

# ROCHESTER HISTORY

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## Not in Our Back Yard

POW Encampment at Cobbs Hill

*by Terry Lehr*



## David Hochstein

Rochester's Promising Violinist

*by Vincent A. Lenti*





*Above: Italian prisoners of war from Stony Brook camp helped to harvest beets at Groveland, Livingston County. German and Italian prisoners across the state helped to harvest crops during the manpower shortage. Rochester Public Library.*

*Cover: (Top) These portable buildings were sent by rail from New England to Geneseo to house German prisoners of war. Gannett Newspapers.*

*(Bottom) David Hochstein in 1917. Courtesy Vincent Lenti.*

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*Italian prisoners of war were trucked to farms near Rochester. Farm hands were desperately needed during the war. Gannett Newspapers.*

## **Not in Our Back Yard**

The fiftieth anniversary of America's involvement in World War II has emphasized the fact that even a popular war creates conflicting attitudes on the home front. Choices made in wartime, even those arising from the most noble motivations, may produce friction and animosities among well-meaning people. This paradox was illustrated graphically by three prisoner of war encampments at Cobbs Hill during the fall of 1943, the summer of 1944, and the winter of 1945. Each of the three situations was made necessary by nearly identical circumstances, involved the same official organizations, and took place in the same setting. Yet each had a unique impact on Rochesterians from ordinary citizens to civil authorities. An examination of the events that took place during those years illustrates the ambivalence felt by the citizenry: a conflict generated by Rochesterians' natural inclinations toward hospitality and their patriotic desires to contribute actively to the country's military needs.

During that era, Rochester and the surrounding districts were uniquely able to help in the military effort. As a center of technical know-how, the city could provide sophisticated, precision engineered parts for war machines. Long-established manufacturing concerns supplied equipment for the Armed Forces. And the fertile soil of Western New York could produce substantial nourishment for both citizens and soldiers. Predictably, when they were called upon to put forth extraordinary efforts to help in the crisis, the people of this area rose to the occasion with enthusiasm and pride in what they could accomplish.

But while the war effort resulted in a heightened team spirit and full and rewarding employment for those who wished to contribute to it, several problems arose. For one thing, the military draft was a constant drain on available manpower. In addition, high wages paid by local industries and the enticements of urban living attracted low-paid agricultural and food processing plant workers from agrarian areas into the city. At the same time, demands for the produce grown by western New York farms multiplied. During the early months of the hostilities, larger harvests were needed to maintain a well-nourished army, to sustain the civilian population, and to supplement the production of combatants in Europe. Later, as the Allies reclaimed enemy occupied countries, local farms were asked additionally to feed liberated citizens and prisoners of war.

Growing conditions in the spring and summer of 1942 were ideal. To compensate for the shortage of farm labor, housewives were recruited, school children were released from classes, workers from Appalachia and downstate were imported, volunteer corps from professions were organized, and even Front Street derelicts were coerced. In spite of civic leaders' efforts to enlist every available citizen in the gathering and canning effort, acres of the record-breaking harvest went unpicked, and half of 1942's tomatoes rotted on canning company platforms. Such waste threatened to impede the success of our servicemen abroad and to make home front rationing even more difficult than it had already become.

Determined to marshal agricultural workers sooner in the season, officials began to search for sources of untapped manpower early in 1943. Convicts and patients from mental institutions were suggested as potential farm laborers. The federal government made plans to import 60,000 agricultural workers from Mexico and Latin America and in emergencies to release unassigned military personnel for farm and food processing work. When Allied forces captured thousands of Italian and German prisoners in the Tunisian campaign, the Food Production Administration began to consider that source as well. By May 12, an estimated 150,000 of the enemy filled Allied compounds overseas. Two days later, President Roosevelt announced that a large number of them would be brought to the U.S. Since the provisions of Geneva Convention restricted activities which prisoners of war could be involved in, since the captives would need something to keep them occupied, since food production was considered a non-hazardous endeavor, and since it was anticipated that area farms would be severely undermanned during harvest season, the decision to augment the food production work force with war

prisoner labor seemed not only logical and practical, but also tailor-made to the situation.

With slight alterations, pre-existing facilities in Western New York might easily accommodate an influx of Italian captives. To the west of Rochester, cooperatives of farmers and food processors united. They each became responsible for computing their district's total manpower need from individual requests, for identifying potential camp locales (often abandoned CCC camps like the ones at Letchworth and Hamlin), for scheduling work crews, and sometimes for transporting war prisoner laborers to and from work sites. They also paid for renovations of old sites or construction of new work camps. Although seven food processing plants and an indeterminate number of related businesses on the east side of Rochester eventually used the services of prisoners of war, they never united into a consortium. Housing of the prisoners and maintenance of the POW facility established at Cobbs Hill was under the total control of the Army. East side concerns merely assumed the costs of renovating the barracks, contributed 80 cents per prisoner per day for labor, and paid the bills for clothing, food, transportation, and medical expenses.

