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## **PRISONERS TO THE RESCUE**

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# Prisoners to the Rescue

*The largely unknown story of how federal convicts supported the war effort at Hanford during World War II.*

BY C. MARK SMITH

Overshadowed by spectacular history of the Hanford Site, is the scarcely known story of how federal prison inmates supported the war effort at Hanford.

By the end of January 1943, the government had acquired almost 430,000 acres from 2,000 land owners at a cost of approximately \$5.1 million. Most of the residents—willing or unwilling—moved on, but some remained and went to work for DuPont. Some residents, whose properties were out of the way of immediate construction, were allowed to remain a little longer in order to harvest their crops.

On March 6, 1943, all of the residents of White Bluffs and Hanford received eviction notices from the government. They were given thirty days to leave their land and crops. Lloyd Wiehl, whose parents had operated the White Bluffs ferry since the late 1800s, said the order “came like a bombshell . . . we didn’t have any place to go.” Edith Hansen, who was evicted from her farm, recalled, “They didn’t give us much money and more or less insulted us.” The town sites of White Bluffs and Hanford were almost totally demolished.[1]



## **ABOUT THE COVER IMAGE:**

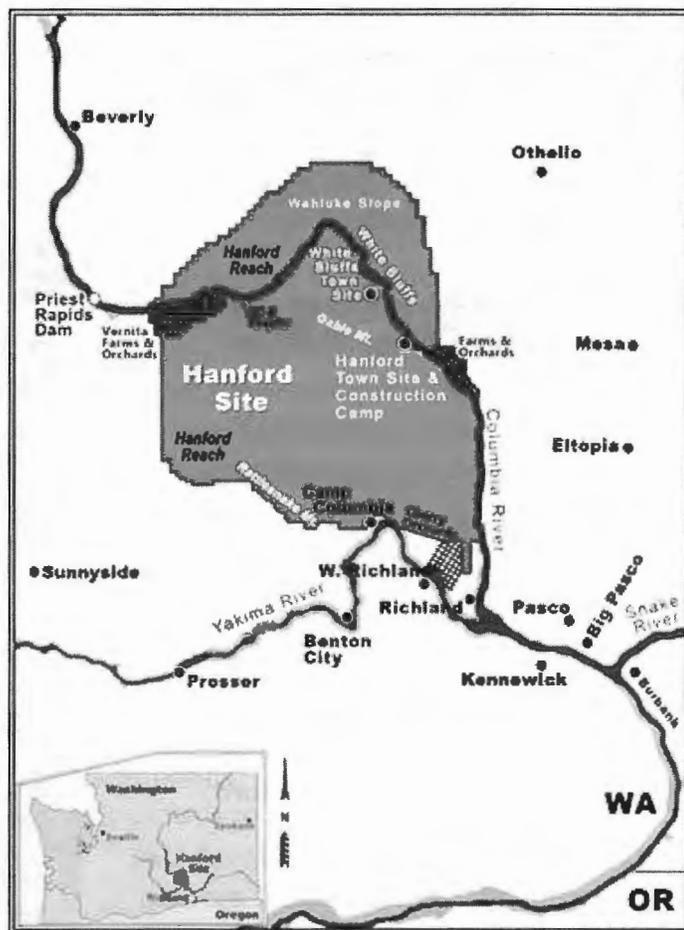
This photo of Camp Hanford prisoners working in the fields, was colorized from the original black and white photo using a new computer aided color process called DeOldify. The original image was preserved.

While most residents were resigned to moving, many wanted to be able to return to their orchards and fields by day in order to harvest their spring crops—for most, their only source of income. Groves and Matthias, with their singular focus on building a massive construction camp and the plutonium production facilities, saw these requests as both a logistic and a security impossibility and their requests were denied. But 3,500 miles away in the nation's capital others saw the situation differently.

Complaints about the land acquisition issue at Hanford reached officials in Washington, D.C., at a time when the Roosevelt administration was increasingly concerned about the potential for severe food shortages around the country. As early as March 1943, the president was voicing concerns to his scientific advisors and the War Department about the possible adverse effects of the Hanford Site acquisition on the administration's food production campaign. He raised those concerns again at a cabinet meeting on June 17, asking if it might not be possible to move the project to another site.

