

# Camp Sharp Park, in peace and war a forgotten part of Pacifica's past

## Vallellmar man among 600 interned at World War II detention camp

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*Editor's note: This is another in a periodic series of stories from research by the Pacifica Historical Society in preparation of material for its planned book on the history of Pacifica.*

Sixty years ago, in the spring of

1939, The Sharp Park Breakers newspaper reported that the population of "our wonderful camp" had reached a record high of 650 men.

That was Camp Sharp Park, a group of bare frame, barrack-like structures on isolated, wooded acreage which years later for a time became the Sharp Park Rifle Range near the eastern side of the golf course.

In 1939, and before, it was one of 28 such camps created to "house and feed single men eligible for direct relief" from the state of California. It was an early-day solution for the homeless and the victims of alcoholism and a depression.

The State Relief Administration camp existed quietly and on very congenial terms, apparently, with the nearby village of Sharp Park, one

mile and a half up the new Ocean Shore Highway. Leading citizens often lunched and attended other functions at Camp Sharp Park and camp residents — paid from \$2.50 to \$10 a month — worked on city streets, sometimes mingled with town residents and shopped locally. They were involved in California's major experiment to substitute the camp approach for direct relief payments.

The experiment ended with the outbreak of World War II. On April 3, 1942, The Breakers reported: "Federal authorities have taken over the former SRA camp near Sharp Park as an internment center where dangerous enemy aliens will be congregated for removal to midwest concentration camps at a later date."

Later, Deputy Sheriff Al Coe reported in the Breakers that "the Reception Center at Camp Sharp Park is securely enclosed with wire fencing and well lighted and guarded." Coe said "No aliens are allowed outside this enclosure. Residents of this locality may rest assured that all non-citizens within this area are under the eagle eye of Uncle Sam."

Over the last six decades, Camp Sharp Park, or the detention camp as it was officially known, or "the concentration camp," as it was termed by some, has faded in community awareness, as it has physically.

Many residents are still surprised to hear of the camp despite the fact that a prominent local citizen was interned in Camp Sharp Park to the shock then of many relatives and friends. The camp was equipped with cyclone fences and fine mesh wire, topped with barbed wire and flood lights.

Felix Piltz, a respected resident and businessman, a German native and citizen, who had lived in Vallellmar for many years, "suddenly disappeared," a Vallellmar neighbor, Claire Pryor, recalled, late in the war and spent much of its remainder in the camp as an alien.

His son, Frank, was in the Army Air Force at the time, and visited his dad in the camp. Frank Piltz went on to be a Naval aviator and is now living in Bellevue, Wash. "There was a great deal of wartime hysteria at the time," he said this week from Bellevue "These things happened." However, he said, his father had no contact with anyone in Germany, as some suspected. Mrs. Pryor said the sudden family misfortune was devastating to Piltz' wife, Elsie.

Frank Piltz said the "short wave radio" which his father was suspected of having and presumably using was a normal small radio with a short-wave band. He said the radio, ironically, "didn't work." Frank said he visited the FBI after the war and asked for and got the radio as a grim souvenir.

The elder Piltz and his wife both were German natives but met in New York City.

The late Bill Regan, who became the principal local law enforcement figure on the Coastside for years, got his start as a guard at the camp, working under direction of the Border Patrol, called to duty by the federal government. His son, Vern Regan, was allowed, along with other boys, to peddle newspapers to camp residents. Regan said some internees were confined along with their wives and some couples sent children to San Pedro School.

ers. Prisoners were divided into two groups

"The enemy aliens (mostly German and Japanese) were kept separate from us," he told the Tribune in a 1989 interview. "The friendly aliens were mostly seamen who had committed some minor infraction of the immigration law," he said.

MacDonald was quickly chosen camp representative and put in charge of a variety of sporting activities and entertainment.

Life was not idyllic, he said, but hardly that expected from a concentration camp, by the Nazi standard. MacDonald later joined the U.S. Army and became an automatic citizen; his Canadian citizenship was based on the fact his mother "happened to be in Canada" at the time of his birth. MacDonald returned to the Merchant Marine and lived in Pacifica after his retirement with his wife, Clara, who still resides here.

