

Labor shortages during World War II compelled the Canadian government to use prisoners of war to meet demands for lumber. For both the government and the POWs, it worked out better than either party imagined.

“FREEDOM IN THE MIDST OF NATURE”

GERMAN PRISONERS OF WAR IN RIDING MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK

When Karl-Heinrich Landmann arrived at the new woodcutting camp in a national park in Manitoba, his immediate thought was “freedom.”¹ Captured by British soldiers in North Africa in November 1942, Landmann was one of thousands of German prisoners of war (POWs) transferred to

Canada to await the end of the war. Initially sent to one of Canada’s largest internment camps, Landmann, along with 439 other POWs, was transferred to work in Riding Mountain National Park in October 1943. With no barbed wire fences or guard towers, the remote camp was a most welcome change.

From 1939 to 1947, Canada held approximately 34,000 German POWs, enemy merchant seamen, and enemy aliens in 28 internment camps. Most of these men spent the first years of their internment sitting idle behind barbed wire, but in May 1943, the Canadian government approved the use of POW labor to help boost the struggling agricultural and pulpwood industries. Over the next three years, civilian companies and government projects employed more than sixteen thousand POWs in almost three hundred labor projects across the country.

In early 1943, the country was in the midst of a fuelwood shortage, one expected to worsen during the upcoming winter.

Manitoba was particularly affected, with an estimated shortage of a hundred thousand cords in the southwestern corner of the province alone, and its members of Parliament pleaded with the federal government for help. With alternative workers unavailable, in June 1943 the Canadian government elected to employ German POWs to meet the region’s fuelwood needs.²

Located on the Manitoba Escarpment 200 kilometers (125 miles) northwest of Winnipeg, Riding Mountain National Park covers approximately 3,000 km² (1,150 mi²)—an area slightly smaller than Rhode Island—and comprises boreal forest, eastern deciduous forest, and grasslands. Established in 1929, the park had previously been designated a forest reserve and had a history of providing fuelwood to surrounding areas; poplar in the western half of the park would be sufficient to relieve the province’s fuelwood shortage. The Minister of Mines and Resources approved the proposal to use POWs so long as the men would not be

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A group of German POWs at Riding Mountain. One POW wrote home, “Woods, water, fresh air and healthy work with my comrades and a certain freedom in the midst of nature, that is what I have wanted.”

allowed to roam free,³ but not everyone liked the idea. In a letter to the Parks Bureau, Roy Gibson, the director of the Land, Parks, and Forest Branch of the Department of Mines and Resources, expressed his concerns:

It is now proposed to put German prisoners of war in a valuable national park upon which substantial amounts of public funds have been expended. The number of guards will be reduced to a small fraction of the number heretofore in charge of these prisoners, and the prisoners will not be housed in a flood-lighted barb wire compound. They will be working in the bush where it will be difficult to guard them and where it will be easy for them to start a disastrous fire.

Citing the experience of government programs employing internees in the early war years as well as during the First World War, Gibson did not believe POWs could be relied on.⁴

Despite concerns, the Department of Labour approved the project, and preparations began immediately. The timber controller selected a site on the northeastern shore of Whitewater Lake expected to yield an estimated two hundred thousand cords, and construction began in August.⁵ When completed, at an estimated cost of \$225,000, it was the largest and most expensive woodcutting camp in the country.⁶ It had fifteen buildings—three POW bunkhouses, a staff bunkhouse, two guards’ bunkhouses, a cooks’ bunkhouse, a kitchen and mess hall, an administration building, a barn, a garage, workshops, a powerhouse, a recreational hall, and a small hospital—plus running water, electricity, and sewage disposal, prompting one forestry employee to remark that living conditions there were better than those provided by

the Department of Mines and Resources to its own employees.⁷

Camp administration fell to Wartime Housing, Ltd., a Crown corporation, but the project also involved the Department of Labour, the Department of National Defence, and the Parks Bureau. In all, the camp employed some 175 military and civilian personnel, including guards, accountants, clerks, instructors, supervisors, and teamsters. Forty-five civilian guards provided security at both the camp and the worksite, and this force was supplemented by a small detachment from the Veterans’ Guard of Canada. Composed almost entirely of First World War veterans deemed too old for overseas service, the Veterans’ Guard was responsible for policing unruly POWs, maintaining discipline, handling mail, and providing escorts.⁸

