Oral History Program

Gary Larsson

Interviewed by Sarah Langsdon
31 January 2006
Mission Statement

The Oral History Program of the Stewart Library was created to preserve the institutional history of Weber State University and the Davis, Ogden and Weber County communities. By conducting carefully researched, recorded, and transcribed interviews, the Oral History Program creates archival oral histories intended for the widest possible use.

Interviews are conducted with the goal of eliciting from each participant a full and accurate account of events. The interviews are transcribed, edited for accuracy and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewees, who are encouraged to augment or correct their spoken words. The reviewed and corrected transcripts are indexed, printed, and bound with photographs and illustrative materials as available. Archival copies are placed in Special Collections. The Stewart Library also houses the original recording so researchers can gain a sense of the interviewee’s voice and intonations.

Project Description

The Prisoners of War at Defense Depot Ogden oral history project is the documentation of the lives of the Italian and German prisoners that were held at DDO during World War II. The Ogden Defense Depot, designated as a POW camp on October 11, 1942, was one of the first ten camps in the country. An estimated 5,000 Italian prisoners and approximately 4,000 German prisoners were sent to the facility. The prisoners worked in local warehouses, farms, and orchards. After Italy surrendered in 1943, Italian Service Units were created which allowed the Italians greater freedom than the Germans, including visits to downtown Ogden. The camp closed during the summer of 1946 after the 10,000 prisoners were shipped home.

This project contains interviews from people who had interaction with the Italian and German POWs, including the community of Weber County and POW widows. They discuss the daily lives of the prisoners which includes conditions at the camp, work related issues, and the feelings of the community surrounding the POW camp.

Oral history is a method of collecting historical information through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account. It reflects personal opinion offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

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Special Collections

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It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

Gary Larsson, an oral history by Sarah Langsdon, 31 January 2006, WSU Stewart Library Oral History Program, Special Collections, Stewart Library, Weber State University, Ogden, UT.
Gary Larsson in his home in Harrisville, Utah on January 31, 2006.
Abstract: This is an oral history interview with Gary Larsson. It is being conducted on January 31, 2006, at his home in Harrisville, Utah, and concerns his experiences with POWs in Ogden during World War II. The interviewers are Sarah Langsdon and Patti Umscheid.

SL: First off, Gary, will you just give us a little bit of background about yourself, where you were born, when you were born, where you went to school?

GL: I was actually born in the old Dee Hospital. My folks were temporarily living in South Ogden with my mom’s folks while our home down the street was being built. My dad’s family, after his uncle died, was left this house and his mother was left 40 acres of the remaining farm out in back. They had several acres of land across the street and when the depot came, they bought out the farmers and the landowners, and so hence, the farm across the street became the depot. My dad’s uncle raised him and his cousin who took his share of the money and moved to Oregon. My dad lived in the little house across the street from the entrance into Harrisville Heights. That is where the main northwest gate to the depot was located. Our house was directly across the street from it.

I came out here when I was about three years old and spent the rest of my life just down the street and in this house. We lived in that little house until I was 12, then my dad bought the farm from his mother, which included the house that is two doors down from here. He remodeled that house, which was one of the old family homes, and we lived there until I got married. Dad gave me a piece of
ground over here, so after we got married I built this home and we have been here ever since.

I went to Wahlquist Junior High. It was Wahlquist Elementary when I went there in the first grade. In the seventh grade they turned it into a junior high, so I just continued on there for nine grades. Then I went to the old Weber High on 12th and Washington, and ended up going to Weber State.

SL: How old were you when the POWs came?

GL: I was probably about six years old. I was born in 1938 and we moved back out here about 1941. The depot was being built then. The war was over in 1945 so I was probably around six or seven year’s old, right in that neighborhood.

SL: Being so close, what do you remember about the prisoners?

GL: Well, I spent a lot of time over there in the north end of the prison camp. My grandmother’s old home was still over there. It was right west of where Conway’s apartments are now. They have torn it down, but there was a family that lived there that worked on the depot, the Riding family. They had a son, Frank. You know there weren’t many kids out here, so we became friends and we just roamed around that prison camp all the time; at least the Army part of it. The only time we ever got down into where the guard towers and fences were, we got picked up by the Military Police and hauled down to the Provost Marshall. He scared the daylights out of us and sent us back home. The thing I can remember most was that I spent a lot of days over there with the prisoners. I would run across the street, go down in the irrigation ditch, crawl along the ditch, and then under the fence, and go right over just west of where my grandmother’s
old home was located. The prisoners were friendly, they were fun. They just laughed and would yell at me if I was across the street. They would say, “Hey Geddy, come on over here”. So across the street I would go. They had a large garden over there. They raised everything. I guess it was something for them to do. Many times they would slip under the fence, down the ditch, and come across to my folk’s home. They would bring big sacks of vegetables and garden goods from over there, and shoot the breeze with my dad a lot. In fact, they would stay even until the evening hours, then they would hurry and run across the street, in the ditch, and under the fence, and back they would go.