The president's query was a question, not a directive, but he was aware that others had similar concerns and these caused his acute political antennae to vibrate. Washington's junior U.S. Senator, Monrad C. Wallgren, was hearing from his constituents. A Democratic insider, he was a member of the Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program, commonly known as the Truman Committee after its chairman and future president. Truman and "Mon" Wallgren also were poker-playing pals.

Spurred by Wallgren's inquiries, the Truman Committee began asking the War and Justice Departments to provide the committee with information about "the factors that governing the choice of this location, the estimated cost of the project, the status of construction at present, and suitable comment with respect to the need for such an extensive tract of farm land." [2]



In response, an alarmed General Groves met with Secretary of War Henry Stimson. On June 17, Stimson contacted Truman directly to say that he would assume full responsibilities for the Hanford project if Truman agreed to stop any further investigation. According to his diary, Stimson called Roosevelt later the same day and "satisfied his anxiety." [3]

While these events were ongoing, Colonel Matthias was dealing with the issue in another way. He was negotiating a contract with Federal Prison Industries, a wholly owned government corporation within the Federal Bureau of Prisons, to provide convict labor to manage and harvest crops on land that could be kept in agricultural production during construction. Under the contract, the army would build and maintain a prison camp on the Hanford Site. Federal Prison Industries agreed to provide inmates and undertake the maintenance of "all good orchards, vineyards, and some of the better farm lands. . . and retain all harvested fruit and produce."

The army would supply “all necessary automotive and fencing equipment and would furnish power and coal for the camp.”[4] Both parties clearly understood the public relations aspects of the agreement. A report written in 1947, noted that,

“ . . . there was a great demand for all food products, and good public relations required that valuable orchards and farm lands continue to be maintained under government ownership, There was also the possibility that such lands might be surplus after the war, and it was felt advisable to keep up the orchards and better farm lands to protect the government’s investment.”[5]

The prisoners came from the nearest federal prison, McNeil Island Federal Penitentiary, located on an island in Puget Sound. They were selected because they were "minimum-custody-type improvable male offenders" who had no more than one year of their sentence remaining to be served. These included conscientious objectors, violators of wartime rationing and price support laws, and other white-collar offenders.[6]

The site chosen for the prison camp was on the very southern boundary of the Hanford Site, on the north bank of the Yakima River, just above the Horn Rapids Dam. A narrow, two-lane paved road ran from the tiny town of Richland (1940 population 240), north to an area of orchards along the Columbia River (now home of the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory), then northwest through fifteen miles of barren shrub steppe to the camp. While the plutonium reactors were being built along the Columbia River about twenty miles north, the camp was on the Yakima River, and for some reason was named Camp Columbia

The camp initially consisted of eleven wooden buildings that had been moved from a former Civilian Conservation Camp in Montana and placed around a parade ground with a tall flagpole. These buildings served as offices, a hospital, mess hall, and storage buildings. The inmates were housed in a row of Quonset hut barracks adjacent to the quadrangle. Twelve smaller Quonset hut structures were later built a short distance away to house administrators, prison guards, and their families. There was no security fence because there was no need for one. There was no place to go. Most men served their time without incident. Only twelve prisoners escaped from Camp Columbia, and they were quickly apprehended.

A senior custodial officer at McNeil Island, Harold E. Taylor, was named superintendent of the new camp. He faced a daunting task. A severe manpower shortage made staffing the camp difficult, and little guidance was available because there was no similar facility within the entire federal penal system. Nearly all administrative decisions were made on the basis of trial and error.

