

THE HISTORY OF THE SURVEILLANCE DIVISION

1942--- ?

The chill fall wind howled mournfully across the wide open West Texas plains on its dusty way to El Paso; in Santa Fe the world was swathed in a beautiful blanket of freshly fallen snow and the wind moaned through the tops of the tall pines; in Crystal City the mercury stood at an even 100 degrees and not a breath of air stirred this crisp fall day of November 1942.

The Official transfer of a Chief Surveillance Officer to the Crystal City Alien Detention Camp had just been completed and the organization of a surveillance group was about to get under way. Of course the camp wasn't occupied by internees yet, only a few idle transients occupied the place, and its beautiful, well kept grounds gave evidence of the care that had been lavished upon them in an effort to make the setting attractive.

A crowd of men waited at the corner of the Administrative Building; some chewing tobacco, aiming and spitting unerringly true at insects and other small creatures that were unfortunate enough to be within range; some whittling on very soft pine with very sharp knives, some sitting back on their boot heels in the way of the cowboy and some just standing. Purpose plainly visible in the manner of all, they were applicants for jobs in the new cam that was to be put up. The Concentration Camp, they called it.

The little wrinkled fellow in the white overalls had carpentered off and on for forty years and now he was working at the Eagle Pass Army Air Field and he was drawing \$1.25 an hour with time-and-a-half for overtime, but his family lived in Carrizo Springs and it's 37 miles from there to Eagle Pass and a man can't make any money keeping up two places at the same time and on top of that his jalopy was just about to cash in. He knew that War Man Power Regulations forbid his quittin his job there to take one here, but we could see what he was up against and couldn't we just hire him and say nothing about it? Sorry, we are governed by the same regulations you are working under, but we will take your name and when the contractor you are working for releases you we will be glad to put you on if it is possible.

The Surveillance Division had commenced to function in the first assigned duty of receiving employment applications. The applicants never let up, although after the first year they did slow down.

A little man in a dark suit and with a Casper Milquetoast manner wanted to apply for the position of guard. He had never had experience as an officer, had never carried a gun, he had a hunting rifle but he didn't get to hunt much. He was the entire office force of a small water company in a town a hundred miles away, before that he had clerked in a store and both jobs had

kept him pretty well tied down. We will take your application and if it is possible to use you we shall certainly give your qualifications consideration.

A husky, well built applicant wants to be a guard. He seems to know most of the answers and he has an alert manner about him, but he has a slight hernia in the right side, it's secured by a truss and it never troubles him. Sorry, we will file your application, we must apply the physical requirements of the Border Patrolman position to our guard applicants as nearly as we are able to do so, later on if it is possible to consider you we will. Could we have but foreseen the time when an applicant with only one hernia to consider as a physical defect would be considered the prize physical specimen he would have been hired on the spot.

There was the 55 year old applicant who had had 23 years experience in the kind of work a guard must do. Four years in the Army during World War I and after, had worked as a Peace Officer in various Texas counties. He sizes up just right, physically as tough as a boot, a little over six feet tall not counting the boots and probably weighs around 170. We note that he is to be considered and we'll investigate his character so that we can put him on if he checks OK. Before we get around to investigate him we have occasion to ask him over the telephone to call at the office. He appears in a slightly alcoholic effluvia and his shrunken lips close over toothless gums. He explains that he has false teeth, but they make him nervous when he wears them so generally he carries them in his hip pocket, he never should have gotten the damned things anyway. Drink? Well, although he told us that he didn't drink alcoholic liquors of any kind,, he did drink a bottle of beer now and then, a man has to do something or other to pass the time. We investigate his statement and find that he never drinks any more at one sitting than he is physically able to convey from the bar to his mouth.

Here is a mountain of an applicant, he's six feet six in his socks and he weighs 235 lbs., he is not too old and he checks out well in his interview. He drives a truck for a motor freight line about twelve hours a day, in between times he gets a little sleep and wrestles freight around in the truck depot. Of course he gets \$120 a month for this, which is pretty good pay. He has worked for the truck line for a long while,,he would be perfectly satisfied to continue working for them if only he had time off to work around his little farm. He has a family of three or four children and when a working man has a family that size he has just got to have a garden and a cow and chickens around the place to make both ends meet. As it is he can't do that, he has to work such long hours that he is unable to take care of the cow, or the garden, or the chickens. His kids are getting to the size where they can take care of the garden and the chickens, but his wife must milk the cow, and she has plenty to do without that. We note the facts and consider him for employment.

