

LETHBRIDGE'S INTERNMENT CAMPS

Few realize that internment camps operated in Lethbridge during both World War I and World War II.

The World War I camp, situated at the Lethbridge Fair Grounds, operated between September 30, 1914 and November 11, 1916. Operating mainly out of the poultry building, the detention center was nicknamed "The Chicken Coop" or "The Henhouse". The name Fort McNicol—after Exhibition and Fair Ground manager J.W. McNicol — was also used.

The camp's prisoners included many German, Austrian, and Turkish military reservists who were arrested and interned as prisoners of war. However, the camp did not strictly house P.O.W.s. Civilians who were deemed "enemy aliens" were also internees. These "enemy aliens" were often ordinary Canadians who possessed a German sounding name or who had emigrated from eastern Europe. Internees also included those who showed sympathy for the German war cause or those who dared to utter anti-British sentiments. The number of prisoners peaked at 300 in mid-1915.

The proximity of the camp to the U.S. border posed a problem, as did the fact that many of the inmates had lived in southern Alberta prior to their internment. This meant that there was a great incentive for inmates to escape, sometimes with local residents—and perhaps former friends—helping in the attempt. Therefore, the camp was closed by 1916 and the inmates were sent to other camps for the duration of the war.

When the second World War was declared in 1939, suspected "enemy aliens" were again rounded up. Those with supposed ties to the Nazis were taken to internment camps at Kananaskis, Alberta and Petawawa, Ontario, along with merchant seamen from German ships found in Canadian waters.

By late 1940, most of these internees were no longer seen as a threat and were released on the condition that they regularly report to authorities.

Now the challenge was to build camps for the large number of incoming prisoners of war: the enemy military personnel captured in combat.

Camps were built in Ontario, Quebec, the Maritimes and Alberta. Those at Lethbridge and Medicine Hat were by far the largest and together housed 22,000 men. Lethbridge's Camp No.133 was built in the summer of 1942 to house inmates being temporarily housed at Camp Ozada, a tent camp west of Calgary.

By November of 1942, 13,341 P.O.W.s were moved to Lethbridge, to a camp constructed between 28th and 43rd Streets along 5th Avenue North. With the large number of prisoners, the camp became a city within itself. The camp was divided into six sections, each with six dormitories, mess halls, kitchens, and entertainment facilities. By necessity, meals were in shifts with prisoners acting as cooks. Tailor, barber, and shoe repair shops were also staffed by prisoners. Non-combat prisoners were engaged in their professions as doctors and orderlies in the infirmary and dental clinic.

Housing and rations were the same standard as for the Canadian armed forces. This caused resentment, as many Lethbridge residents were unable to obtain many of the same supplies on their strict ration allowances.

With so many young men away, local farmers began to request labour assistance from the camp, especially for the sugar beet industry. By 1943 an agreement was reached and some of the prisoners worked on farms in southern Alberta. Most of these prisoners went from the camp to the farms daily, but some were kept at "lodges" at the more distant farms for days at a time with minimal guarding. For their labor, the prisoners were paid 50 cents per day.

When the war drew to an end, so did the need for Camp 133, and it closed in December of 1946. The area where the camp stood eventually became an industrial park and part of the Federal Agricultural Research Station.



Prisoner of War Camp 133 at Lethbridge, 1941-1945. Photograph of prisoners at front entrance. Galt Museum & Archives, 19752908025.