One of the first challenges Superintendent Taylor faced was finding a horticulturist to oversee the prison staff of field supervisors. George E. Hess, a farmer from Roseburg, Oregon, was hired as one of two field supervisors with responsibility for all aspects of orchard and farm management. In January 1944, Hess, his wife and five-month-old daughter Sandy were one of the first families to move into the Quonset huts. →

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Camp Columbia officially opened on February 1, 1944, and operated until October 10, 1947. By April, 1944, the camp held 180 inmates. Between 250 and 290 inmates were housed in the camp at any given time and a total of 1,300 served time there between 1944 and 1947. The prisoners were supervised by fifty officers, about half of whom lived on site with their families in the Quonset huts while the other half lived off-site in nearby communities.

The inmates' primary job was to maintain and harvest crops from areas of the Hanford Site not impacted by construction and plutonium production. These consisted of more than a thousand acres concentrated in three areas. The first was near the Vernita ferry crossing at the northwest corner of the Hanford Site and included apricots and hay on the former 400-acre McGee Ranch. A second concentration was located on the east side of the Columbia River in Franklin County, just below the vacated Hanford town site. It consisted of about fifty acres of orchards and forty acres of hay land. The third concentration included a large number of cherry orchards west of Richland Village. Most of the fruit was packed and trucked to McNeil Island where it was processed for sale to the military.

A 1947 report summarizing the activity at Camp Columbia noted that in 1944 the camp managed more than a thousand acres, including 550 acres of orchards, 125 acres of vineyards, 73 acres of asparagus and 280 acres of hay and potatoes. The camp produced almost 5,669 tons of crops between 1944 and 1947, valued at more than \$500,000. In early 1945 they were forced to abandon 530 acres because the fields and orchards were too close to the new plutonium production reactors and other facilities. Even with reduced acreage, the camp produced almost 1,400 tons of crops worth \$105,815 that year.



NUCLEAR FAMILY: A family photo taken from around the times of the Manhattan project camp.

Expenses were not insignificant, but the camp represented a real value under the circumstances. Direct operating costs, including housing, materials and supplies, coal, vehicles and fuel were provided by the army. Fuel and transportation costs were high because the nearest crops were fifteen miles from the camp and the farthest more than thirty-five miles away on the other side of the Columbia River. In addition to getting work crews to the farms, hot lunches had to be delivered, doubling the number of trips required each day.

Living at Camp Columbia was a memorable experience. In an early 1944 letter, Taylor described living in a Quonset hut to his wife, Doris, who had not yet arrived at the camp with their young son, Robert.

“...if the floors were properly finished and the windows and doors fixed so as to keep the dust out; if the windows were placed for vision; if they weren't so awfully cold in the cold weather; if the heating arrangement were other than 2 coal stoves; if the tin roofs wouldn't swelter one in the summer; and if they weren't so homely and forbidding looking' then, yes, with some adequate furniture they would be 'all right!'  
”[7]

Taylor knew that he and his family would soon move into one of twelve new 609 square-foot prefabricated houses, similar to those being built in Richland Village. They were luxury accommodations compared to the Quonset huts, but they had their own issues. Built in Portland and barged up the Columbia River to Richland, they were of notoriously flimsy construction, although many remain today in Richland.

The pre-fabs had only had one outside entrance. A long-standing story contends that one young mother was concerned about fire and called the Richland Fire Department. “What do I do in case of fire and the door is blocked?” She reportedly was told, “Just take a stout piece of furniture and push it hard against the outside wall. It will go right through!”[8]

Some of the prisoners also were memorable. Bob Taylor, the superintendent’s son, remembers growing up at the camp. He shared a large box of his father’s letters, reports and pictures with the author. On a tour of the site, now a county park, he pointed out a large tree into which he had crashed his bike as a child. He also vividly remembered one of the cooks “who made the best cinnamon rolls in the world.”[9] Taylor and the other children who lived in the camp were bussed each day to school in Richland. He remembered,

“At school there were always two very major factors to consider. One, we were all ‘equal.’ There was no class differentiation. Second, we knew that our fathers were all working men but absolutely no one knew what they did. We all knew we could not even consider asking questions.

And, yes, we knew we were a little bit different from other kids in that we lived in a prison camp with prisoners. So, no, we were really not normal. But we were still kids, doing what kids do.”[10]



CINNAMON ROLLS TO REMEMBER. A cook’s signature sweet rolls at the Hanford camp made a lifelong impression on Bob Taylor.