I don’t know much more about that other than it just seemed like they were not under any kind of stress or strain at all. In fact, I can remember them being over at my dad’s house and he would talk about hunting and fishing and show them his shotguns and all that kind of stuff. It wasn’t long after they started coming over to my folks house that one night the MPs, or the Military Police, showed up and escorted them back across the street. I think that was the last time they ever snuck out, but they did that a lot. They snuck out to my folk’s house a lot.

SL: So there wasn’t any fear on your part or your family’s part?

GL: Not a bit, not a speck of fear. The German prisoners were over east where the fairground is now located. They never let the Germans out at all. There was only one commotion down there I can remember where we heard a few shots fired.
The German prisoners would make puppets out of their gallon food cans from the mess hall. The puppets were very well made. They looked like little warriors or little knights. They had tin suits on and they had metal rods on them so that their feet and hands worked. A few of the people around here got them, and I saw some, but I never did happen to get one.

Other than that, later on in life, a lot of these Italian prisoners stayed here in the states after the war. In fact, I rode to work with one of them out at Marquardt. It's where Autoliv is now on 33rd Street. I rode in a carpool with one of the prisoners that was here during the war and stayed. He married a local girl, had his family and lived in Farr West.

SL: Do you remember his name?

GL: I can't remember his name other than it was Joe. I can find that name out for you. I know the lady in Farr West who rode with us that he lived by. I can find that out for you. Joe Bernoli or …

SL: Joe Battisti or Joe Giordano?

GL: It could be. It has been a lot of years since I worked out there.

SL: Well those are just the two. They have since passed away, but the widows…

GL: They have passed away? So it could be one, but I know I want to say his name was Joe and the Italian last name.

SL: Do you remember any other names like the ones that would come to your family's house?

GL: No, I never did know any of their names. I was only six or seven, so I didn't really know any of their names. I heard that the prisoners down there even
worked and were hired by the government to work in the warehouses. I don’t
know what they made. I have heard 10 cents an hour, 50 cents an hour, I don’t
know what it was, but they did work for the government.

SL: We have some great photos of the soccer teams. Do you remember them
playing soccer?

GL: I can’t remember them playing soccer, but I can remember them playing
baseball. There was a baseball diamond right straight south of where we are
right now. There was a great big tree down there and they had a backstop and
bases. I don’t know if they had many bleachers. But there was a baseball
diamond just over the hill here.

SL: Was that both German and Italians that were playing?

GL: No, no Germans, and I am not positive that the Italians played there, but I know
the GIs played there and the Italians could have played there. I don’t know.

SL: Being so close and on such friendly terms, did your family ever go to their
parties? They would have huge Christmas parties, the Italians did.

GL: No, we never did anything like that that I can remember anyway. And I don’t
think my parents ever went any farther than that. I think my mother was a little
nervous when they would come over, but my dad wasn’t nervous at all. He really
enjoyed meeting with them.

PU: Your folks, did they know that you used to go over there and crawl under the
fence? Did they know that you went over there and kind of socialized with them
at all, as kids?
GL: Well, I’m sure my folks did. I got to be very good friends with the guards over there on the guard gate. There was one by the name of Red that I really got to feel real good with. He was a great big tall red-headed guy. The guards never made any attempts to stop me. The Owens family lived right west of us, and I am not sure whether their son that was a couple of years older than me ever went over with me or not. I know that we all went down to the base theater and watched the movies, because the Riding boy’s dad had something to do with the depot where we could go down, go to the base theater, and go to the movies.

SL: Do you ever remember seeing any of the Italians out and about in Ogden?

GL: No. I’ve heard just through hearsay that they did give them passes and they could go into town. I know that Joe married a local gal, and they had a family here and lived in Farr West until he passed away.

SL: A lot of them once they became Italian service units after Italy surrendered; they were allowed to go to local Italian families for dinners.

GL: I remember the story that Joe would tell us on how he got to be in the Italian Army. I don’t know if that is interesting or not. He said he was in Italy and I don’t remember what town he lived in, but about 2 o’clock in the morning there was a big crash on the door and the police came in and jerked him out of bed. He said the next thing he knew he was in the Italian Army, and it wasn’t just a few weeks later he was in North Africa. It was terrible conditions over there. They didn’t have much to eat, or much equipment or anything like that. Six weeks after he got over there he was captured by the English. The English would line them up in the morning to call them out for roll call or something. The English officer
would line them up and he would go down to the end and take out his service revolver and fire a shot right down in front of their noses, right down the line, so they made sure they were in an exact straight line.” But it wasn’t very long after he got pulled out of bed and was in North Africa that he was on his way here to good old Ogden, Utah, and in the prisoner of war camp over here. That was kind of an interesting story. I’m not sure he wanted to be in the army, but he was in the Army nonetheless.

PU: That is probably what happened to a lot of them.

