

8

Nazis on the Homefront

Boise Valley farmers enlisted prisoners of war.

by Susan Hook

By December 11, 1941, when the United States entered World War II, tens of thousands of German and Italian soldiers had already been captured in combat. America rushed in to relieve the overcrowding. Troop ships returned from Britain with more than 400,000 enemy combatants. Hundreds of prison compounds and camps sent inmates into the agricultural fields during a time of extreme labor shortage. Prison labor was especially welcome in the Boise Valley. Boise Valley crops—especially the sugar used to make explosives—had become vital munitions of war.

Base camps, 175 of them, popped up across the United States, in every state except Vermont, Nevada, and North Dakota. Smaller branch camps, 511 of them, reported to these main camps. It was more efficient to house the prisoners closer to the farms that needed the labor.

In the Northwest, the U.S. Army built Camp Rupert near Paul, Idaho, to oversee a network of 23 small branch camps in Idaho, Utah, and Montana that eventually held 15,000 Italian and German prisoners of war (POWs). Base Camp Rupert resembled a small city, with its 172 buildings, including barracks, mess halls, a hospital, and a church. Workers built smaller Idaho branch camps in Aberdeen, Blackfoot, Emmett, Filer, Franklin, Gooding, Idaho Falls, Marsing, Nampa, Payette, Pocatello, Preston, Rigby, Shelley, Sugar City, Thomas, Upper Deer Flat, and Wilder. Considered “temporary” camps that would be closed during the winter, the branch camps consisted mostly of tents. Groups of farmers and sugar companies built many of them.

The Upper Deer Flat Labor Association constructed the Upper Deer Flat Branch Camp on the Swartz farm south of Nampa and began housing prisoners in May 1945. Tents were used as barracks. Each of the six-man tents held seven prisoners. The overcrowding was explained away to the Red Cross inspector by the “temporary” placement of an additional 50 prisoners at the camp. A 220 × 330 foot barbed-wire fence enclosed the camp. Inside this restricted area stood a kitchen/mess hall (150 × 20 ft.), bathhouse (20 × 50 ft.), and pit latrine (20 × 30 ft.). Well water was supplied by the Upper Deer Flat Labor Association. Open ditches drained into an irrigation canal.

time. I was on my way to Africa and after a stop in Naples, we finally joined the Africa Korps. On May 1943, the war in Africa was over, and after weeks of misery Americans took over and shipped most of us to the U.S.A. We landed in Norfolk, Va. and soon found ourselves in a POW camp in Tonkawa, Oklahoma. I spent three years, mostly in the west, in different locations (Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, Oregon, Washington and Idaho). I was, may b

	13. 5. 43	GEFANGENNAHME	
	5. 6. "	TUNIS	
	13. 6. "	SOUKH EL CEMIS	
	14. 6. "	BDNE	US troops train for the campaign in Africa.
	3. 8. "	ABF. N. U.S.A.	
	27. 8. "	ANK. " "	
	30. 8. "	TONKAWA (OKLA.)	
	27. 5. 44	HASKEL "	
	8. 4.	MC. ALLESTER "	
	8. "	WETUMKA "	
	3. 10. "	GRUBER "	
	17. 10. "	LORDSBURG (N.M.)	
	30. 5. 45	ELOY (ARIZ.)	
	9. 5. "		
	12. 6. 45	PT. LEWIS (WASH.)	
	20. 6. "		
	20. 6. "	ADAIR (ORE.)	
	20. 4. 46	NYSSA (")	

more than 150,000 POWs lived in the US after surrender of General Rommel's Africa Korps.



©BRIGITTE CARNOCHAN 2008

The Franklin Farm Labor Association built a second branch camp in Nampa, located on Franklin Boulevard about a half mile north of Ustick on the east side of the road. The army described it as “5 miles north of the town of Nampa in the heart of the Snake River Irrigation District.” Accepting prisoners beginning in May 1945, this camp consisted of 45 six-man tents housing 260 prisoners in a fenced area 337 × 280 feet. A single-strand barbed wire with an overhang encircled the camp.

Local farmers built the Emmett Branch Camp to hold a few hundred POWs. Farmer Wayne Harper noted that it was constructed on Main Street in Emmett.

As a nod to the labor unions, applicant farmers submitted paperwork detailing their need to use the prisoners for labor and stating that no other labor was available. The War Department required farmers to pay the same rate they would have paid civilian laborers had they been available. This rate was “the difference between the prisoners’ 80 cents (paid by the government), and the standard daily wage after deducting the employers’ cost of transportation, housing, and security.”

The money went directly to the U.S. Treasury and became a source of profit for the U.S. government. Months before the end of the farm labor program and the repatriation of the POWs, Lieutenant General Blackshear M. Bryan, the head of the War Department Prisoner of War Division, announced to Congress that as of June 1945, the government had profited by \$22 million.

