

WWII Sharp Park: The Detention Camp and 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?

Wartime coastal California was tense, on high alert for enemy attack from the Pacific. When the U.S. government began detaining “alien enemies,” residents didn’t question it. 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 and others who lived nearby during the war and interviewed by PHS.

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. The daughter of one German woman who was incarcerated for months also went to school there. Vegetable gardens were tended by the prisoners and, after the war, locals took plants home.

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. 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. The irony, his son Frank later said, is that that radio band didn’t function. Frank, who attended Sharp Park School, served as a WWII Army Air Force 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. He was a friend 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. (See PHS's <https://pacificahistory.org/sp-internment-camp>). 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." The Del Rosso family recalled visits from the FBI, their phone being tapped, and restrictions curtailing who could transport produce to the San Francisco wholesale market. President Roosevelt lifted restrictions against Italians in October 1942, a relief to the Italians of the coastside.

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.

Sharp Park and neighboring Vallemar, Rockaway and Pedro Valley did not have Japanese residents, according to the 1940 census. However, south, in El Granada, Montara and the Half Moon Bay area, was a thriving Japanese community of farmers who arrived in the early 20th century. The Japanese by law were not eligible to become American citizens or own land. Thus, they leased their land.

With President Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066 on Feb. 19, 1942, the Japanese of the Coastside were forced from their homes, taken to Tanforan in San Bruno. Yunosuke Takahashi of Montara, a pioneer of the coastside flower and nursery business, was one of the few to regain his land after the war. He took in fellow internees until they could get back on their feet when released from camps (Historic Resource Study for GGNRA by Mitchell Postel, 2010). We have no information of any local Japanese residents detained at Sharp Park; most were taken to Tanforan and then forced to Manzanar, Topaz, Gila River and other camps in the U.S. interior where they were incarcerated during the war years. For more on Japanese at Sharp Park, see <https://pacificahistory.org/sp-internment-camp>

■ By Laura Del Rosso, PHS Board Member