The project relied on the dense Canadian woods and remote location to contain the POWs. With the nearest park boundary or civilian roadway ten kilometers away, the Department of Labour believed the camp sufficiently isolated to prevent POWs from making contact with civilians or escaping.⁹ Camp boundaries were marked only with red flags or blazes. Since most POWs had spent the previous year or more behind barbed wire, military authorities hoped they would work hard and not risk losing their newfound freedom by venturing beyond camp bounds.

The 440 POWs, nearly all veterans of the North African campaign, arrived from the base camp at Medicine Hat, Alberta, on October 26, 1943. All volunteers, 400 received woodcutting tools, and Wartime Housing expected them to cut and stack three-quarters of a cord per man per day. The remaining 40 were to assist with the day-to-day operation of the camp, working as clerks, medical orderlies, cooks, tradesmen, and in one case, a gardener. Each POW received fifty cents per working day and could spend



The Riding Mountain Park Labour Project had fifteen buildings—and no barbed wire fences.

these earnings in the small canteen, which stocked items such as tobacco, toiletries, candy, and soda.

The first large-scale POW woodcutting operation in the country, and with more than four hundred POWs allowed to move freely around the camp, the labor project was destined to encounter difficulties. But no one imagined it would happen so soon. Five days after their arrival, on October 31, 1943, nineteen POWs used their first day off to explore their new surroundings. As light snow began to fall late that afternoon, the POWs realized they had gotten lost, and as the snow became heavier, their tracks disappeared. While the lost men hunkered down for the night, the guards scrambled to find them.

Snow hampered initial searches, but the following morning, as guards, camp staff, and police scoured the area, some of the missing POWs wandered back to camp, cold and hungry. By the afternoon, all missing men were accounted for. Refuting accusations of escape, each man asserted they had lost their bearings while hiking.¹⁰ Local papers described the incident as the second-largest escape in the country, but camp staff agreed there was no motive for escape and released the men for work.¹¹

Regardless of the actual circumstances, the incident emphasized concerns about the considerable freedom enjoyed by POWs at Riding Mountain. Although each POW promised never to go beyond the camp bounds again, a more effective deterrent came not from camp staff or guards but from fellow POWs. Hoping to appease military authorities while ensuring they remained at Riding Mountain, POWs scheduled the nineteen errant men for a “hiding” (beating for punishment) but were prevented by doing so by the camp translator, who assured them this was both unnecessary and misguided.¹²

This incident demonstrated the value POWs placed upon the opportunity to live and work in relative freedom. Most enjoyed

their new life at Riding Mountain, as is evident from their correspondence, which was translated and reviewed by censors. In a letter home, one POW reassured a loved one not to worry for, as he described, “Woods, water, fresh air and healthy work with my comrades and a certain freedom in the midst of nature, that is what I have wanted.” His only regret was having failed to persuade a friend to volunteer with him. Compared with barbed wire fences, the forest was, as one POW described, a “real treat for the eyes.” Another remarked on how life at Riding Mountain was much better than that in an internment camp: “There is no barbed wire around our camp, and what that means can only be appreciated by one who has spent two years behind it.”¹³

It was not only their freedom that the POWs valued but also the opportunity for work. The monotony of life in an internment camp affected both physical and mental health, and many saw work as a potential cure. As one POW explained, “You cannot imagine how I felt when after three years I saw a forest again. To wander through the woods and to once again have real work before me was something divine.” Another informed his family, “[Work] makes muscles and is good for the body; also, one does not have so much time for brooding and the day passes more quickly [sic].”¹⁴

To prevent unrest in off-hours, the Department of Labour, Wartime Housing, and international aid organizations, notably the War Prisoners’ Aid of the YMCA and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), provided recreation and entertainment. In the rec hall, POWs had access to a piano, Ping-Pong tables, dart boards, card tables, writing tables, and a radio, where English-speaking POWs could often be found translating the latest news of the war for their comrades.¹⁵ Many POWs chose to spend their free time reading, painting, building models, working at handcrafts, improving their education, or putting on musical and theatrical performances for fellow POWs and camp staff.



