD was presented to her with the story of Eduard's stay here, told in his own words. She was quite moved as she heard her grandfather's voice for the first time as he passed away before her birth. She was also awed by the many artifacts and pictures housed in the POW Museum.

Eduard Kaib, who lived in Bielefeld, Germany, died May 24, 1988. He was a peace-loving man who left an on-going legacy to Algona, a town in Iowa. In the spirit in which it was given the NATIVITY SCENE will continue to be shared each year during the month of December. The hours, beginning the first Sunday in December are: Sundays and Christmas Day (12:00 noon-9:00 pm), Mondays through Saturdays (2:00-9:00 pm), closing at 6:00 pm New Years Eve. For special appointments, contact Marvin Chickering (515-295-7519) or the church office for information (515-295-7241).
