

WWII Sharp Park: Local Residents Incarcerated

What was life like in Sharp Park and neighboring communities while the Detention Center was operating in World War II and thousands of Japanese, Italians, Germans and other foreign nationals were incarcerated there?

After the shock of the Pearl Harbor attack, coastal California was tense, on high alert for enemy attack from the Pacific. Sharp Park was no different.

Residents didn't question when the U.S. government began detaining "alien enemies" and transformed the Depression-era relief camp on City and County of San Francisco property adjacent to the golf course into a detention center. The town newspaper, The Sharp Park Breakers, assured its readers "suspicious alien enemies" were behind barbed wire fences at Sharp Park, with guards on watch towers so that neighbors need not fear.

One local, Bill Regan, a longtime law enforcement officer, served as a camp guard with other Sharp Park residents. His daughter-in-law, Lorraine Regan, grew up in Rockaway Beach during the war. She recalled in a 2024 interview with the Pacifica Historical Society that everyone in the community knew about the detention center, but people didn't talk about it much. It was war time, there was fear, and residents didn't question what the government was doing, said Regan.

Other longtime Pacificans who lived nearby during the war and interviewed by PHS had similar recollections: after Pearl Harbor, they accepted that it had to be done.

The camp soon became part of the community. Bill Regan said in a 1966 Pacifica Tribune article that the camp "was quite a place, surrounded by a cyclone fence, and well kept up." His son and other local boys biked up to the camp to deliver newspapers. Sometimes they'd get invited to eat in the mess hall. The food was pretty good, they said. There was meat, which was rationed at the time. Regan said couples who were interned sent their children to school in Sharp Park. Vegetable gardens were tended by the prisoners and, after the war, locals took plants home.

Three Local Men Detained at the Camp

At least three local men were incarcerated at Sharp Park.

One was Felix Piltz, a German who had lived in Vallemar since 1929. He was well known in the community, having worked at the quarry, sold chicken feed from quarry material. He ran the Halling Shell gas station on what is now Palmetto Avenue. He worked as a butcher at the Old County Road Market.

Why Piltz was interned is unclear. One reason may have been that he had not turned in a radio with a short-wave band as "alien enemies" were required to do. The irony, his son Frank later said, is that that radio band didn't function. Frank, who attended Sharp Park School and Jefferson High, served as a WWII Navy aviator. He visited his father in the camp on home leave. As for Felix's German-born wife Elsie, a Vallemar neighbor remembered in a Tribune article that Felix one day "disappeared" to the camp and that Elsie was "devastated." She died

a few years after the war. In 1952, Felix, a widower at age 57, took his life at his Vallemar home. He left a note saying he was lonesome and “tired of living.”

Another local man unaccountably interned was an Italian farmer in Pedro Valley, Remigio Lazzerini, another “alien enemy.” He was a neighbor of the Del Rosso and Benedetti family that had a farm on Peralta Road. PHS member Laura Del Rosso said her family visited Lazzerini regularly at the camp. According to government records, Lazzerini was released from internment after an undetermined period in August 1942. His sponsor for release was Irene Rees, who ran a dude ranch in Pedro Valley. She had to agree to report back to the government once a month about Lazzerini’s activity.

“Alien enemies” of the area lived under an 8 p.m. to 7 a.m. curfew, were constrained to a five-mile radius of their houses and had to carry pink “alien enemy” ID cards.

They were fearful that, if they were caught disobeying the restrictions, they would be thrown into the Sharp Park camp. One, Italian-born Pedro Valley farmer’s wife, Frances Malavear (of the farm that is today on the property at Linda Mar Boulevard and Sheila Lane), told the Pacifica Tribune she felt “I was house locked,” fearful of leaving the house and being apprehended for even a minor violation. The matriarch of the Pitto family, whose ranch was on today’s Perez Drive, was required to report regularly to the FBI regarding her whereabouts.

The Del Rosso family recalled visits from the FBI, their farmhouse phone being tapped, and the five-mile restriction curtailing who could transport produce to the San Francisco wholesale market. When President Roosevelt lifted restrictions against Italians on Columbus Day in October 1942, it was relief to the Italians who, although still living with the “alien enemy” stigma and suspicion of American neighbors, feel freer to move about. One Del Rosso family member, a naturalized American citizen, joined the local Civil Defense patrol that guarded the hillsides, in part to show his loyalty to his American neighbors.

The third local man was a Canadian. Daniel McDonald, a merchant marine from Nova Scotia, overextended his visa. He went to the US immigration office in San Francisco in July 1942 to apply for US citizenship (his mother was American). He told the Tribune in 1989 that he was stunned to find himself instead detained for overstaying his visa and sent to Sharp Park. He was locked up for almost 4 months. It was part of a government policy to control the number of non-Americans within US borders during the war.

McDonald said there was a group at the camp that called themselves “friendly enemies”: French, Yugoslavians, Danes, Poles and others. He was elected camp representative and organized boxing and soccer matches. Some of the men made their own alcohol. He had to play bouncer when tempers flared. Eventually, Canadian family members secured his release. McDonald then enlisted in the U.S. Army, which gave him immediate citizenship. After the war, he returned to the merchant marines. In a strange twist, McDonald later settled in Linda Mar and married Clara, a local librarian and a Pacifica Historical Society member.

--by Laura Del Rosso, PHS Board Member