Except for expansion of the area and one alteration, the Cobbs Hill facilities during all three encampments were identical. Early in 1942, two hundred military police had been assigned to protect local defense plants, and the Culver Road and Main Street Armories were enlarged to help house them. In February of that year, the City Council offered the Army the use of the Open Air School and its immediate surroundings at Cobbs Hill at the cost of \$1 for the duration of the war. The Army was granted permission to alter the existing structure provided that the setting would be restored at the end of the hostilities. By combining descriptions from newspaper articles and details remembered by Rochesterians who lived in the area at the time, a fair account of the location may be reconstructed. By 1943 a fenced compound consisting of ten to twelve, gray, single-story frame buildings nestled against the hill. The Open Air School had been expanded to include a mess hall, a recreational hall, and sanitary facilities. While Rochester's main reservoir at the top of the Hill and the Lake Ontario Water Company's Standpipe outside the compound were heavily guarded by the MPs, the rest of the park was available for citizen use. Neighborhood children still played basketball on the courts, and in winter Lake Riley remained a favorite ice skating rink.

The camp acted as a military police barracks until late September, 1943. The weather that spring and summer had somewhat eased the pressure to find additional farm workers. April

was so cold and wet that farmlands became shallow lakes, farm machinery mired helplessly in mud, or seeds rotted before germinating. Finally in June, fields drained enough to allow delayed plantings and the earth warmed enough for seedlings to sprout. It wasn't until mid September that the manpower shortage became critical. Harvests of individual crops, usually staggered in a longer growing season, telescoped so that several crops ripened simultaneously. On September 15, the Army considered the situation enough of an emergency to release more than a thousand unassigned troops to work temporarily in the area. Two weeks later those soldiers were replaced by an equal number of Italian war prisoners from Pine Camp who had volunteered for the assignment.

Late in the night of September 28, a convoy of heavily-guarded Army vehicles escorted by State Troopers divided into smaller contingents at the intersection of Culver Road and Empire Boulevard. Sixty captives, some as young as 16, rode south on Culver in canvas-covered trucks until they reached the barracks at Cobbs Hill. A few of them wore parts of the uniforms in which they had been captured, but most had been issued fatigues with a large "PW" painted on the backs. On arriving at their destination, they found that their new accommodations contained long rows of iron bunk beds, and each prisoner was assigned an unfinished stand to hold his few personal belongings. Large stoves provided heat for every building.

The following day the prisoners were assigned to work details which traveled regularly to local farms, to seven food processing plants both within the city and in towns just east of Rochester, and to manufacturing concerns which served the food processing industry. Among the businesses that used their labor were Harold H. Clapp, Inc., Curtice Brothers, Co., Fairport Storage and Ice Corporation, and the Kittleberger Basket Factory in Webster. For the most part, they were transported to the fields or factories in Army trucks accompanied by carbine-bearing guards in a ratio of two guards for every five prisoners. At noon, they would reboard the trucks to eat an isolated lunch which had been prepared at the barracks. Regulations forbade fraternization between American workers and the Italian captives, but Italian-speaking citizens and English-speaking prisoners found ways to communicate. Their workday could last as long as 10 hours, and the normal workweek was six days.

At the barracks, some prisoner time was spent maintaining the area under the supervision of their own officers. They were allowed to spend the 80-cent per day wages at their own PX-like

facility for personal items such as soap and shampoo (or for cigarettes and candy which had a ready market among their American co-workers). Postage-free mail; musical instruments, athletic equipment, and books, donated by civilians for distribution to prison camps around the world; and Christmas packages assembled by the Red Cross were just a few of the amenities found at most POW camps in this country. In addition, POW facilities offered classes in English, religious services, and sports competitions. In general, meals were prepared by prisoner details, and being under the provisions of the Geneva Convention, prisoners ate as well as American soldiers. Published menus list several items which appeared on civilian ration lists.

Col. John M. McDowell, commanding officer of District 4, Second Service Command out of Buffalo, had charge of all prisoner of war facilities in Western New York. His goal throughout the duration was to keep each installation running smoothly, and he regularly inspected them personally whether there was a problem or not. His advice to Rochesterians was to treat the war prisoners "with respect and not as jail prisoners."<sup>1</sup> *Times-Union*, 29 September 1943. Initially, authorities expected the Italians to remain at Cobbs Hill only a month, but late harvested crops like



*German prisoners of war were housed here at Cobb's Hill. Military police guarded them and transported them to work on farms and in the city. Gannett Newspapers.*

carrots and beets prolonged their stay into the following year. And within two weeks of their arrival at the Hill, their status changed dramatically; on October 12, Italy officially capitulated and declared war on Germany."

No one was happier at the news than the young Italian POWs. And Rochesterians must have been delighted. From the enemy in their midst who had merely generated curiosity, the captives transformed into visitors, worthy of hospitality and friendship. Army regulations relaxed; by the end of October, the War Department was recommending that willing workers be allowed the freedom to labor outside the camps unguarded. Citizens relaxed; one resident recalls people coming to the encampment at Cobbs Hill with gift bundles for the internees: "...the people would bring food. They couldn't pass it through the [fence]. They'd throw it up over the fence....It was like a picnic when they brought the food....It was like they were all relatives, you know. And they talked in Italian."<sup>2</sup>

Interview with Bill Bierly, 9 February 1992. At other camps, like the one at Romulus, regulations relaxed enough that prisoners worked side by side with Americans at the Ordnance Depot, and they were allowed to leave the compound freely. Local citizens even organized weekend dances at that compound. The Cobbs Hill facility preserved much of its military discipline, however, and the "co-belligerents," as they were now called, continued contributing to the American war effort throughout the winter. Everyone praised the quality of their work.