The Upper Deer Flat and Franklin Labor Associations contracted with the government for 10,125 man-days of POW labor between May 10 and June 30, 1945, for the following work:

Beets – thinning	\$10 seg – \$12 reg	.4–.5 acre
Beets – hoeing	1st \$4 – 2nd \$2.50	1.25 acre
Onions – weeding	\$25–\$15–\$10	.2–.3–.5
Lettuce – thinning	\$10 acre	.5 acre
Potatoes – veg seed hoeing	60 cents/hour	
Cleaning irrigation ditches	60 cents/hour	



U.S. ARMY

General Blackshear Bryan commanded the U.S. Army’s Prisoner of War Division.



W. C. SCHROEDER

Few of the guards spoke German, so prisoners received handouts in German and English with instructions on how to work the crops. Amalgamated Sugar also produced a training film.

Guard keeps watch as prisoner works in the field.

Even tiny Fruitland had a small temporary POW camp that held no more than two dozen POWs in a corner of the city park. In an oral history recorded for the Idaho Historical Society in 1995, farmer Albert Naher of Fruitland remembered his first encounter with the prisoners who were there to help him thin his apples. “We got the ladders June the 29th so they—Yeah. They came June the 30th, 24 in a truck with a guard.” The guard told Naher, “They’re from the Africa Corps, the North Africa Corps. These guys are tough. They’re rough.” The guard instructed Naher not to give them anything. “Just do your business,” the guard said. “Tell them what to do and not what to do . . . and just kind of stay away.” A German sergeant accompanied the prisoners. It was the sergeant rather than the guard (who didn’t speak German) who controlled the prisoners. “The Sergeant barked out an order and they fell into formation,” Naher said. “They didn’t walk down the orchard. They fell into a formation, and they marched.”



GERMAN FEDERAL ARCHIVE

Infantryman of the Africa Corps with sand goggles and a dust cloth over his face.



During wartime, women helped with the harvest.

Because Naher spoke German from childhood, he had friendly conversations with the prisoners, even though the rules forbade it. Asked if his opinion of the prisoners changed after word got out about the concentration camps, Naher replied, “The people in this country, the ones I know, they didn’t really hate the Germans as such. They hated Hitler and his regime.” After the war, Naher’s church sponsored some refugees. Naher asked one of the refugees, Fritz Johnson, why, if he saw the concentration camps, he didn’t do something. Fritz replied, “If you complained, you wound up in there.”

Emmett farmer Wayne Harper explained that the labor shortage occurred because so many men in the community were off fighting in the war. “During the cherry harvest,” he said, “I harvested two or three years with nothing but 14-year-old to 18-year-old girls. These girls were brought over from Boise. . . . They were instructed [to] come over here and do war work. In other words, harvest the fruit. The kids found out they could make some money so they worked.” Harper insisted the German POWs worked hard. “Of course, they were good help,” he said, “because if they didn’t fulfill their quota, they slept outside in September, and were stripped without anything but a pair of shorts on. So they had to work.” Harper claimed the army enforced the rules and set the quotas. “Every man had to pick 17 boxes [of prunes]. That’s 850 pounds, which doesn’t sound like it’s an awful lot, but the orchard was old and hard to pick.”

The Geneva Convention established rules for treating prisoners humanely in the areas of housing, food, clothing, medical attention, hygiene, and even education. The War Department insisted that these rules be followed in order to protect U.S. soldiers held captive in Europe. Branch camps did not always enforce the rules. Some of the camp commanders added rules of their own. The Franklin Labor Association distributed the following rules to its members:

Supervision – Details going out for the first time must be given proper instructions on how to best work the crop so as to accomplish maximum production. The farmer or his representative must be in the field at all times.



©BRIGITTE CARNOCHAN 2008

Transportation – No prisoner will be loaded in a car or truck unless there is a seat where he can sit down. No trailers will be used which do not have brakes.

No person will be allowed to talk to the prisoners except the guard and the farmer or supervisor in charge of the work.

No women or children will be associated with the prisoners of war in any category.

Artist Brigitte Carnochan created photo memories of her father, a German soldier in Erwin Rommel's elite Africa Corps, who was captured when she was just 18 months old. He served time in Camp Rupert located near Paul, Idaho.

An army inspection report dated August 30, 1945, described the poor living conditions at the Franklin Branch Camp. Prisoners lived without electricity or hot water. “Here, as in a number of the Rupert branch camps,” the report said, “electric wires run to the compound fence but do not enter. The camp commander believed that candles were on the way, but was not sure. No hot water for bathing and washing purposes is provided. Agricultural workers, who leave the camp at 6 a.m., do not return until 7 p.m. or later.” In effect, the prisoners were never in their tents during daylight except for their one day off each week.

