

Prisoners to the Rescue

Franklin County's Wartime Italians

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2020 MARKS THE 75TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE END OF WORLD WAR II which was the defining event of the twentieth century as the war forever changed the landscape of our region in both figurative and literal terms. I first heard stories about local Italian prisoners of war during the time I was a tour guide for the American Empress tour boats and pick. I got more interested when I was researching the Something Extraordinary book and came across one of those Images of Modern America books written by the wife of the former Port of Pasco port director. It had pictures of the Camp Columbia and the Italians. This proved that the rumors were true. The Columbia Camp story came from my personal friend, Bob Taylor, whose dad was the warden of the camp. Other details were helpfully supplied by longtime Franklin County Historical Society member LaDona Madison who worked at the army supply depot in Pasco during World War II. (Part 1 of 2)

By 1943, the City of Pasco, located almost fifty miles downriver from HEW, was not only the primary point of arrival for people and supplies headed to the Hanford Site. It also faced a severe labor shortage, making it difficult to supply enough civilian workers for the two recently completed military installations. The army's supply depot was especially in need.

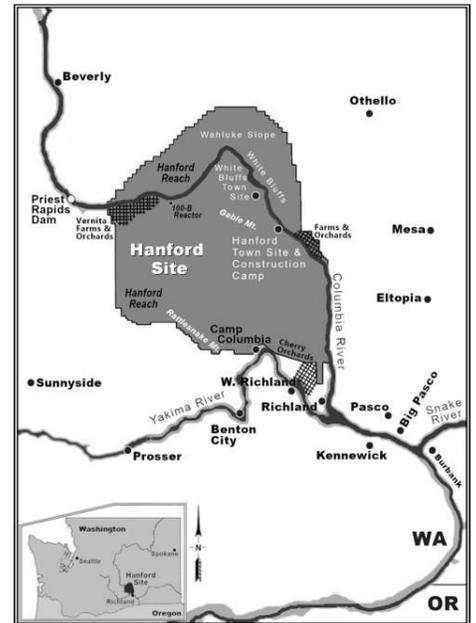
Late in 1941, the Army Corps of Engineers had chosen a 459-acre tract along the Columbia River in Pasco for one its

ferred excellent rail service from both the Northern Pacific and the Spokane, Portland & Seattle Railway. Located approximately 230 miles inland from the Seattle, Portland, and Vancouver ports, it was out of range of potential aerial attack. Colonel Franklin Matthias, who had been involved in the selection of the site, told the *Pasco Herald* on January 18, 1945, that...

*"...Pasco was the only [site] on which there was no further investigation after its initial selection. The location and transportation facilities offered here were so nearly perfect for the purpose, that it was not felt that there was any further need for study."*¹

Construction began in February 1942, and was completed six months later at a cost of \$5 million. Captain Lealand S. Davis, a former official of the Spokane, Portland and Seattle Railway who had been instrumental in lobbying the army to select the Pasco site, served there for two years as Transportation and Operations Officer. As many as 800 workers were employed during construction, including a number of still-segregated African

American labor units. They built eight warehouse buildings containing a total of 1.7 million square feet under roof. Each warehouse measured 960 feet long and 180 feet wide, with a rail car loading platform running the length of the



The Hanford Site showing Camp Columbia and Big Pasco (Chris Pickens)



Captain Lealand S. Davis (center in light uniform) was instrumental in the selection of the Pasco Holding and Reconsignment Point site. (Franklin County Historical Society)

massive supply depots. The Pasco Holding and Reconsignment Depot was one of ten similar facilities established near major ports along the east and west coasts to store and ship Lend-Lease supplies to our allies. The Pasco site of-

building and truck bays on either end. Sixteen other buildings provided barracks, a mess hall, commissary, and administrative services. The site included a large rail yard, rail dock and barge terminal. More than 2.1 million tons of freight moved through the facility between 1942 and 1945.

Two of the eight giant warehouses on the western side of the complex were designated as the Pasco Engineer Depot, a separate operation run by the Army Corps of Engineers, whereas the rest of the facility was managed by the Army Transportation Corps. They had separate missions. The Pasco Engineer Depot supplied material to military bases around the Pacific Northwest where-

as the larger facility stored and shipped Lend-Lease supplies and equipment to the Soviet Union. The Corps was able to handle large volumes of freight because items were crated and ready for overseas



Downtown Pasco in the 1940s.
(Franklin County Historical Society)

shipment. The situation was different at the Pasco Engineer Depot where a private contractor, G&S Handling Company, fulfilled orders from other military installations for supplies and equipment. Almost immediately, the locals began combine the two operations by calling the sprawling facility Big Pasco.

Big Pasco and provides yet another relatively unknown story of how prisoners helped support the Tri-Cities war effort. Their story has been the subject of a book and several articles by veteran reporter and author Ted Van Arsdol, a series of largely-forgotten news stories in the now-defunct *Pasco Herald*, as well as a detailed historical study prepared in 2004 for the Port of Pasco. This article draws upon their reporting. Italy joined the Axis Powers in June 1940. A member of the allied coalition during World War I, Italy felt it had been slighted by its more powerful partners at war's end when the Treaty of Versailles redrew many of the world's boundaries. After it came to power in 1922, the fascist government of Benito Mussolini sought revenge and empire by attacking Libya and Abyssinia. Italy aligned with Germany and Japan in September 1940 and soon entered World War II by attacking British interests in Egypt and around the Red Sea.