As Allied forces slowly fought northward through Italy late in '43 and early in '44, the 60-man Italian contingent remained at the Hill, working even more diligently, hopeful perhaps that their efforts would help to feed their liberated countrymen. The encampment ceased to be newsworthy except for occasional appreciative comments about their industriousness and reminders that the prisoners had helped in the harvest. Like guard towers that had sprung up throughout the city and the constant influx of servicemen en route to other military destinations, the compound at Cobbs Hill became just another familiar landmark and its inhabitants became just another part of the team concerned with ending the war victoriously.

Early in 1944, worry about manpower demands for the new year's harvest duplicated the previous year's anxiety. While many Western New York agriculturists hoped that the interned Italians would be allowed to remain in their previous capacities in spite of the change in their status, some sources expressed skepticism. On February 18, the War Food Administration's office of labor officially declared that the internees were no longer





*When Italian prisoners of war learned that Italy declared war on Germany in October 1943, they cheered. They had been working in a cannery in Webster. Gannett Newspapers.*

prisoners, and thus they would not be available for farm work the following summer. Immediately, area hopes that German POWs might be enlisted to replace their former allies rose. But Col. McDowell tempered those hopes by pointing out problems that such imported enemy captives would pose. The prisoner guard, which had been reduced since October, would have to be increased once again. Furthermore, stronger precautions would need to be taken to guard against attempted German prisoner escapes, by this time familiar news items in the local papers.

Attitudes concerning German war prisoners in this country were decidedly different from those about the Italians. Articles generated by news reporting services reflected that disparity. The few national news stories about Italian prisoners included descriptions of their religious devotions, of their enthusiastic reactions to the Allied invasion of their homeland, and of their industriousness in the war effort. On the other hand, national news about German war prisoners focused on repeated escape attempts (each coming closer and closer to the Western New York area) or on rebellious work stoppages or on the fierce loyalty to the fatherland which led groups of prisoners to inflict mental and physical anguish on compatriots who cooperated with their captors. According to the press, the Italians loved America; with a little language training they would not be out of place in many neighborhoods. The German POWs, on the other hand, were invariably characterized as remaining hostile even in captivity and as posing a constant threat to vital war industries, to security, and even to citizens. While some of the stereotyping employed by the press was undoubtedly based on government propaganda,

there is evidence that the newspapers cooperated willingly in influencing local attitudes.

Headlines, especially for local news stories, can reflect editorial policy and perhaps community opinion. *Times Union* issues during the war years reveal more than just objective reporting. In both national and local prisoner of war stories, headlines used one of four designations: "POW," "war prisoner," "prisoner of war," or "Nazi." Obviously, the Italian captives were referred to only by the first three terms. However, when the possibility of German prisoners was first discussed, the more emotional word, "Nazi" was added to the local news headline lexicon. Interestingly, as the employment of these men became imminent and ultimately a fact, local newspapers used the word "Nazi" in headlines with increasing regularity. Furthermore, although area news items published in both the city and the out of town editions of the *Times Union* were identical, their headlines were not. City editions headed stories about POW camps in Western New York with the term "Nazi" much more frequently than their out of town counterparts. Subtle inferences in story selectivity and headline phrasing contributed to Rochesterians' ambivalent feelings about enemy captives in this country, and it is no wonder that paranoia pervaded the community during 1944 in spite of continuing Allied successes in Europe.

On May 11, 1944, Rochesterians learned that German captives had been requested to replace the Italian co-belligerents whom the Army planned to form into non-combat units. By the 18th, a large contingent of captives from Rommel's troops were encamped at Pine Camp. These men, it was planned, would be divided into smaller units and transported to nine branch work camps throughout Western New York as had happened the previous fall. But before that happened, each camp required the construction of an additional security structure, a stockade built to Army specifications, the cost of which was borne by the cooperatives benefiting from the prisoner labor. Throughout the spring the weather cooperated so that workmen could enclose each camp within a 34-strand barbed wire fence reaching eight feet into the air. The barrier extended two feet below ground surface, and three additional feet of barbed wire angled into the compound at the top. Strategically placed guard towers and floodlights changed the complexion of the once minimum security facilities. Guard assignments, made negligible when Italy had become an ally, had to be multiplied.

Cobbs Hill was one of the last converted installations to house the Italian internees; they returned to Pine Camp on June 8. During the next two weeks, the perimeter of the military police



*Prisoners of war housed at Hamlin were put to work on farms around the city. Gannett Newspapers.*

compound and the living facilities were expanded to accommodate an expected 100-prisoner contingent. On June 26, Rochesterians glimpsed their first photograph of the German POWs at work and read in the *Times-Union*, "The entire contingent was moved into this area yesterday....They were under guard of a host of military police who accompanied them here in addition to the MP's available at Cobbs Hill." *Times-Union*, 26 June 1944. During the next four months, the German prisoners were assigned to the same work routines that their Italian counterparts had experienced. No sit-down strike, attempted escape, or act of sabotage occurred during that time. However, the summer of 1944 was one of tension. Although they were model prisoners, the Germans did one disruptive thing—they sang. And they sang well.

It wasn't as if forming a male chorus was an activity unique to Cobbs Hill. At all camps throughout the U.S., Army programmers capitalized on the captives' musical inclinations by providing instruments and by introducing them to American musical forms. The Americanization process was secret though, and community leaders were unaware of its official source. So the songs that the Cobbs Hill neighborhood heard drifting from the camp on summer evenings echoed sounds that were common to all POW camps in this country.