GL: I think so.

PU: Did any of your neighbors resent or were they afraid of the prisoners at all?

GL: Not that I know of. There weren’t really a lot of neighbors around here. There were Lunds down on the corner, then the Jensens, then Owens, then our place. There was my grandmother’s house and the old house that my dad bought later. Anderson’s house is east of here, this two-story house set on the curve in the road. That is about all the houses that were out here, other than a couple across the street, that were taken over by the government when they bought the place out.

SL: When they came over, did you ever give them anything? Did they ever ask for anything?

GL: No, not that I know of. All they did was come over. I think they were just lonesome and lonely, and just came over to shoot the breeze. Just talked. Never an instant when we felt in danger or in peril or anything like that. Had the
German's come up, that would have been probably a different story. They kept them right under toe down there.

SL: We've heard that anybody that was a troublemaker got immediately shipped out.

GL: That could be.

SL: Of Ogden.

GL: I have a good friend that when he was young lived in Rome, New York, and there was a German prison camp in Rome right across from his house. There was an occasion or two when the Germans did try to escape, but they were soon captured and they were cold and hungry and glad I guess to be back in the prison camp.

SL: Do you remember when the two Germans did escape from here?

GL: I didn't know that there were Germans that escaped. All I know is that there was really a hubbub down there. I can remember one night the search lights were on and I remember a couple of shots were fired, and that is about my young remembrance of that.

SL: It would be interesting to know if your parents were a little more worried being so close and knowing that there was easy access to the house.

GL: You know, I don’t know. I never heard them say anything or talk about being afraid. And my dad worked at the railroad at night all my life. So there was never any fear. We were there all night for my whole life all alone.

PU: Do you remember any of the railroad people. Do you remember Robert Busico, Maggios?
GL: No I don’t remember that name. I know that when Cy Anderson moved out here, he was a railroad man. His kids I think were all railroad men. Most of my dad’s friends were railroad people but they were from all over the county. From Hooper and Wilson and what have you.

SL: Do you remember anything else?

GL: Not with the prisoners. I just remember the depot very well. There was a water tower right across the street, a hundred-foot water tower that was humungous. I just remember the troops, the soldiers marching up and down the street and things like that.

SL: Did you ever see the Italian Revues?

GL: Never did see any of those. They might have been down on 1200 West.

SL: Eleanor said she could see them from her house.

GL: She probably had a better view of the German prisoner compounds down there. They had some nice big guard towers down here. I can remember those. We tried climbing around on those one time. That is the time we got hauled down to the Provost Marshall, I guess.

PU: Did your father get after you when you got caught by the MPs?

GL: No, he probably didn’t even know it. They just scared the daylights out of us.

PU: Just sent you home, is that what you mean?

GL: Yes, “You can come over here and go to the movie, and that, but don’t climb around on the guard towers.” I can remember when we were climbing around on those guard towers; I can’t remember the Italian prisoners even being there at that time. That might have been later.
SL: Well, thank you.

GL: Well, you are welcome. It is fun to talk about that. Joyce, do you have any additional things that you might have picked up in your history?

J: It is all in the book.

GL: Anyway they never did anything, said anything hurtful. They taught me how to count to ten - uno, dos, tres, quatro, cinco, seis. I can remember that very well. And I want to say there were some swings over there that we swung on, and a couple of big apple trees that we usually talked under.
ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW AGREEMENT

This Interview Agreement is made and entered into this 4 day of February 2008, by and between Weber State University Stewart Library (WSUSL) and Gary Larson, hereinafter called "Interviewee."

Interviewee agrees to participate in a recorded interview, commencing on or about January 31, 2006, with Sarah Langsdon, in association with his/her research on POW's in Ogden.

This Interview Agreement relates to any and all materials originating from the interview, namely the recording of the interview and any written materials, including but not limited to the transcript or other finding aids prepared from the recording.

In consideration of the mutual covenants, conditions, and terms set forth below, the parties hereby agree as follows:

1. Interviewee irrevocably assigns to WSUSL all his or her copyright, title and interest in and to the interview.
2. WSUSL will have the right to use and disseminate the interview for research, educational, and other purposes, including print, present and future technologies, and digitization to provide internet access.
3. Interviewee acknowledges that he/she will receive no remuneration or compensation for either his/her participation in the interview or for the rights assigned hereunder.
4. WSUSL agrees to honor any and all reasonable interviewee restrictions on the use of the interview, if any, for the time specified below, as follows:

   - X Open and usable after my review
   - Print X Present & Future Technologies
   - Closed for a period of ______ years
   - ______ Closed for my lifetime
   - Other: __________________________

Interviewee and Interviewer have executed this Interview Agreement on the date first written above.

INTERVIEWEE

(Signature) Gary Larson
(Printed Name) 970 W Harrisville Rd.
(Address) Harrisonville UT 84404

INTERVIEWER

(Signature) Sarah Langsdon
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