The dark, leathery looking applicant with the paint splotted clothes has a blue butterfly delicately tattooed on each side of his neck; according to him he is a painter and he can sling a paint brush like nobody's business, he has painted from Maine to Florida and there never was a combination of color that he could not mix. Just lately he has been spraying the under pinnings of a widow lady's house on account she had termites, he used creosote and it drove the termites up into the walls and floors besides taking some of the hide off his body. He can paint signs too, usually he and his wife contract to do a job because he is a War Veteran from World War I and he has a silver plate in his head where part of his skull used to be. Sometimes he works eight hours a day, most of the time he can't and his wife takes over where he leaves off, now if that kind of arrangement can be made everything will be alright. He doesn't have any address because he lives in a shack built on an automobile chassis and he moves from place to place when he gets ready to and he don't have to worry about what the landlord thinks. He will ^{be} back from time to time so never mind looking him up.

The big cowboy with the ruddy complexion has had twelve years experience as a Peace Officer, his right arm was recently broken, but it has mended OK; he's been around a lot and the interview is in his favor. We need a few guards immediately so an investigator gets on the job and the cowboy is hired next day. His duty is to patrol the eastern edge of the grounds and to prevent the transients from removing property that we have taken over when they move out. He does this for two nights, on the third he hands in his resignation because he weighs 205 lbs., and he is a cowboy, not a hiker, and he has walked more these last two nights than he has in six months; besides his boots are hand made and they were fitted for riding, not walking.

A couple of young ranch hands, earnest and sincere about the whole business; their blue denims have faded from much washing, their worn boots are polished and their Stetsons are stained. But somehow or other they have the appearance of immaculateness. Maybe it's the slow, soft, polite way of speaking and looking right into your eyes when they do. Each has a family with small children, one has been a Government Trapper matching wits with predatory animals over in the Big Bend country, but he wants to be closer to home where his wife teaches school. The other has been working on various ranches all through this country; ranch hands are in great demand, but the work is not steady, at calving time and in the fall a ranch hand works from the time he can see to the time he can't, and in between he just works from time to time for first one and then the other. That's not much of a life for a man with small children in the family, he just can't drag them around from ranch to ranch all of the time. With these two applicants our belief in the law of just compensation is restored and we note that they are highly desirable.

The sandy haired man, badly in need of a shave, has a livid scar across his throat from ear to ear, and has been a Texas Ranger from 1913 until 1919. Yessir, a "Meskin" cut his throat like that when he was in the Rangers. They were after old Juan Paso Gomez at the time and the "Meskin" meant to kill him. Now you take this proposition of guarding at a concentration camp, a feller ought to kill one of them damned people every time he gets a chance and can get away with it. Now when he was in the Rangers he remembered one time--- And so it goes, one past achievement after the other, violent deeds and killings right and left. He always triumphed over the lawless element. We wonder why if this fellow was such a cracker jack, did the Rangers ever turn him loose. He shows no sign of running out of conversation and after a long while he must be gotten rid of to give the next applicant a chance.

This Surveillance assignment of taking all applications begins to size up as a full time proposition. They come in a never ending stream; carpenters, plumbers, brick masons, painters, laborers and artisans of every type. They want to work and they want to work right now, because when a man works on construction he can't afford to lose many days of work and there is a huge demand for construction workers all over the country. We explain that as yet we have very little construction material on hand and the best that we can do is to take their names and addresses. That's not much good because if they don't get work here they'll go over to Hondo where the Army is putting in the Bomber Base; they'd rather work here because there is plenty of room in town and there are a couple of places to eat. When you follow the construction game you learn to sleep anywhere you can and eat any kind of grub that doesn't crawl and the eating places here size up OK. It dawns on us that this proposition of scouting labor is going to be something, what with the Bomber Base going up at Hondo, a large Air Field at Eagle Pass and a larger one at Del Rio, by the time we get our construction material hired help in the construction line is going to be hard to find.

Female applicants. Most for clerical positions, no, they can't take shorthand, but they can type. Some of them have never worked before, learned it in school and now they want to see what they can do. Their qualifications are noted and the exceptional ones are passed on to some one in the Administrative Office who knows what the score is in the positions they seek.

Applicants for the position of Matron. Young ones, middle aged ones and old ones. One has had actual experience in such a position and she does not give the impression of a lady wrestler. She is a large motherly type of woman with a kind, calm manner and a perpetual smile. We will do well to hire her if she checks satisfactory. At least one quarter of the women in this county apply for a matron position. We explain that at present we have not any such positions open, but is probable that we will in the future and we thank them very much for making their applications.

At fifteen minutes to midnight a guard applicant raps on the door of one of the camp personnel cottages, he explains that he has been over during the day and didn't find the ones who took the applications so he decided to come later, he was pretty sure he'd find the right ones at the camp then at that time of night. He is applying for a guard job now, and what are his chances? He is told to come back next day and his qualifications will be discussed.