The singing must have begun almost as soon as the prisoners moved in, for two days after the Independence Day celebration

that year, the City Council met to discuss the War Department's plea to restrict civilian use of Norris Street and Cobbs Hill Drive which bordered the encampment. Several citizens had begun to visit the stockade nightly to listen to the impromptu concerts. And assuming that the same liberal conditions which had applied to the previous tenants still obtained, many of the citizens attempted to communicate with the young men, some bringing cigarettes and food bundles as they had just a few weeks previously. Reluctant to curtail civilian use of city park land any further, the Council proposed that "No Loitering" signs be erected around the compound rather than sealing the area off.

That solution did not satisfy the Army who, while not wishing to offend civilians either, wanted to insure that no contact was made between them and the prisoners. For the first time a complaint was made that city land leased ostensibly to house a military police barracks was being used to house enemy aliens "within a stone's throw" of the community's principal reservoir. Furthermore, the compound was in proximity to some important war industries and bordered "one of Rochester's best residential sections."<sup>4</sup> *Times-Union*, 10 July. At first, Major John Doyle, Provost Marshal for Rochester, represented the Army, and City Manager Louis B. Cartwright negotiated for the city. As the argument escalated, however, Col. McDowell, who had shown himself capable of putting down a number of prisoner rebellions, became the military spokesman. And Mayor Samuel Dicker took the city's position in the debate. The *Times-Union* entered the argument on July 18 in an editorial urging reassessment of municipal defense priorities. Vicemayor Frank Van Lare took charge of a search for another, more suitable site for the POW camp, one "where neighborhood disfavor won't be aroused."<sup>5</sup> *Times-Union*, 18 July 1944. It is interesting to note that as the Army arbitrators moved upward in the chain of command, the city's moved downward.

An alternative site for the Cobbs Hill prison camp, the abandoned Municipal Hospital on Waring Road, was not reported on for over a month, and the Army promptly rejected it as being too costly to prepare satisfactorily. Besides, materials essential for the project were in short supply because of the war. The city counterproposed that the prisoners be transferred to the Hamlin Beach site where an existing POW camp had space for the additional population. Again, Col. McDowell dismissed the suggestion as impractical. The Cobbs Hill contingent worked on farms and in industries east of the city; transportation from Hamlin would waste precious gasoline as well as time. In addition,

disposition of prisoners at the Hamlin camp was under the direction of the Hamlin Association of Growers and processors; the Army could not usurp their authority.

But during that five-week search, events at the Hill became explosive. Nearly 200 people gathered every night to get a glimpse of, to try to communicate with, and to enjoy the vocalizing of the German prisoners. In contrast to the previous year, the weather of the summer of 1944 drew neighborhood residents to the park. Even without the camp, they would have gathered there often in the cool of the evening to gain relief from stiflingly hot, dry days. The climax occurred on Sunday evening, August 13 when a squad of police was summoned from the University Station to quell a disturbance that had erupted when soldiers intermingled with civilian spectators, and the ensuing arguments turned physical. "Fist fights started....Joseph Sauer...and his son, Frederick...were beaten up by soldiers....[When police arrived at the scene] Mrs. Sauer was swinging her pocketbook at a soldier."<sup>6</sup> *Times-Union*, 14 August 1944. Spectators continued to congregate at the park in spite of, or perhaps because of, the conflict, and so did soldiers, both groups increasingly short-tempered. The authorities were at an impasse: the city stood on principle, demanding that the Army honor the lease provisions for MP facilities; the Army insisted that policing the area outside the stockade was a municipal responsibility.

Finally, the City Council accepted a one-sided compromise on August 30: the prisoners could remain at the Hill until October 31 when the canning season concluded. Five days later soldiers solved the nightly concert problem. Manning a convoy of Army trucks positioned on Norris Street, they raced their motors until the singers gave up and the spectators went home. Longer, cooler fall evenings helped to end the friction and further concerts as well. Official tempers flared briefly again at the end of October when the Army hinted that prisoner removal might be delayed. Finally, on November 1, the last of the 1944 German prisoners vacated the Cobbs Hill barracks. Tensions eased, but news articles throughout the remainder of the year indicated that civic authorities could not relax completely. The Army still held the lease to the Cobbs Hill compound, the contract for the 230-man German POW facility at Hamlin was extended into 1945, and farmers were already requesting that prisoner laborers be made available for the new year.

Local weather, never forecasted since detailed reports might aid a possible enemy attack, had been a subtle but potent factor in events concerning Cobbs Hill during 1943 and 1944. Rain and