The report also documented the lack of other amenities. “The Canteen system is deplorable, not only due to lack of organization but also due to the scarcity of money among the prisoners.” Although prisoners were supposed to be paid 80 cents per day for their labor in canteen scrip, receipt was often delayed for weeks or months due to government red tape. Unless the prisoner could arrange credit, he could not buy soap, tobacco, needles, writing paper, or personal items that were not provided by the camp.

The same inspector reported very low morale at the Upper Deer Flat camp: “Eighteen recently refused to work, but after five days confinement and restricted diet they decided to resume labor.” Restricted diet meant bread and water only. Prisoners’ punishment was a maximum of 30 days in prison, maximum 2 weeks on bread and water. (No prisoner at the Franklin or Upper Deer Flat camps had ever been given the maximum penalty.) The report points out that guards were returned American veterans who, having seen the atrocities committed by Nazis in Europe, antagonized the entire group of prisoners under their supervision. The camp commander, Captain Michael Woronovich, also treated the prisoners poorly. He provided no recreational opportunities for the men and no electricity or candles despite saying he had requisitioned them many times. The 50 “temporary” prisoners lacked adequate shoes, blankets, and clothing. Administrators at Base Camp Rupert refused a requisition of mattresses for these men because the shipment would require a boxcar and cost \$830.



Canteen scrip was issued in denominations of 1, 5, 10, and 25 cents.

By the fall of 1945, resentment was growing among the POWs, who had expected to go home once the war was over. Germany had surrendered in May, and the Geneva Convention required repatriation. According to a *Statesman* article, lack of railway transportation caused delays in repatriation. POWs in Idaho would work until November 24, even though the contract with the labor association had expired.

The logistics of getting nearly 400,000 prisoners home, plus the scarcity of available farm laborers nationwide, caused some constituents to put pressure on Congress to not only keep the POWs in the country but also to import more prisoners being held in Europe. This never happened, however.

The last POWs left the Idaho branch camps on July 10, 1946, according to a *Statesman* article published July 11. The article bemoaned their departure: “The farm labor situation



U.S. FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

Harvesting beets

worsened as approximately 620 German prisoners of war left the Upper Deer Flat, Franklin, and Wilder camps for parts unknown.”

Treaties with some countries required that POWs be returned to France, Great Britain, and the USSR to help with reconstruction. It was 4 years before some of the prisoners that were sent to work in France and Britain could go home. One group of German POWs scheduled to be returned to the USSR was killed on the dock by the crew of the Soviet ship that was scheduled to pick them up, and the USSR kept some prisoners in forced labor for up to 10 years.

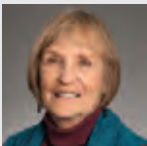


A dilapidated building is all that remains of a POW labor camp in Nyssa, Oregon.

By 1947, Camp Rupert ceased to exist. Anything that wasn't sold at auction was hauled off. The original tents and single-strand barbed wire, the latrines and mess halls are gone now. This may explain why most Idahoans don't know the camps even existed. Almost no structures remain to show where German POWs lived and worked as field hands. There's nothing to see but empty farmland and a few small subdivisions where the Franklin Branch Camp used to be. B&E Storage Rentals now occupies the site of the old Emmett Branch Camp. One of the Upper Deer Flat guard towers that survived for more than 60 years on the Swartz farm south of Nampa blew down in 2006, after being moved closer to the farmhouse and used as a playhouse for generations of Swartz children. Descendants of the same family still grow sugar beets on the farm. A small wooden structure still standing on the farm belonged to the camp, and the crumbling cement pads that sat under the prisoners' tents are now used to keep farm equipment out of the mud.

Bodies of the six German soldiers that died while captive in Idaho were initially buried at Camp Rupert, then transferred later to the Golden Gate National Cemetery in San Bruno, CA. The U.S. government offered to ship their bodies back to Germany if their families paid for it, but none could manage the expense. In the end, no prisoners who died in Idaho ever made it back to Germany.

WWII had brought the unexpected. War had brought air bases, industry, high prices, rationing, and, in Idaho, an urgent shortage of farm hands. War prisoners joined Mexicans, Japanese Americans, and local teenagers in the multicultural mobilization needed to harvest the crops. There were those who thought the prisoners pampered. Others felt ethnic kinship. In a valley where German was widely spoken and where one in five Idahoans claimed to be ethnically German, it was possible to detach the Nazi horrors from misfortune of common soldiers in global events beyond their control.



SUSAN HOOK retired from the communications industry in 2010. She graduated from Boise State University in 2015 with a degree in multidisciplinary studies and a certificate in dispute resolution.