

The Algona Nativity

The first one was twelve feet wide, still quite a production because Jesus, Mary, and the babe were mud-sculptured, then baked, then painstakingly painted. Back in Germany, Eduard Kaib had been an architect. That's not to say his hand-made Nativity—all of twelve feet wide—required architectural expertise. It was Christmas, 1944, and Kaib was a long, long way from home. Things just got to him; so he decided to create this most famous barnyard scene, a fully manned—and animal-ed—nativity.

Eduard Kaib was an ocean away from home that Christmas and fairly comfortable, if prison can ever be. He was in a German prisoner of war camp somewhere amid endless Iowa cornfields. Kaib and most a couple thousand others had been captured in North Africa and Italy. By early 1944, other Allied powers—England mostly, but others too—were overwhelmed with captured Gerries, or Huns, or whatever other names with which Allied forces blessed the blitzkrieg-ing enemy.

The U. S. of A. stepped up. Eventually, 425,000 captured prisoners—many German, some Japanese, some few Italian—were shipped to this country and imprisoned in as many as 400 camps, several of them—like the one at Algona, Iowa—“base camps,” home places from which gangs of prisoners could be sent out into the heartland and elsewhere, where necessary work wasn't getting done. Eleven percent of all Americans—every color, every gender, every last hometown—were gone serving the nation during World War II, 16 million Americans out of the work force.

Across the land, agriculture alone required perspiration that wasn't being spent. Emergency cleanups from tornadoes to earthquakes, from fires and to floods, kept thousands of German prisoners busy throughout the country.

This side of the Atlantic, POWs got work done that otherwise wouldn't have been.

Eduard Kaib was an officer and therefore had special privileges that allowed him time to create that creche. In all likelihood, Kaib knew that were he not in Iowa, he would have spent the winter in Belgium, carrying out Hitler's last daring offensive, the Battle of the Bulge. Worse, he could have been frozen stiff or dead on the Eastern Front, where two million Germans were killed, thirty million people in all. In December of '44, Algona was a warm blessing.

The Camp Commander, Lt Col Arthur Lobdell, took one look at Kaib's twelve-foot nativity arrangement, smiled, and told Kaib that what he should do next was create was something a good deal bigger.

Most American homes this holiday season will have at least one nativity set. Some are beautifully hand-carved; some are tall silhouettes; some, set on music boxes, pipe their own beloved carols. Some are African or Hispanic or Native American. Some feature leprechauns. Some are tiny. Many are huge, life size, some bigger; some are accented in 24-carat gold. Check out Walmart sometime—they likely stock a dozen or more. These days, some churches do them live.

Pardon my insistence, but Algona's POW Nativity is somehow something else altogether. It's not just the concrete on chicken wire, not just the hand-painted-ness. Algona's Nativity is not the biggest or the most expensive or even the most lifelike. I'm not at all sure anyone would call it art.

But unlike any other creche I know of, the love story so divinely celebrated in this monumental barnyard moment begins, as impossible as it may seem, with hate and death. This nativity was sculpted from a whole world war of destruction, sadness, and grief. That's its amazing genesis.

What the Algona Nativity so conspicuously displays, even in its story, is the beloved mystery of the Christmas miracle, a story of hope drawn by a single line of the visions of a prophet named Isaiah—"a little child will lead them." It's that mad and that beautiful and still that simple.