After some initial successes, Italy suffered major losses. British and Commonwealth forces captured more than 130,000 Italian prisoners in Libya in September 1940, and another 64,000 in East Africa in early 1941. A decision was made to transport most of them to England or to Commonwealth countries—in spite of significant security concerns—because of their substantial value as a supplemental source of labor. As a member of

the Axis Powers, Italy followed Germany in declaring war on the United States four days after Pearl Harbor. On the defensive for much of 1942, the Americans fought mainly in the Pacific but finally led an Allied landing in North Africa on November 8, 1942, where they faced German general Erwin Rommel's Afrika Korps and their Italian allies. Defeating Rommel, the Allies captured 252,415 German and Italian prisoners in that campaign and decided to split them equally between the British and Americans.

As a result, more than 50,000 Italian prisoners of war were transported to the United States where they were incarcerated in twenty-one prison camps in eighteen states. Most of the Italians were delighted to find themselves in America. However, their status became more confused after Italy surrendered on September 8, 1943,

but the allies resisted. Not only was it impossible to repatriate the Italians in the middle of the war, but the prisoners had become a valuable source of labor, freeing up American workers for combat duty.²

Building on British experience, the Italian prisoners in the United States were asked to join what became known as Italian Service Units, 250-man non-combatant units attached to U.S. military units. About 35,000 Italian prisoners agreed to join such units after pledging that they would not engage in combat or conduct sabotage. In return, they received incentives which included good working conditions, light supervision and some personal freedom, early repatriation to Italy after the war, and the possibility of being able to return to the United States without having to wait for an immigration visa. They were supervised by American officers and wore American uniforms with the word "Italy" emblazoned on blue oval arm bands. Each unit had an Italian officer and five or six enlisted men who served as overseers and interpreters following the orders from American officers. They received the same pay they would have



Big Pasco during the war. The Army Corps of Engineers used the two large warehouses (center right) while the Pasco Reconsignment and Holding Point used the other six. Prisoner barracks, mess hall, medical clinic and administrative buildings are to the right.
(Franklin County Historical Society)

and then switched sides by joining the allies on October 13. By that time, Germany had occupied much of Italy. A high priority for the new Italian government was to retrieve its prisoners from prison

received in the Italian Army—an average of about eighty dollars a month—and \$16 a month for use at the base canteen.

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Italian POWs

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Pasco, like other West Coast depots, was experiencing a severe labor shortage. Lealand Davis, the former SP&S Railway official who had served at Big Pasco for two years, was promoted to Major in March 1943, and was transferred to the 9th Transportation Zone in Salt Lake City, Utah, where he served as Chief of Operations. It was in that capacity that he placed an order for 1,200 Italians prisoners to help meet the severe manpower shortage at the depots.

On July 30, 1944, the 255th Quartermaster Salvage and Repair Company arrived in Pasco where they camped in Sibley tents near the huge warehouse complex. Wooden barracks were procured two months later. The 255th had been formed from prisoners at a POW camp in Ogden, Utah, and activated on April 15, 1944. Captain Enrico Tagliavacca was the Italian officer-in-charge under the command of U.S. Army Captain Raymond J. Ernest. Non-commissioned officers were all Italians. An August 10, 1944, the Pasco Herald reported that



One of the eight giant 173,000-square-foot warehouses at Big Pasco (Franklin County Historical Society)

WSHCG grant award

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raised locally for which the Franklin County project qualified after this past year's "Telling Your Story" capital campaign. Principal grant writer Richard Scheuerman credited campaign committee members Doc Hastings, Bruce LePage, Kevin Williams, Pat Roach, and Anne Hayden-Ray for their valued roles in guiding society and community fundraising efforts, which was also spearheaded by society board members Sarah Hysjulien, Sandy Johnson, Keith Snyder, Ron Colley, Kim Neff, and the late Valerie Stanley Carlson. Staff members



Members of the 255th Quartermaster Salvage and Repair Company (Italian Service Unit) upon arrival at Big Pasco in 1944. (Franklin County Historical Society)

the Italians would be, "used to perform necessary labor operations which have heretofore been neglected because of the impossibility of obtaining sufficient manpower."³ With the addition of the Italians, employment at Big Pasco rose to approximately 600 workers, many of whom were considered to be of relatively low quality when compared to the Italians. (Italian prisoners were also sent to Ft. Lawton in Seattle and, later, to a new holding and reassignment center in Auburn.)

Their primary work at Big Pasco consisted of loading and unloading freight—often as many as 225 freight cars a day. The Italians loved driving the fork-lift trucks and other vehicles. Workers soon

learned not to leave the keys in the ignition of any vehicle. However, many prisoners had special skills and often served as mechanics and electricians on vehicles and equipment needing repair before being sent to the Soviet Union. About twenty-five were employed as cooks, kitchen police, orderlies and clerks. While most of the Italians could not understand English, they comprehended enough through gestures and other forms of communication to know what needed to be done.

The Italians became a common sight on the streets of Pasco during their off-hours. They were generally well accepted by the Pasco community. Some were even invited into the homes of the few Italian-speaking residents or attended Mass at the tiny white frame St. Patrick's Catholic Church near Our Lady of Lourdes hospital. The language barrier did not seem to deter them from trying to date American girls working at the depot.

Look for the conclusion of this story in the next Franklin Flyer.

¹ Ted Van Arsdol, "Tells Story Location of P H & R Here," *Pasco Herald*, January 18, 1945. 1.

² George G. Lewis and John Mewha, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization by the United States Army*, (Honolulu, University Press of the Pacific, 2002) 177.

³ Ted Van Arsdol, "Italian Quartermaster Unit Arrives at the Army Point." *Pasco Herald*, August 10, 1944. 1.