Many years later, Sandy Hess, the Field Supervisor’s daughter, remembered a particularly nice inmate, a handyman who did repairs around the camp, who would play with her in her backyard. After the war, when the time came for the prisoner to be discharged, a suitcase arrived at the camp containing a high quality tailored suit. A limousine picked him up and drove him to Yakima where a chartered plane was waiting. She always wondered who he was.[11]

In 1947, with World War II over and the Cold War yet to heat up, the Hanford Site faced a period of retrenchment. It was not clear what the future held for the massive plutonium production facilities or nearly 25,000 residents who now lived in Richland Village. The future of Camp Columbia was equally uncertain. With fewer acres being managed, the income from the camp was declining while the cost of transportation to distant fields and orchards remained high. Balanced against these financial constraints was Taylor’s concern that abandoning the crops was socially irresponsible and might become a public relations problem. Taylor suggested a compromise. He recommended that operations at Vernita and across the river in Franklin County be suspended and future operations be limited to the profitable orchards near Richland. →

## Exciting Grant News at a Much Needed Time

Since our last Courier the EBC Historical Society & Museum has received another exciting grant from the **Benton County Historic Preservation Fund!** The Museum has 240 audio cassettes of individual oral histories that have been recorded over the last 4 decades. These include family histories, anecdotal stories of early life in Benton County, history of the region, local events, etc. The grant is to pay for the cassettes to be digitally remastered, repaired if necessary and converted to a MP3/CD format. This project will preserve the memories and stories of Benton County's early pioneers and beyond and will nicely compliment the grant received from Three Rivers Community Foundation for audio and video recording equipment. Are you interested in preserving your family history? Contact us today!

### Thanks Volunteers!

Kathy Swift, Gale Metcalf,  
Paul Oliver, Jenni Heerink,  
Connie Boice, Renee Pottle  
Shirley Miller, Jim Lakey,  
Margaret Wilde,  
Gail Blegen-Frost,  
Rick Wessley, Ryan Bennett,  
Don Sorenson,  
Richard Eaten and  
Lee & Sharon Simmelink

"There doubtless will be strong public protests from residents of Richland if orchards were allowed to die, in view of the value that is attached to any greenery is this desert location. Also, loss of these orchards would be relatively widely publicized off the project." [12]

Federal Prison Industries and the army ultimately concluded that the camp should be closed and its buildings sold off as surplus. The camp officially closed on October 10, 1947.



*C. Mark Smith spent 40 years managing economic development organizations at the federal, state, regional and local level. He is the author of five published books and numerous magazine articles of history and biography, including his latest, Something Extraordinary: A Short History of the Manhattan Project, Hanford and the B Reactor, with co-author Robert L. Ferguson. This article is the result of research undertaken for that book, but not included in it.*

### Acknowledgments:

[1] S. L. Sanger. *Hanford and the Bomb: An Oral History of World War II*. (Seattle: Living History Press, 1989). 25.

[2] Vincent C. Jones, *United States Army in World War II, Special Studies, Manhattan: The Army and the Atomic Bomb*, Vol. 8, Part 9, (Washington, D.C., Center for Military History Publication, No 10-11). 365-366.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid. 369.

[5] Harold E. Taylor, Letter to District Engineer, Manhattan Project, January 7, 1947. (Taylor Family Collection).

[6] Harold E. Taylor, Draft report the Federal Bureau of Prisons, March 8, 1944. (Taylor Family Collection)

[7] Harold E. Taylor. Letter to Doris Taylor, March 3, 1944. (Taylor Family Collection).

[8] C. Mark Smith, oral history story.

[9] Robert Taylor. Interview with the author, April 10, 2020.

[10] Robert Taylor. Interview with the author, April 10, 2020.

[11] Jean Carol Davis, "Columbia Camp Revisited," (*The Courier*, East Benton County Historical Society, October, 1993) 6.

[12] Harold E. Taylor, Letter to District Engineer, Manhattan Project, January 7, 1947. (Taylor Family Collection)