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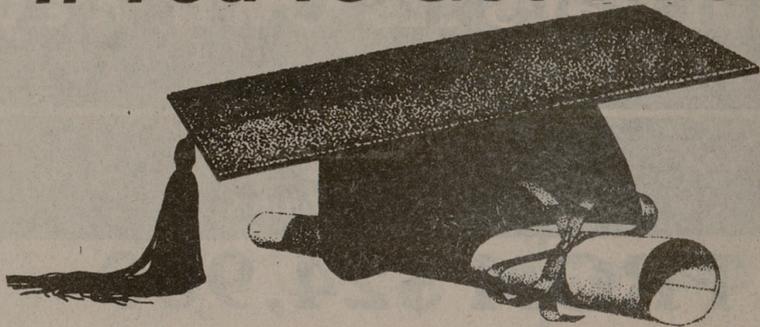
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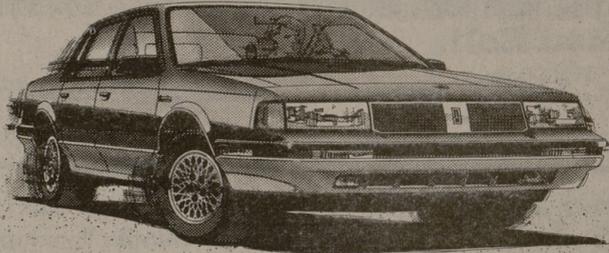
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40 former POWs return to camp to attend Mass

UMBARGER (AP) — After leaving this country as prisoners of World War II more than 40 years ago, a group of Italian soldiers interned at a nearby POW camp were welcomed as friends to a Mass celebrated here Sunday in honor of their dead comrades.

As part of a visit to the area where they once were held captive, the former POWs celebrated Mass in a church their fellow prisoners decorated during their internment with painted wall murals.

"The work that is in this church has been such a constant presence to us that when we see it we think of you with love," the Rev. Richard Sonderman of St. Mary's Catholic Church told the group.

Cameras flashed and video cameras recorded the paintings as the group of about 40 ex-POWs and their families viewed the handiwork of nine of their comrades, who volunteered in 1945 to decorate the interior of the small stucco church.

Only two of the artists who were brought daily from the POW camp at Hereford, 10 miles to the southwest, to work at the church still are living, and only one of those made the journey, retired Brig. Gen. Franco Di Bello.

"My soul is overwhelmed with emotion in coming here today," Di Bello said.

A resident of Pordenone, Italy, Di Bello described to parishioners, some of whom he has corresponded with for years after forging friendships in the 1940s, how the walls of their church came to be decorated with pastel-toned paintings of religious symbols and geometric designs.

A 23-year-old lieutenant at the time of his capture by Allied forces in Tunisia in 1943, Di Bello was one of about 6,000 soldiers held at the Hereford camp from 1944 to 1946.

After the priest at St. Mary's ad-

mired artwork done by the prisoners, he arranged for Di Bello and the others to design and paint the murals.

The Italians agreed to do work on condition that they be paid and that U.S. officials understood that they were not cooperating with the government.

The principal artist, Dino Gabetti, is in poor health and could make the journey to see how work has withstood 40 years, Bello said.

Using a book as a copy, Gabetti and the others painted the scenes of Christ on canvas behind the altar along with two flanking murals. One soldier executed a woodcarving in the front of the communion table.

On Saturday, the group of 40 men visited the site of the 7000 POW camp, dismantled in 1948 except for a chapel built by the prisoners in honor of five soldiers who died at the camp.

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