Prisoners of War in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan?

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Question: What does the North Country Trail have in common with a Nazi prisoner of war camp?

Answer: They are in the same place.

This statement is indeed true if you are lucky enough to hike through the Superior Shoreline Chapter’s section of the NCT in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula.

When we joined the NCTA in 2003 we spent a great deal of time finding the trails in our area and exploring so we could decide which sections we would adopt. One of our first hikes took us on a section beautiful but strangely dotted with large pits on either side of the trail. We also spotted some large metal objects and a large white thing that we decided we would haul out on our return trip.

The large white thing turned out to be a portion of a toilet. What in the world was it doing in such a desolate spot? The large metal object appeared to be some sort of stove.

Several months later we saw a picture in The Munising News with a caption explaining that the person in the picture was a German officer and the location was a local Munising bar. To add to our confusion, the local NBC affiliate, TV 6, did a short story on a video that was being put together by John Pepin of the Marquette Mining Journal and a TV6 reporter, Jackie Chandonnet. The subject? Nazi POW camps in the UP.

Now we were on the hunt for more information. We turned to the Internet and went to the CCC Museum near Houghton Lake, which proved to be a gold mine. In the Upper Peninsula alone, a total of five 1930s Civilian Conservation Corps camps had been converted to house more than 1000 German POWs during World War II. Two of those camps were right here in Alger County. They were brought here to help with a shortage of manpower, as most of the able bodied men were serving their country overseas. POWs were paid eighty cents a day to cut logs, and make crates for shipping munitions, fence posts, and plywood.

Prisoner escapes were infrequent. If you have ever hiked the UP, you know that we are known for a lot of snow for part of the year, and bird-sized mosquitoes and black flies the rest of the time. Escapes often returned to the camp without too much persuasion.

Now, our mission was to find these two camps, one called Camp AuTrain and the other, Camp Evelyn. As luck would have it, we also Geocache and some kind soul had placed a cache at Camp AuTrain. Our Garmin took us within feet of the entrance to the NCT and the place that had held the toilet. Getting closer, the first things we noticed were several giant slabs of blacktop, with the occasional pipe sticking through. Still getting closer, we found large pits, similar to those along the trail. Then we found an old root cellar, cisterns and other remnants, including a pit with metal plates, cups and soup bowls. Now it was making sense.

Later visits have turned up a 50 year old root beer bottle, buttons, and a wagon wheel “hub cap.” Next to the camp was an orchard that occasionally still produces fruit. We later learned that when the camps were being dismantled, pits were dug and furnishings buried.

Finding Camp Evelyn was more difficult. The word “Evelyn” appeared on the US Forest Service map, but it was in the middle of nowhere, on a railroad track. A visit to the Forest Service Visitor’s Center was invaluable. Within minutes we were driving across the Camp’s former baseball field and parking near more blacktop slabs with pipes, which were actually the bases of former guard towers. Camp Evelyn also had its own orchard.

By this time the video entitled “The Enemy in Our Midst” had been completed. John and Jackie had raced against the clock to finish the project while people still alive could share their memories of the German experience. From the video, we learned that there was only one remaining guard tower intact, in the town of Sidnaw.

Traveling to the National Conference in 2010 took us through Sidnaw in the western UP. We explored but came up empty. At conference a member of the Peter Wolfe Chapter suggested that on our return trip, we stop at Mom’s Diner and ask. Bingo! A patron pointed us in the right direction, or more precisely, directions. The tower was in two sections at two locations. Plans exist to reassemble it in the near future.

If you find yourself in Superior Shoreline’s magnificent area in the eastern UP, we would love to show you our Yooper part of United States History.

Finding Directions In The UP

Yoopers are a different breed. Until people are trusted, information given to them is sketchy at best. When we bought our camp, Tim wanted to fish a particular stream. He asked directions and ended up in some guy’s living room. It took several years before we got good information the first time we asked.

Everyone up here knows where these POW camps are, but we do not hand our directions until we get a feel for the person asking. Do not need a bunch of Trolls (people living below the Bridge) tromping around “messing with our stuff.”

The only way we found Camp Evelyn was to prove to the Forest Service that we had really, really tried. If we hadn’t been real close, they would not have helped us.

—Ellen