For a week steady we take all kinds of applications, investigate guard applicants and make a few appointments. Government property must be protected and the stuff is scattered all over the place and the place is just about 212 acres in size. We have to have three tours of guards posted on the roads to see that only persons on business go in or out. We have to formulate our Surveillance plan as we go along and we instruct the few guards in the proper manner of handling civilian internees long before the internees arrive. By this time we have a sizeable construction crew at work and our compound fence is being put up.

A Victory Hut is put up at the main gate and it becomes the Control Center, Employment and Time Keeper's Office, and a shelter from the cold weather that is with us in the early morning off and on. Before long the place takes on a slightly gamey smell, what with kerosene stoves turned up until they smoke, oil skin slickers hanging on the walls, wet boots and shoes drying out on the feet and held up to the flames until the socks begin to scorch; the sharp smell of honest sweat from the clothes of the workers, together with an ever present cloud of tobacco smoke from pipes that had been broken in on Old Battle Ace, or Honest John smoking mixture, there was an air that was distinctly Control Center.

Time Keeping becomes a problem for our Oklahoma-born employee who handles the job, for he never learned to speak Spanish or pronounce such American names as Ybarra, Zuniga, Guzman, Arredondo or Almendarez. We find Surveillance assigned to the task of checking them in and out and assigning them to their work. Now we must fingerprint all employees whose pay is more than 40¢ per hour. The pile of Personnel Affidavits and fingerprint cards grows and grows, before long it will take up most of the corner of the hut and the table that does for a desk will have to be moved.

The rains come and all except inside construction stops, cars stall and stick on our best roads. Some of them we leave until the roads dry out, with others we compound the situation by sticking the trucks that went up to pull them out. We hand up an all time record by sticking three trucks and cars just 50 feet past the end of the pavement. The first one stuck remains there for three days. Wet guards, wet laborers and a wet dog or two, all drying out in the Control Center makes the situation normal. We dwellers in the camp personnel cottages plod our way homeward through the deserted cornfield and the waist high weeds, collecting mud, grass burrs

and evil thoughts enroute. One day we have a road graded through the tangle, and years and years later we pave it.

The compound fence is partially up and it remains that way for a long while. Four guard towers go up on the corners, our first group of internees is due shortly. We investigate and hire more guards and instruct them in the treatment to be accorded Alien Enemies. Months later when some one in the Central Office questions as to why guards were hired when there were no internees to be guarded, we thought of the eleven Government employment application forms required to be filled out on each applicant, not counting the physical examination blank. Most were required to be filled out in the applicant's own handwriting and we average 2½ hours per applicant. Some times our local doctor is in town and some times not, he serves a community of 5000 people and it's just a matter of his finding time to give the physical, often he finds it possible to perform the examination within three days of the first appointment that is made with him.

Our first internees arrive from Ellis Island on December 12th and we settle down to business. They are German and have two Spokesmen for the one group, which complicates the problem. One wants to ride his bicycle around over all the grounds outside of the cottage area where they are quartered. He learns first hand something of the Texas temperament and the Texan's attitude toward Alien Enemies when he tells one of the guards to pump up the tires on his bicycle. He protests to a Patrol Officer about the fact that the guards wear guns, he is afraid that some child might be injured should the guards shoot. He is assured that should the guards find it necessary to shoot, that the children would be uninjured except for the possibility of a recent corpse falling on them. The second Spokesman asks why they are brought down to the wilds of Texas where the people do not like them. He is left to figure that one out for himself.

A month later we receive a small group of German males from Camp Forrest, Tennessee and our population numbers 130, by February it has grown to over 350, and on March 16th we receive our first Japanese females from Seagoville. A week later our first Japanese males from Camp Livingston, Louisiana. We get good at this detrainning of internees and their baggage, the tremendous amount of assorted junk and luggage accumulated by the Japanese internee travelling, or about to travel, challenges our ability or anybody's ability when it comes to moving them from place to place. We gain experience from handling the Japanese and their luggage and work out a system for handling all internee entraining or detrainning movements. We learn that it is an impossibility for two persons to attempt to direct one group of workers, we become adept at this business of taking internees off of trains or putting them on, and in February of 1944 when there is a delay of train movements that have a definite deadline to meet at the Gripsholm sailing time, we load two trains with 634 Germans bound for repatriation, in some 45 minutes.

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Our second German repatriation party was entrained without fuss or muss late at night on January the second, of this year. We accept this loading and unloading proposition as just another days work and the excellent cooperation given the Surveillance Group by our other divisions has made it possible for us to feel this way about the task.

Two years after the arrival of our first internee group, our camp population numbers well over 3200. We are into our third year at Crystal City, and we have all learned and we have all had our problems. Our Surveillance Division believes itself second to none in the service; when we entrain the last bus load of internees on the old SAU & G Railroad and the engineer high balls it out of town, we are going to turn around and look at the old camp and figure we did a worth while job of it.

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