

WWII Sharp Park: Detention Camp and Residents

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

After the Pearl Harbor attack, 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 even though their longtime neighbors were impacted. The town newspaper, The Sharp Park Breakers, told 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 went and 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 and 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 and Jefferson High, served as a WWII US 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 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 at the camp. According to government records, Lazzerini was released from internment after an undetermined period in August 1942. It’s not clear why Lazzerini was detained.

“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, prohibited from farmer west of Highway 1 and had to carry pink “alien enemy” ID cards. If they were caught disobeying the restrictions, they could 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, Half Moon Bay and Pescadero, 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).

Pescadero had a strong Japanese community and it was devastated by Executive Order 9066. One farmer, Tsunematsu Kuawahara was taken into custody on March 28, 1942, and was not released until 1946, a year after the end of WWII. According to intensive year-long research by local journalist Marie Baca for the Half Moon Bay Review (Dec. 30, 2015),

■ By Laura Del Rosso, PHS Board Member

German-born Fred Plate who ran the Old County Market on Palmetto was a naturalized American but he was active in German clubs in San Francisco. He knew had at least one German friend that we know of interned at the camp and visited him regularly.

Frank Pitto, a Pedro Valley rancher, one what is today Perez Drive, recalls his Italian-born mother having to check in regularly with the government during 1942.

Milagra Ridge was a military site acquired by the US Army in the late 1930s. It was a “gun battery,” observation stations and a radar facility. They were built there when the United States entered the war in the event the US had to battle ships at sea and a land invasion.

Later, during the Cold War, a Nike antiaircraft guided missile launcher was added to defend against aerial attack. The Nike storage magazines are still buried in the mountain. While Milagra was the launch site, the control and radar site was on Sweeney Ridge. This is all part of GGNRA land now. In the late 1930s, the United States Army acquired Milagra Ridge as part of a project to defend the San Francisco Bay. Several In 1948, 6-inch guns were mounted at Milagra Ridge, only to be removed between 1949 and 1950.

In 1956, Nike Missile Site SF-51 was established at Milagra Ridge. These surface-to-air missiles were protection against attacking aircraft during the Cold War. The site was converted to the nuclear-capable Nike-Hercules system in 1958. The entire area was fenced with barbed wire and patrolled by guards with trained dogs.

The National Guard managed the area from 1963 through 1974. The buildings were demolished, the launch elevators were buried, the asphalt was removed, and the site was given to the City of Pacifica as an open space park. In 1987, Milagra Ridge became a part of Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

In May 1940, Hansgirg left Japan for the United States after the political mood became "hostile to foreigners".^[5] In the United States, Hansgirg joined forces with American industrialist [Henry J. Kaiser](#). Before the war, the demand for aircraft engineering had increased the need for light magnesium alloys. Kaiser had paid \$750,000 to Winter for the patent in the carbothermic process and received government credits of about \$22 million to build a plant for [Permanente Metals Corporation](#) (PMC) in California.^[15] By 1941, the first unit at Kaiser's plant^[16] was producing about 5 short tons (4.5 long tons) of magnesium per day.^[5]

However, getting the Permanente plant working was dangerous and fraught with problems.^[15] The technology for the Hansgirg process was still as unreliable as it had been in Radenthein, as it required handling magnesium dust which ignites explosively in air. PMC engineers built a pilot plant to improve the process.^[17] However, instead of modifying the approach, PMC chemists found a new use for the magnesium dust. They invented a new incendiary mixture of "goop" – a paste of magnesium dust gelled with gasoline and additives, which could be used as a bomb. Government controls allowed PMC to price the "goop" in competition with [napalm](#), and avoid large financial losses. By September 1943, only 10% of the dust was being used to produce magnesium as ingots. For the entire war period, PMC issued 20 million lbs. of magnesium and 86 million lbs. of "goop". The proportion of [incendiary bombs](#) with "goop" constituted about 8% of the total tonnage of incendiary devices used in the bombing of Japan and Germany. After the war, the Permanente plant was halted, and at the end of 1945 Kaiser repaid his credits.^[15] Nine days after the December 7, 1941, [attack on Pearl Harbor](#) plunged the United States into World War II, Hansgirg was arrested by the [FBI](#) on a presidential warrant accused of being "potentially dangerous to the public peace and safety of the United States".^{[5][18]}

After arrest, Hansgirg was first held in jail in [Santa Clara County](#), California, and later at [U.S. alien internment camps](#) in [San Antonio](#), Texas and [Stringtown, Oklahoma](#).^[5]

During Hansgirg's wartime internment, U.S. attorney general [Francis Biddle](#) denied permission for his wife to visit him.^[5] Heller appealed in a hand-written *woman-to-woman* letter to [First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt](#)^[5] seeking leniency, explaining that her husband could not criticize [Adolf Hitler](#) because their son was still in the German army and would be retaliated against if he did so.

The Sharp family of San Francisco owned the acreage since the 1870s. George Sharp instructed his wife, Honora, that he wished something tangible be done for the city in his memory. When she died, the executors said she had instructed it be used for recreational purposes. The SF Rec/Parks department, led by John McLaren, decided on a golf course and hired famous architect Alister MacKenzie to design the course. The Willis Polk famous architectural firm designed the clubhouse. The course opened to the public in 1932. Many of the trees that ended up at Golden Gate Park were originally planted here. During the Depression, San Francisco built and operated a camp for indigent men on the eastern section of the land, including planting McLaren's trees.

After the war, the site became a rifle range and also the home of the San Francisco Archers, which is one of the largest and most important place for archery tournaments in California.

