

Ste. Genevieve County residents got a taste of war close to home when the government announced in July 1942 that Weingarten, Mo., on Highway 32 between Ste. Genevieve and Farmington had been selected as the location of a massive prisoner of war camp, a project for which approximately \$2,000,000 was allocated. The camp had a capacity of 5800 POWs, and approximately 380 buildings of all types were constructed on a 950-acre site.

A number of families were displaced by the camp and five – the Jaegers, Harters, Sampsons, Donzes and Stantons – lost part or all of their farms, with much of the land dating back to when it was originally homesteaded.

“I’m going to be raising Japanese instead of pureblood Hereford cattle,” joked Mr. Henry Harter, who would eventually cede 150 acres of land to the government. Mrs. Harter found it funny also that their son, Lt. Austin Harter, was in Alaska, “keeping a lookout for the Japanese while Japanese are to be moved into our pasture.” The Harters’ comments reflected the initial belief it would be Japanese housed at Weingarten, but the 5000 Italians that ultimately ended up there made it one of the largest POW camps in the country.

Any humor in the situation also was lost on elderly people like Mrs. Mary Jaeger who was displaced by the camp. She spent a lifetime on the land, and for her, the forced move would be particularly difficult. The newspaper account identifies her as being “past 70, frail and bent with hard work.”

“Now where do I go to die?” she asked tearfully. “To empty fields when we were married my husband and I came, and for 50 years through snow and rain I have helped to build our home so it would last.”

The mounting uncertainty was enough to make another farmer, Mr. Charles Sampson, physically ill.

“He has had an upset stomach ever since these government men have been around,” said Mrs. Sampson when a newspaper reporter came to their door. “A man can’t stand everything.”

All but 40-acres of Sampson’s 270-acre farm were going to be seized for the camp. “They ought to take the 40, too,” said Mr. Sampson. “It ain’t going to do me any good by itself.”

Servicemen assigned to the camp began to arrive in November 1942, even while the installation was still under construction. These GIs enjoyed a great deal of interaction with the community, joining Ste. Genevieve County residents at dances, holiday meals and in softball and basketball leagues.

In May, 1943, the prisoners arrived, and Azilee Lohrke McKeone of Cape Girardeau, Mo., remembered clearly the tension at the camp on the day of the prisoners’ arrival as the MPs escorted the Italian POWs from the depot, down a gravel road and to the internment camp about 900 yards away.

“It was cold and rainy, and there were guards every two feet from the train to the compound,” recalled McKeone who worked at the camp, “and here were these very young boys in shorts, tee shirts and sandals (I think some went into service at fourteen in Italy) who came here from North Africa, glad to be in America and looking forward to warm food and clean beds.”

Life at the camp was generally uneventful. Prisoners worked for local farmers, receiving eighty cents a day for their work. They organized soccer leagues, camp orchestras and theater troupes and spent an enjoyable couple of years on the sidelines of the war. There were a couple of exciting moments, however, including a small riot at the camp and an escape by a pair of the Italian POWs.

POW Escape

On Sept 10, 1944, two prisoners managed to escape from Weingarten after digging their way under the fence surrounding the camp. The men got as far as Ste. Genevieve east before

being apprehended. The MPs went and fetched the Italians from Ste. Genevieve without incident after citizens notified them the men were seeking help at houses on South Fifth Street.

One of the residents who reported the escapees was Mrs. Catherine Papin. Her husband had left at 2:30 pm that day to go to work at the evening shift at the Mississippi Lime Plant, and so she was alone with her small children when the two men came to her house and knocked on the door.

"I saw these two fellows walking across the fields as if they were avoiding the road," Mrs. Papin said. "They came down the hill, knocked at my door, and asked if I had a room they could rent for the night."

The prisoners' dress and thick accent gave Mrs. Papin an immediate clue that something was up. The men were wearing brown uniforms and each carried a heavy winter coat on what was a very hot day.

"I told them, no, I had a family and no empty room, so then they tried my neighbor, and she told them to go to the hotel."

As soon as the prisoners left her doorstep, Mrs. Papin called a tavern nearby – Toad's Saloon – and asked for help. The barkeep wouldn't leave his place untended.

"I was pretty alarmed, because I had several small children at home at the time," said Mrs. Papin. "I called the bartender again, and told him to watch for the military police and to stop them when they went by."

By now, the escapees had climbed into an empty boxcar at the feed store nearby. They were hiding inside when the MPs arrived, though the MPs checked the boxcar and didn't see anything. The American soldiers checked the boxcar a second time at Mrs. Papin's insistence, and only then collared the two men who were each carrying a block of cheese and a long butcher knife.

"You see, the boxcar was lined with brown paper, and the men's uniforms were brown. They blended right in. They almost didn't get caught," said Mrs. Papin. "If they hadn't looked a second time, those policemen would have thought I was full of baloney."

The MPs asked the two Italian POWs what they were trying to do, said Mrs. Papin.

"They said they just wanted to go home. They were just homesick boys," she recounted. "Evidently they didn't realize how far from home they were."

Even though this incident may have spooked area residents, most Italian POWs had no desire to try to make a run for it. "We could roll back the fencing at 10 o'clock in the morning, at 11 o'clock all the prisoners of war would be gone," said Col. H. H. Glidden, camp commander, remarking on the contentment of the Italian internees. "and at 12 o'clock they would be back — waiting for their noon meal."

Riot at the Camp

On September 1, 1943, some prisoners — a surly handful of men, all members of Mussolini's Black Shirts — decided to fly the Italian flag over their barracks. Orders from the War Department prohibited such activities, and the POWs were told to take down the flag. After they refused, a company of MPs armed with billy clubs was formed to take over the compound by force. The Italians responded by throwing rocks, sticks and other objects at the GIs and several were cut when hit by the projectiles. After the first group of Americans was repulsed, unable to regain control of the compound, a second group was sent in. This group, too, was forced to retreat, with one officer and several enlisted men suffering the indignity of being "roughly manhandled during the excitement, suffering considerable cuts and abrasions."

On a third attempt, the Americans entered the compound, now having traded their billy clubs for bayonets. This time they were successful in quelling the fracas.

The thrill of the incident lasted for a while, remembered Teresa Drury, who worked in the camp's Quartermaster Office. "One of the officers got hit in the head with a rock. There were a one or two drops of blood," she said. "A couple of them were laughing about it later because he

got a Purple Heart out of it, getting wounded for his country, you know."

The camp at Weingarten operated until October 1945, when it was closed following the shipment of the last group of Italian POWs back to Europe. The structures were torn down and the original landowners had the opportunity to buy back their land from the government. The only striking trace of the camp that remains is a stone fireplace that had been part of the Officer's Club which still stands, silent and alone.

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