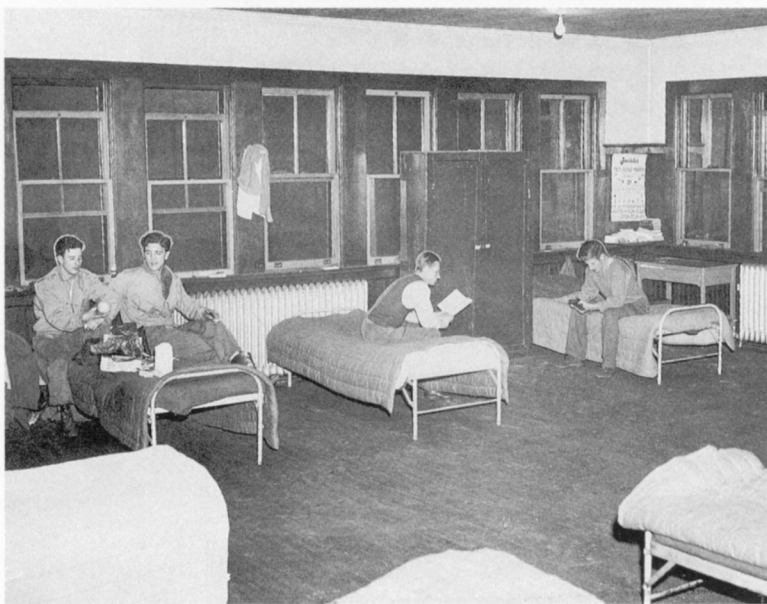
cold had delayed the growing season and severely limited the harvest the first year. Thus the Italian POW contingent had not arrived until the cool fall, just in time to avert massive crop waste and just before the captives turned from enemies into allies. Hot, dry conditions the following year allowed farmers to plant increased acreage and multiplied crop yields in Western New York, making necessary the presence of German prisoner labor early and throughout the summer. Sweltering summer evenings encouraged people to use park facilities more, increasing contact between civilians and captives and soldiers on leave. In 1945, Rochester weather again became a major factor in bringing prisoners of war back to the Cobbs Hill facility.

The winter of 1944–45 contrasted sharply with the previous summer. By February 1, six successive storms had all but paralyzed the city. The New York State Guard arrived to help unclog rail yards where frozen freight cars of essential war materials sat. Mountains of snow covered coal, at that time a major source of heat, power, and transportation, would last ten days at most—provided streets could be cleared enough to get it from coal yards to where it was needed. Because stalled transportation halted food shipments across the state, the Army stationed in Rochester contributed part of its milk stores for distribution to families with babies. The repeated storms delayed collections of household garbage and ash residue from burned coal. The possibility of reimporting German POWs from their quarters at the Hamlin facility to help in the emergency was again considered. The Babcock Coal Company was already using eight captives to facilitate its deliveries, and the War Manpower Commission agreed to provide 27 more for work at the Merchants Despatch Transportation Co. at East Rochester. But unpleasant memories of the summer tension persisted.

By Saturday, February 3, the Rochester City Council ordered all places of amusement closed for four days to conserve fuel, and City Manager Cartwright enthusiastically endorsed the use of prisoners from the Hamlin camp for the duration of the emergency. The authorities reluctantly considered relocating them at the Cobbs Hill facilities. This time, Mayor Dicker voluntarily stayed out of the controversy. Two days later, Cartwright begged the Army for prisoners, hoping either that they commute daily from Hamlin in trucks or that a larger facility could be constructed to house hundreds of them at Edgerton Park. The Army, still under Col. McDowell's command in the matter of prisoners of war, delayed its authorization of their use until it was satisfied that the camp facilities were suitable and that the city was sincere in its request. As the week progressed, bus and subway routes

bogged down, fuel oil supplies dwindled, and the amusement ban was extended through Friday. By Wednesday, Col. McDowell offered to supply 175 German PWs and 50 guards at the Edgerton site and another 100 prisoners at the existing compound at Cobbs Hill provided that Rochester authorities would commit the agreement to writing. Civic officials agreed "so long as we get them here fast." *Times-Union*, 9 February 1944. On Friday, Cartwright signed an eight-week contract for the 100 prisoners to be housed at Cobbs Hill. Their ranks would be supplemented by other prisoners trucked in from Hamlin. While the Army firmly dictated the terms of prisoner housing, civilian authorities could terminate the agreement with one day's notice.

On Saturday, February 10, city police set up barricades to seal off unannounced locations where contingents of young German prisoners began shoveling Rochester out of its crusty snow cover. Their work began, understandably, near hospitals, but areas scheduled to be cleared by the work crews were kept secret. Both the Army and civic leaders warned civilians not to congregate near the work sites and to avoid any contact with the shovelers. Private photographs of the captives were forbidden, and film



*After the war, the prisoner of war barracks were converted to apartments. A housing shortage developed as servicemen returned. Gannett Newspapers.*

was confiscated from cameras when that rule was violated. The MPs held responsibility for controlling prisoner behavior; the city police were responsible for civilian behavior. A week later buildings at Edgerton Park were being renovated at municipal expense for another 175-man contingent expected to move in by the end of February, but a thaw on the 24th diminished the need for the additional manpower. Continued snow removal efforts and improving weather conditions brought the emergency to an end, and the prisoners of war returned to Fort Niagara on March 10. This time, Rochester's experience with the enemy captives contrasted with what it had been a few months before; official statements reported in the newspapers were appreciative, and letters to the editor anticipated the need to import prisoner labor for the 1945 agriculture season in much more positive terms. Only the American Legion, which had adamantly opposed the local housing of prisoners during the summer of 1944, continued its opposition.

V-E Day on May 8, 1945, ended the dispute. The demand for manpower became manageable, and the barracks at Cobbs Hill remained vacant that summer. Rochesterians could refocus their attention on helping to win the war against Japan. Their senses of loyalty and hospitality would not conflict again.

*Terry Lehr is the assistant curator of the Baker-Cederberg Museum & Archives of Rochester General Hospital and an instructor in the English Department at SUNY Brockport.*

## End Notes

1. *Times Union*, 29 September 1943.
2. Interview with Bill Bierly, 9 February 1992.
3. *Times-Union*, 26 June 1944.
4. *Times-Union*, 10 July 1944.
5. *Times-Union*, 18 July 1944.
6. *Times-Union*, 14 August 1944.
7. *Times-Union*, 9 February 1944.