The camp's surroundings provided abundant opportunities for those interested in the park's natural amenities. With hundreds of game trails and prewar logging roads throughout the area, not to mention the wildlife, hiking and exploring became a popular pastime. Herbert Kurda told his family he could walk in the forest without guards, and Erich Lamer wrote, "I often take walks to spy on the many wild animals, for such a sight is not offered to every European."¹⁶ In letters to his parents in Germany, Karl Kappel fondly described wandering through the dense, untouched forest and enjoying his quiet and peaceful surroundings while occasionally spotting deer, elk, moose, bears, and wolves.¹⁷

Animals were also common in the camp. With the help of civilian employees and the park warden, several stray dogs and cats were adopted by the prisoners and were prominently featured in group photographs. The most notable pet was a black bear cub captured by a group of POWs while hiking. Quickly adopted as the camp mascot, the bear was popular not only with POWs, one of whom fondly referred to it in a letter to his parents as "our good and faithful camp-bear," but with guards and camp staff as well.¹⁸

Prisoners were also quick to take advantage of the proximity to Whitewater Lake. After seeing a birchbark canoe on the cover of a magazine circulating through camp, some POWs tried their hand at building their own boats. Lacking the requisite tools and experience, they ultimately carved dugout canoes from large spruce and poplar logs and paddled around the lake under the supervision of their guards.¹⁹

While most were content with remaining within camp bounds, some POWs ignored the guards' orders and, after hearing about nearby settlements, set out to find them. In January 1944, rumors reached camp that POWs were roaming beyond park boundaries and fraternizing with civilians. Fearing that the farmers south of the park, who were predominately immigrants from Eastern Europe, would help POWs escape and provide them with clothing,



The "good and faithful camp-bear," with the translator and one of the guards.



A POW sits in a dugout canoe. Access to Whitewater Lake afforded POWs even more freedom, though guards did monitor their boating.

food, and maps, the guards and police began patrolling local communities. Their efforts were soon rewarded when, in February, guards apprehended several POWs beyond the park boundaries.

Camp staff soon discovered that POWs were leaving camp after the evening roll call, using money earned from the illicit sale of woodcrafts to pay admission to local dances, and returning to camp before morning roll call. Further information about POW exploits south of the park came when censors seized a POW diary.²⁰ Written by Konstantin Schwarz, a self-identified Nazi, the diary revealed that Schwarz and his comrades used homemade compasses to explore the area and make contact with civilians. The POWs had made friends with some farmers, many of whom had been given marginal land and therefore resented Canadian and British-born residents.²¹

With POWs in the countryside, it came as no surprise when other residents began voicing concerns. After the camp doctor was spotted in the nearby town of Dauphin under “very loose courtesy custody,” local newspapers protested this “preferred treatment” provided to POWs at Riding Mountain.²² The story made its way to the House of Commons, where a member of Parliament criticized the use of POW labor and said the camp’s so-called security measures were an insult to the families of those in uniform. The minister of National Defence assured everyone he did not approve of the POWs roaming free but emphasized that any restrictions on their freedom would likely result in a drastic reduction of production.²³

Anticipating more frequent visits to nearby settlements during

the summer months, camp staff introduced new measures to prevent POWs from leaving camp. Eliminating any ambiguity about camp boundaries, the guards clearly redefined the woodcutting area and warned that any POWs found out of bounds would face punishment.²⁴ Guards also introduced new patrols, erected warning signs, and staffed a small guardhouse near the camp entrance to turn away unauthorized visitors.²⁵

