

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 and Sharp Park was no different. When the U.S. government began detaining “alien enemies” and transformed the Depression-era relief camp into a detention center, 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. Other longtime Pacificans who lived nearby during the war and interviewed by PHS had similar recollections: after the shock of 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. 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.

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. 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.

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 farmhouse phone being tapped, and restrictions 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, feel freer to move about.

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.

Nearby Japanese Communities South of Sharp Park

Sharp Park and neighboring neighborhoods that are today Pacifica did not have a Japanese community, according to the 1940 census.

However, south, in El Granada, Montara, Half Moon Bay and Pescadero, there were thriving Japanese farmers who had arrived in the early 20th century. Because Japanese by law were not eligible to become American citizens or own land (laws that were not lifted until 1952), most were forced to lease their land and rent their homes.

Still, the Japanese had found success. Pescadero's Japanese residents had an Asian market, a judo school, a Buddhist Temple and a Japanese language and cultural center, according to Marie Baca, an El Granada-based journalist who did extensive research on the San Mateo County coast's Japanese community for the Half Moon Bay Review (Dec. 30, 2015).

However, the community was devastated by President Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066 on Feb. 19, 1942. The Japanese of the Coastside were forced from their homes, and, eventually, to internment camps far away from their homes.

One was Tsunematsu Kuwahara, a Pescadero farmer who was taken into custody by a deputy sheriff and an FBI agent on March 28, 1942 on suspicion of being a "dangerous enemy alien," according to Baca's research for the Half Moon Bay Review. Kuwahara, who never had any charges filed against him, received no trial by jury and was never permitted a lawyer, was not released until 1946, a year after the end of WWII.

Kuwahara spent two months detained at Sharp Park, then was transferred to internment camps in Lordsburg and Santa Fe (both in New Mexico). At one point he was held at Fort Lincoln in Bismark, N.D. He remained for years separated from his family, who were at Topaz War Relocation Center in Delta, Utah. Eventually, the Kuwahara family was reunited in Crystal City, Texas. After moving around the Bay Area, they returned to Pescadero, one of the few Japanese-American families to return, according to Baca's reporting.

Another of those families from Pescadero were the Imamura. One of the Imamura children is Naomi Patridge, who became a seven-term mayor of Half Moon Bay. She recalled the hardships at Tanforan, the race track turned detention center where most Japanese from the coastside were first sent, staying in horse stalls, grandstands and barracks for months before being sent by train to Topaz: "We felt very lucky to have been given a clean horse stall because we were a family with children. Some people had stalls where the manure was just whitewashed over." (Half Moon Bay Review Dec. 30, 2015).

Other notable Japanese residents forced from Pescadero to Tanforan and to inland camps was the family of Diane Matsuda, an attorney for the Asian Pacific Legal Outreach, San Francisco, and a member of the Sharp Park Memorial Committee that created interpretive panels detention center site.

Yunosuke Takahashi of Montara, a pioneer of the coastside flower and nursery business, was one of the few Japanese to return and to regain his land after the war. He took in fellow internees until they could get back on their feet when released from camps. The Sato family also returned and found that their belongings had been saved for them by celebrated artist Galen Wolf, a neighbor who lived at Frenchmen's Creek north of Half Moon Bay. Wolf protected the Satos' belongings in his family barn, threatening a sibling with a shotgun who wanted to burn the barn down during WWII (Historic Resource Study for GGNRA by Mitchell Postel, 2010).

By Laura Del Rosso, PHS Board Member