*David Hochstein in 1917. Courtesy  
Vincent Lenti.*

## **David Hochstein**

American author, Willa Cather, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her 1922 novel, *One of Ours*. An important character in this World War I story is David Gerhardt, a violinist who finds himself as a Lieutenant in the American Army. Gerhardt's death is recorded near the end of her novel in these words:

They were running together across the open, not able to see much for smoke. They bumped into a section of wire entanglement, left above an old trench. David cut round to the right, waving Hicks to follow him. The two were not ten yards apart when the shell struck. Then Sergeant Hicks ran on alone.

In later years, Cather admitted that the model for David Gerhardt had been Rochester violinist, David Hochstein, whose life ended in an all-too-real artillery barrage on the fifteenth of October in 1918. Hochstein was twenty-five years old and died less than a month before the General Armistice finally put an end to the senseless slaughter. His death came as an overwhelming shock to Rochesterians and others, who grieved over the loss of a fine young man and a musician of unquestionable genius. His standing as the finest musician ever produced by our area may well be preserved to this day, and his memory is perpetuated by a fine community music school which bears his name.

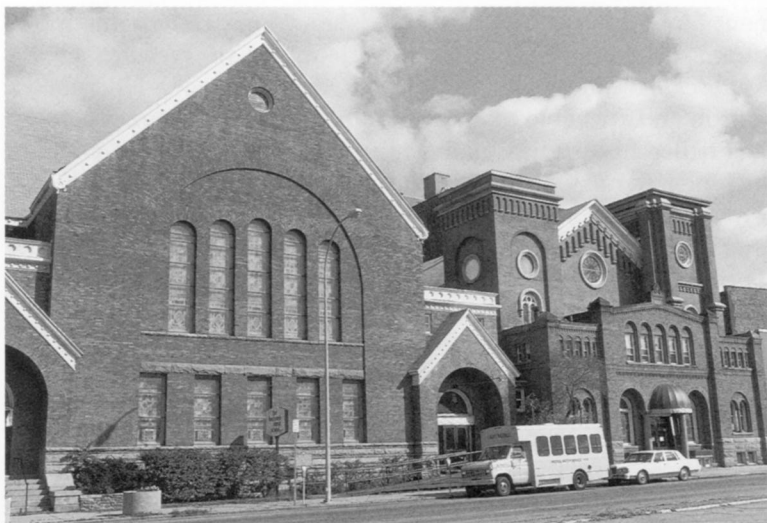
David Hochstein was born on February 16, 1892, the third child of Jacob and Helena Hochstein. Showing an unusual talent for music at an early age, he was sent to Ludwig Schenck for violin lessons. Schenck was one of the "musical institutions" in turn-of-the-century Rochester. Conductor-founder of the Rochester Symphony and music teacher at East High School, he was an extremely capable violinist who had received his own training under the master-teacher, Otakar Sevcik. Upon graduating from School No.9, young David entered East High School in 1905 and joined the school orchestra, of which he soon became concert master. In an early Senior Annual there is a picture of the orchestra personnel somewhat dominated by a serious and mature-looking David Hochstein seated to the right of a very stern-looking Schenck. Perhaps at Schenck's suggestion, Hochstein made a change in his violin teacher at this time by beginning to work with Aloys Trnka. Trnka was American-born of Bohemian parents and, like Schenck, had studied with Sevcik. He was in Rochester for only three years before departing for New York, and his own career as a teacher and violinist was cut short by a tragically early death in 1923. His Rochester years were characterized either by difficulty in finding an adequate studio for his work or by being a difficult tenant. Each of his three years saw him at a different address, and we can presume that his young student, David, took lessons at each and every one of these shifting locations. Evidence of Hochstein's progress with Trnka is clear from the fact that he appeared for the first time in New York City on February 10, 1908, playing a modest recital in Carnegie Chamber Music Hall.

Hochstein's East High School days were of great importance to his future. He befriended John Adams Warner, a highly gifted pianist who was the son of Rochester architect, J. Foster Warner. Adams' subsequent career makes an interesting story in itself. After graduating from Harvard 1909, he spent considerable time studying music in Europe, working with such major teachers as Buonamici in Italy and Godowsky in Innsbruck, and also studying organ with Charles-Marie Widor. But he abandoned a promising music career in 1917 to become the fourth man to join the newly formed New York State Police. Six years later he was appointed Superintendent, and in 1927 he married Governor Al Smith's daughter. Although his law enforcement career extended for more than a quarter century, Warner never abandoned the piano and continued to perform upon occasion. Hochstein's friendship with John Adams Warner was of importance to him since the Warners were among Rochester's socially most promi-

nent families. Through this friendship young David was introduced to Emily Sibley Watson, daughter of Western Union founder, Hiram Sibley. Mrs. Sibley Watson became Hochstein's patron and was able to assist him in securing support necessary to further his studies in the future, support which eventually included the assistance of George Eastman. With Schenck and Trnka both having been trained by Sevcik, it was only natural that the decision was made for Hochstein to also go to the European master to continue his studies. Accordingly, he left for Vienna in the fall of 1909 to become one of ten students in the violin class at the *Meisterschule* taught by Otakar Sevcik. Of the 902 students enrolled at the *Vienna Akademie* that year, only twelve were American.

