

Prisoners of War—Harvest Help

For a short time near the end of WWII, German POW's spent some quality time in and around Melita and Pierson

War affects farming communities in unique ways. During the Second World War, with so many young men serving in Europe, the shortage of labour at harvest time was a serious problem. At the same time there were about 16,000 captured German soldiers interned at two dozen camps across Canada, including some in Manitoba.

The solution was to put some of these prisoners of war to work. It was a solution that would ultimately

benefit both the prisoners, the farmers, and the government.

Prisoners were dispersed to "Harvest Hostels". Farmers paid the government the going rate of wages paid to farm workers. In turn, the government allowed each prisoner 50 cents per day that he could use for his personal needs beyond food and clothing (also provided by the government). They were not paid in cash nor could they buy anything to resell. The prisoners made money for

the government due to the disparity between what the farmer paid and the workers received. It is estimated that POW labour raised some \$3 million over the course of the war.

The prisoner farmhands were lightly guarded and often permitted to go shopping or attend church. Eventually, those soldiers who wished to return to Germany were sent home. An unknown number stayed and became Canadians.

This notice advised Melita area residents of the program...

A Recollection: German Prisoners at Hendry's

"Each morning truck loads of 10 or 12 men and a guard were sent to different farms in the southwest area. They returned to their camp in Melita's River Park in time for their evening meal.

"The farmer's wife fed the men a hot noon meal and some places fed them an afternoon lunch in the field. The prisoners were to be fed outside the home, but most people took them into the house, as they would feed any hired help. It was obvious that many of these men enjoyed children and would play with them when the opportunity arose to do so. Our daughter, Ruth, was a blond six-month old baby when they worked here, and many of them wanted to hold her. By the interest they showed in our children, one could imagine the longing for their families and possibly their own children whom they had not seen for years

"On the farm during August and September vegetables were plentiful. Mrs. Robert Melvin recalls preparing

battered corn on the cob as a special dish for the noon meal. The prisoners were reluctant to try eating this corn on the cob and some refused, as in their country, corn is considered to be food for the animals . . . cows and chickens.

"One day Ken Williams picked up a man walking from Melita along the Peninsula Road going south. Ken gave him a ride to the turnoff to the Williams farm, where the man continued walking south. Ken immediately phoned the authorities, as it was believed he was trying to escape to the U.S. border and freedom, but he was soon picked up and returned to camp.

"The prisoners were in the area a month or so, stooking. Some stayed on in pairs to assist in threshing; the others were transported to the sugar beet fields in eastern Manitoba before being repatriated.

"On September 12, 1946 an arti-

"Working in conjunction with the Provincial Farm Help Service, farmers of the southwest now have the assistance of 100 German prisoners of war to assist in stooking. A minimum of 10,000 acres had to be assigned before assistance was available."

Sources:

CTV News.ca - Sunday, August 7, 2011 7:27PM EDT.
Edward History Book Committee. *Harvests of Time*.
Altona. Friesen Printers, 2003. PP 90.
"Historic Sites of Manitoba: Canadian National Railway Water Tower / Prisoner-of-War Camp (RM of Roland)". Manitoba Historica Society. <http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/sites/cnrwatertowerroland.shtml>.
Pembina Valley Online - Monday, 08 August 2011 10:00.

cle in the New Era regarding their leaving, stated, 'During the prisoners' time in captivity, much of it spent in Canada, they have gained a different outlook on life and the relations of their country towards the rest of the world. When they are finally returned to Germany, this broadened experience, if given a chance for interpretation, should serve both the homeland and the world in general to advantage. But the big 'if' remains a secure reason for doubt in the minds of those who have been associated with these men over their years of segregation.'" - Jean Sterling

I venture to suggest the Canadians learned something as well.



◀ Melita area POW's would have come from the Main Camp near Roland Manitoba. This photo is of a "Harvest Hostel." near St. Pierre.