Hopes for productivity notwithstanding, in the initial months of operation, POWs were producing only two-thirds of a cord per man per day. Given that civilian workers could produce two cords per man per day, the wood fuel controller saw no excuse for the low rates. He recommended that military personnel replace the civilian guard force and provide the discipline required to increase production.²⁶ Describing current woodcutting operations as “most primitive and uneconomical,” his office also recommended that the camp follow the same practices as civilian operations.²⁷

On June 17, 1944, the Department of Labour took over all responsibility for the project and agreed to produce ten thousand cords of fuelwood by March 31, 1945.²⁸ The changeover was partly due to reduced demand for fuelwood, but the department also believed the camp needed a complete overhaul to boost production. The camp was downsized to two hundred men and the civilian guards replaced by men from the Veterans’ Guard of Canada. The takeover proved successful; by October 1944, the POWs had met their quota, and guards had succeeded in drastically reducing fraternization with civilians.²⁹



Located in southern Manitoba, the POW camp was about 160 miles (258 kilometers) northwest of Winnipeg as the crow flies.

Despite the visits to local communities, there were remarkably few escape attempts. The exception was Hans Weis. Weis first caught the guards' attention when he was found with two letters, both written by civilians, in his possession. But this was only the beginning. On November 22, 1944, Weis left camp and, proceeding south of the park boundary, purchased a train ticket to Winnipeg with money obtained from the sale of woodcrafts to camp employees and civilians.³⁰ Police eventually arrested him in Winnipeg four days after his escape, and military authorities transferred him to an Ontario detention facility for twenty-eight days of discipline.³¹ However, after returning to camp after Christmas, Weis stole a truck and made his way to the nearby town of Dauphin. This escape was cut short when two guards, both on leave, discovered Weis eating at the local bar and promptly took him into custody. After three months of discipline, Weis returned to camp only to be sentenced to fourteen days in the Dauphin jail for auto theft, after which he was transferred back to Medicine Hat.³²

In January 1945, military authorities selected the Riding Mountain camp as a testing ground for its new political classification system, PHERUDA. Intended to identify POWs' political attitude and determine their suitability for labor, the program examined a man's (P)olitical outlook, attitude towards (H)itler, (E)ducation, (R)eligious beliefs, (U)sefulness, (D)ependability, and (A)ttitude toward the Allies. Two intelligence personnel

interviewed each POW, and the results determined a man's classification: Black for pro-Nazis, White for anti-Nazis, and Grey for those in between.³³

Although unable to uncover any "Gestapo-like" activity, the interviews identified sixteen "Black" Nazis. Anti-Nazi POWs were also used as informers to identify troublemakers and pro-Nazis, who were then recommended for transfer out of concern for their reactions in the event of Germany's capitulation. One intelligence officer observed that the Whites and Greys enjoyed the privileges at Riding Mountain and did not want to be transferred to an internment camp.³⁴ However, after working in the bush for more than a year, many welcomed the possibility of farmwork.

Woodcutting operations ceased in Riding Mountain on March 31, 1945, by which time Manitoba had a fuelwood surplus. Although camp staff received applications from fifteen or twenty local farmers seeking POW labor, increasing demand for labor in Ontario bush camps prompted the transfer of most prisoners to other labor projects, leaving only forty POWs by the end of May. Unable to secure sufficient work for the remaining men by August, the Department of Labour closed the project. Because the buildings were too remote for use by the Parks Bureau, the Department of Labour handed the project over to the War Assets Corporation for termination, and demolition began September 1.³⁵ On October 10, 1945, the last ten POWs left Riding Mountain National Park.³⁶

The Parks Bureau allowed the site to return to its natural state, leaving little trace of the 440 POWs who spent almost two years of the war in the backcountry of Riding Mountain National Park. Although popular and local narratives of the camp have depicted a sort of *Hogan's Heroes* scenario, this was not the case. The camp generally succeeded in encouraging the men to work hard and avoid trouble. Despite mosquitoes, harsh weather, and the occasional lost toe or finger to frostbite or accident, POWs preferred life at Riding Mountain to that of a high-security camp and took it upon themselves to cooperate and protect their relative freedom in a near-wilderness environment. □

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NOTES

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