During Hochstein's two years as a student there, we know of thirteen performances he gave, including four public concerts and nine school concerts. His first appearance was on Thursday, November 18, 1909, when he played first violin in a performance of Mozart's *Quartet, K.428*. At the end of January 1910, he made his first public appearance, performing the opening movement of Paganini's *Concerto in D*. There were five concert appearances that initial school year, the last one occurring on May 19 when he performed the Goldmark *Suite in E* with pianist Hans Ebell. A true friendship with Ebell must have developed for the two appeared together professionally in later years. Ebell was four years older than Hochstein and had received his pianistic training from Sergei Rachmaninoff and Josef Hoffman before going to Vienna to continue his work with Leopold Godowsky. Hochstein's second year in Vienna saw him appear in a total of eight public and school concerts, performing chamber music and sonatas of Brahms, Beethoven, Schubert, and others. In all of his chamber music performances, there was never a time when David Hochstein played anything but first violin. When he graduated at the end of the 1910-1911 school year, he became the first student in history to win both the *One Thousand Crown Award* and the *First State Prize*.

During the summer months of 1911 Hochstein went to Loschwitz, near Dresden, to study with Leopold Auer, perhaps the greatest violin teacher of all time. In the late fall, however, he was back with Sevcik and went to London with five other students to appear in a special concerto program in Queen's Hall. Local commentators praised his "highly developed technique" in describing his performance of the Paganini *Concerto*, and declared that his reading of the opening movement of Beethoven's *Concerto* was "very finished and musical." Six days later, Hochstein had the added honor of presenting a solo recital



*The Hochstein Music School at 50 N. Plymouth Avenue perpetuates the memory of David Hochstein. Courtesy Hochstein Music School.*

in Beckstein Hall. Prior to the two performances, an overly nervous Sevcik had written to a friend of his that "Hochstein will shortly play before a London audience, and I hope he will not disgrace Mr. Trnka or myself." There was apparently no need for such concern since both performances were extremely well-received.

Following the London concerts, the young American violinist, not yet twenty years old, returned to Rochester to visit with his family. On April 30, 1912, he gave a brilliant recital in Convention Hall with his friend, John Adams Warner, as collaborator and accompanist. Illness, however, intervened at this point of his life when he was diagnosed as having tuberculosis, and he was sent to a sanitarium for six months. In the fall of 1913, completely recovered, Hochstein left for St. Petersburg to resume study with Leopold Auer, a move which may have been encouraged by his friend Hans Ebell who was a native of St. Petersburg. Not much is known of this time in Hochstein's life, but a later (1917) periodical reference indicated that he "gave public recitals and was featured as a soloist with symphony orchestras in Vienna, Petrograd, Dresden, Berlin, London, and other European cities." However, some of these cited performances may have dated from his student days in Vienna.

In December 1914, Hochstein was back in Rochester appearing as soloist in the Bruch *Fantasia* with the Rochester Orchestra

under Hermann Dossenbach. A more important event, however, occurred on January 15, 1915 when he made his official New York City debut. The critics were unanimous in their praise, particularly for his performance of Bach's *G Minor Sonata*, the *New York Times* commenting that "so clean and finished an execution is not often heard except from players of acknowledged standing in the artistic world." The New York recital was followed four days later by one in Boston which was equally well-praised. The *Boston Transcript* declared that his performance "gave good reasons for large expectations of him in the future." In June of the same year there was another Rochester recital, this one being a musicale for East High School students on June 8, presented with his friend, John Adams Warner.

In September of 1915 Hochstein established a residence in New York City, but accepted a one-year appointment to the faculty of the D.K.G. Institute of Musical Art in Rochester. This fledgling music school had been founded a few years previously by Alf Klingenberg, a Norwegian pianist and teacher of considerable distinction, in collaboration with Hermann Dossenbach, the local violinist and conductor. A third partner, singer Oscar Gareissen, soon joined Dossenbach and Klingenberg in this educational endeavor, hence the initials D.K.G. for the surnames of the three partners. The music school attracted a somewhat distinguished faculty but was never on a sound financial footing. It was this school which George Eastman purchased in 1918, leading to the establishment of the Eastman School of Music, as successor to the Institute, in 1921.

Despite his acceptance of an appointment to the faculty of the D.K.G. Institute, the major focus of the 1915–1916 season was not teaching but performing, since this was to be time of major effort in launching a career as a concert violinist. Within a short while Hochstein made two recordings (10" Emerson discs) and had four compositions and arrangements published by Carl Fischer of New York. These efforts, however, were probably of somewhat minimal importance or benefit to his career. In an age prior to radio, television, and long-playing records, and compact discs—and one without the benefits of fast air travel—musicians' reputations and career were made only through many recital and concert appearances which gradually won them recognition and respect. One vehicle for a young artist such as Hochstein was to appear as an "assisting artist" to a more established and well-known performer. In this role, someone like Hochstein could be given the opportunity of playing a few solos on what was essentially someone else's recital. In this type of role, David Hochstein gained both experience and public exposure over the next two

seasons by appearing with such artists as well-known Italian baritone Pasquale Amato and tenor Giovanni Martinelli.