Piltz was released from the camp before war's end. Before being interned he had operated a thriving business, Vallellmar Supply Company, which produced a poultry feed augmented with limestone rock material from the Rockaway quarry which resulted in a superior "chicken grit."

Piltz, who had been a foreman at the quarry when it was running full steam, also operated a chicken farm. At its peak, his poultry feed enterprise was shipping grit by railroad through Colma to many points, including heavy loads to Hawaii. Piltz took over the former Halling Shell gas station on County Road (now Palmetto), utilizing the mechanics' underground garage pit to install a complex sorting system to produce the grit materials for various poultry needs.

—Vice President Russ Conroy and member Clara MacDonald of the Pacifica Historical Society contributed to this story.

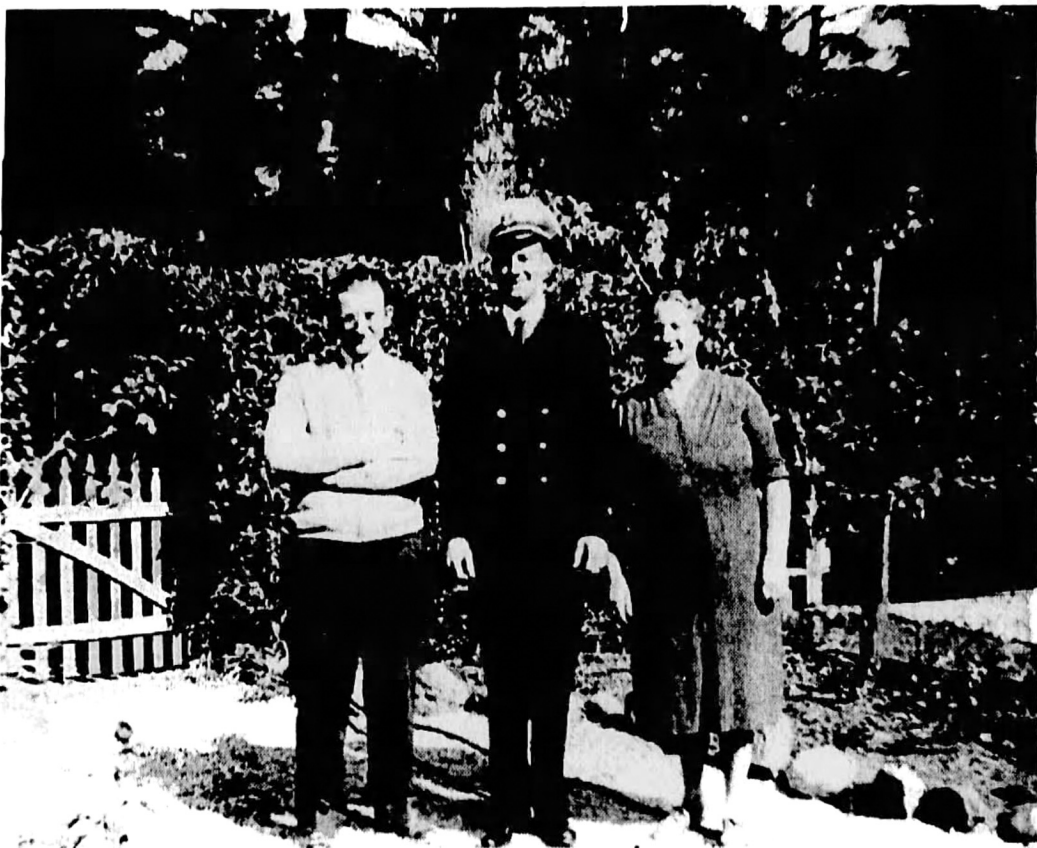


Photo courtesy of Claire Pryor

A shadow fell temporarily on Vallellmar resident Felix Piltz, left, a prominent German-born American, when he was interned at Camp Sharp Park during World War II as an alien. He is pictured here with his wife, Elsie, and son, Frank in his Army Air Force uniform.