In addition to these assisting roles, the young American violinist had opportunities for concerto performances and recitals of his own. Early in the 1915–1916 season, he was soloist with the Orchestral Society of New York in a performance of the Tchaikovsky *Concerto* and presented his second Boston recital on November 15, 1915. The program was repeated in New York four days later, at which time the *New York Times* declared him to be “a most artistic and thoroughly satisfying violinist”, and this was followed by a Chicago recital on December 5 for which the *Examiner* predicted that “he will be one of the most striking figures of the concert hall.” After his Chicago triumph he returned to New York and appeared with other artists at the home of John Jacob Astor in a benefit for the Serbian Relief Fund, and following the holidays he once again appeared with the Rochester Orchestra performance the Tchaikovsky *Concerto*. The spring months saw him in a variety of places including a recital at Radcliffe College on March 29; an appearance with soprano May Peterson in Middletown, Connecticut on April 6; soloist with the Nylic Association in New York’s Aeolian Hall on April 29; and soloist with the Festival Chorus in Elizabeth, New Jersey on May 15.

The 1916–1917 season was highlighted by his third consecutive New York recital which was described by the *New York Times* as being “one of remarkable excellence.” In February he was joined by his old friend Hans Ebell for a recital in Buffalo, and later in the month was in Texas as assisting artist to Julia Culp. Then in March he had the great pleasure of performing from the stage of the old Metropolitan Opera House in New York, where he appeared with the well-known opera singers, Margarete Matzenauer and Lucca Botta. In early April he assisted Amy Castles in a Carnegie Hall recital, and the *New York Times* commented that he was “an excellent violinist whose style is sound and substantial, his technique very trustworthy, his tone extremely full and beautiful.” These and other performances were slowly building his reputation as a remarkable young violinist.

The 1917–1918 season could have brought him even greater triumphs and accomplishments, but instead set the stage for tragedy. Despite an initial exemption from military service, David Hochstein enlisted in the Army, and on October 1 he was assigned to Headquarters Company, 306th Infantry Division and sent to Camp Upton on Long Island for basic training. Army life did not prevent him from attending, along with scores of other

violinists, the sensational New York debut of Jascha Heifetz on October 27. In addition, there was time for some additional concert appearances of his own. In December, eight days before Christmas, he returned to Rochester to play the Mendelssohn *Concerto*. The *Rochester Herald* declared that "in Rochester, his former home, he is held in a jealous regard that places him at least on a par with the greatest in his field, not excepting Kriesler, Elman, or Kubelik." He repeated the Mendelssohn *Concerto* in Carnegie Hall with the Philharmonic Society of New York on January 9, 1918, probably his last concerto performance.

On March 9 he was travelling from Camp Upton to Rockville Centre for a concert when the bus transporting him had an accident which resulted in severe damage to his Stradivarius violin, a priceless instrument purchased for Hochstein by George Eastman. He thought that the violin was beyond repair, and may have never known that it was, indeed, repaired and survives to this day. The apparent destruction of his violin was only a prelude to the real tragedy six months in the future. On April 15, Hochstein received his orders to proceed to France. Then, on July 24, he requested transfer to a combat unit. He was commissioned a Second Lieutenant on October 1, assigned to Major Geoffrey Baldwin's Company E, 60th Infantry Division, and in fifteen days was dead. His body was never found. His last letter to his mother contained the following:

"...those who die, be it recklessly, or by the most unexpected exploding shell, have a compensation more than a mere title of hero or a posthumous service cross. You don't try to explain it, but you know it, in France..."

Upon learning of his death, Leopold Auer declared that "...America has lost one of its finest violinists." At the time of his enlistment in the Army, however, David Hochstein's career was in its infancy, and there is really no objective means of telling what the future might have held for him. Despite his successes during the period 1915–1917, it would be fair to admit that his fellow American violinists Albert Spalding and Eddy Brown were further along in their careers. Admittedly, Spalding was older, but Eddy Brown was three years younger and had already achieved far greater recognition and success than young Hochstein. And yet, there is certainly reason to believe that David Hochstein was a remarkable talent and a musician who might have ranked among the finest of his generation had not the tragedy of war intervened. In reading his press reviews, praise for his talent and ability is widespread. Sometimes he was accused of being "cool" or "distant", but this infrequent criticism

must be taken with some suspicion since the style of playing prevalent at the time was more sentimental and romantic than that accepted by more modern tastes. Critical acclaim for Hochstein's technical mastery was virtually unanimous. In particular, there are frequent comments concerning his intonation which was apparently quite phenomenal.

Sadly, this talent would never be given the opportunity to fulfill its promise for David Hochstein was one of 512 young men from Rochester who went off to war never to return.

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## End Notes

Anyone interested in the life of David Hochstein will inevitably turn to Grace Kraut's concise biography, *An Unfinished Symphony: The Story of David Hochstein* (1980). Her fine research yielded what is probably the most complete biography which could have been written more than sixty years after Hochstein's untimely death in France. Another source of biographical information is the essay contained in *World War Service Record of Rochester and Monroe County, Volume I—Those Who Died for Us*, edited by City Historian Edward R. Foreman and published by the City of Rochester in 1924. Foreman also was the author of a short but informative essay entitled *An Appreciation of David Hochstein* which was published in the *Centennial History of Rochester, New York, Volume II* (1932). Unfortunately, there are few other sources of information readily available.

Some documentation concerning Hochstein's student days in Vienna is found in the yearbooks (*Jahresbericht*) of the *Vienna Akademie für Musik und Darstellende*. Fortunately, it was their practice to list student concert performances in these publications.

Information concerning Hochstein's brief career must be found by a painstaking examination of newspaper and periodical references to his concert appearances. Of particular value are periodicals such as *Musical America*, *Musical Courier*, and *The Strad*, as well as reviews which appeared in newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *The Democrat and Chronicle*.