Oral History Program
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Jack Mecham

Interviewed by Ruby Licona
7 December 2005
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Weber State University
Stewart Library
Ogden, Utah

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Ruby Licona
Special Projects Librarian

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

Jack Mecham, an oral history by Ruby Licona, 7 December 2005, WSU Stewart Library Oral History Program, Special Collections, Stewart Library, Weber State University, Ogden, UT.
Jack Mecham in his home in Layton, Utah on December 7, 2005.
Abstract: This is an oral history interview with Jack Mecham. It is being conducted on December 7, 2005, at his home in Layton, Utah, and concerns his experiences as a 12-year old with German prisoners of war who worked in agriculture during World War II in American Fork, Utah. The interviewers are Ruby Licona and Patti Umscheid.

RL: Mr. Mecham, to start with would you please give us your full name and tell us where and when you were born?

JM: My name is Leo Jack Mecham; I always went by Jack. I was born in Nephi, Utah, but I was raised in American Fork, Utah.

RL: We understand that you worked with POWs for awhile. Were you working in apple orchards, or what kind of work were you doing?

JM: It was probably weeding onions or cabbage.

RL: You were working doing agriculture work. Who were you working for?

JM: F. Rulon Nichols. Rulon Nichols eventually became a County Commissioner in Utah County. He is a well-known person.

RL: About what year was it – 1944, 1945?

JM: Well, I only guess, but the war ended in 1945 so I would say it was in 1944.

RL: Okay. Was this during the summer?

JM: Yes. I was out of school.

RL: You were on a regular payroll?

JM: Well, I worked for a lot of farmers. During the Second World War they had a hard time getting help, so to provide help schools let out early. Even though I
was only 12, my grandpa was a farmer so we helped him a lot. My grandpa knew a lot of farmers and we were available. I guess we had a pretty good reputation for working because we never ran out of work. My brother was a couple of years younger than me and he was there, too.

RL: Did you get a regular pay for it?
JM: Yes.

RL: It was acceptable; it wasn’t considered child labor or anything like that? It was a matter of getting the job done.
JM: We were making 25 cents an hour and we thought we were doing really good. My grandpa hired me for a dollar and a quarter per day the year before and I got a chance to work for 25 cents an hour, so there was a big raise. That is basically what they were paying most of us kids then – 25 cents an hour.

RL: I knew people who were doing work-study in college in the 60’s, and they were not getting a whole lot more than that. [laughing] So, when you went to work in 1944 on Mr. Nichols’ farm, were the prisoners there already or did they come later?
JM: The first time that I saw them they were already on the farm. The farmer usually picked us up in our neighborhood and brought us to his farm. I remember when we unloaded we could see people working over on the other side not having any idea who they were, and we were told that they were German prisoners of war and we were to stay away from them. I can remember unloading and looking over there and I could see several men working with hoes; they were hoeing. Behind them about 25 yards was a soldier with a rifle. We were told that we
weren’t to get around them. Because of what we knew about German prisoners and what we had seen in newsreels, they didn’t have to tell us twice because we were a little scared of them anyway.

RL: Did they stay the same the whole time you were there, or were you at a point where you were allowed to interact with them later?

JM: Well, I don’t know exactly how often I worked for Rulon Nichols because I worked for other farmers. We would work for one farmer until we got him caught up then we would go somewhere else. So, I think at a later time we came back and worked side-by-side with the prisoners. Evidently, they had eased off. You would finish up with one farmer and pretty soon somebody else would call you and if you were available you would go. Or one of your friends would say, “So-and-so needs help.” So we’d go over there. I didn’t work steady for Rulon Nichols. In fact, out of all the farmers I worked for he was probably one of the least I worked for.

RL: Was he the only one that had POWs working for him?

JM: He was the only one I ever saw. None of the other farmers that I know of had them, and I worked for several. The farmers were all basically in the same area, though.

RL: Are there any particular incidents or stories that you can tell us about working with the prisoners or any memories that you have of them?

JM: Well, I can remember one time that we were there first. This must have been after we could work with them. I remember the bus coming and it had quite a few prisoners on it. Five or six of them got off and unloaded their food, drink and
coffee. I don’t know what all they had, but I can remember them unloading their stuff. Right behind the bus was a Jeep and in the Jeep were GIs and one of them got off. Then the GI would stay there and the prisoners would go and do whatever we were doing. There was another time when we were working with them that the Germans started talking in German to each other, and then one of them left and headed down to where the guard was. The guard was down at the end of the row, he had not come with us. Evidently, he was down there dozing a little bit and the Germans saw a cloud of dust coming. They knew it was the Jeep, or they determined it was, so they went down to the end of the row, woke up the GI and made sure that he knew they were coming so he would be alert.

RL: Was the GI armed?
JM: Yes.

RL: So, at any point one of them could have taken the gun.
JM: I imagine they could have if they had a mind to.

RL: Where would they have gone?
JM: Besides that if they thought they were bad people, I don’t think they would have let us kids work with them. But I think they finally determined that they were just normal people.

RL: But they were looking out for their GI?
JM: Yes. By the time the Jeep got there, it looked like the GI was a good guard, you know? [laughing] I don’t know that I knew this, but I think it was probably just talk, that he had a hangover from the night before. So, the Germans knew that he was not very alert. I don’t remember what the Germans wore. I remember
they had gray-colored uniforms, but I don’t remember whether they had German markings or PW.

RL: You don’t know if they were uniforms or had a big PW marking?

JM: No, I just don’t remember that.

RL: We had heard that at one point at DDO the German soldiers wanted to keep their uniforms because they could intimidate other people with them, and that eventually their uniforms were taken away so they did not have that as a psychological weapon. I imagine by the time they were out in the orchards working they were not considered dangerous or anything.

JM: I don’t think so. They would not have let us work with them had they been dangerous. Most of them were 18 to 20-year old kids. When I say kids, they were men to me. But, one of them was older and he was a major. He wasn’t very friendly, but the younger guys were. They would try to teach us German and interacted with us all the time. But the major, the older guy, was just kind of ornery. And he was ornery with them, too. Every once in awhile they would get in a verbal battle with each other and they would be yelling back and forth in German, so you knew they weren’t too friendly.

They tried to teach us German. I learned to count to ten. I remember one time there was a frog and they’d say, “Frosch, frosch, frosch.” So, I know what frog is. And another time they said, “Snucka, snucka.” [schlange] That meant “snake.” One time one of the younger ones picked up the snake and there was one prisoner who was really terrified of snakes. They teased him with the snake until you could hear this major, or whatever he was, getting after them for doing
that. They hassled back and forth and laughed, but they quit doing it.

RL: Was it a poisonous snake?

JM: No, it was a blow snake – a water snake. You would see a lot of them down there. That ground used to be kind of a marsh and they drained it so they could farm it. But, there were a lot of frogs, snakes, and toads and that kind of thing around.

Another thing we learned real quick was “Zehn minutan pausa.” That meant “Ten minute rest.” After they had been there a couple of hours, you would hear “Zehn minutan pausa.” Well, we all knew what that was because we liked to rest, too.

RL: Ten minutes of goofing off. [laughing]

JM: Yes. They would have a snack before they would resume work again.

RL: Did they smoke?

JM: I can’t remember. But, I remember they talked to the farmer quite a bit – the guy that was the owner.

RL: Did they have quotas that they had to meet each day?

JM: I don’t know.

RL: I understand with the apple orchards they had so many bushels they had to do each day and then for anything over they were paid extra. But instead of being given money, they were provided with goods from the store. I didn’t know if you were aware of anything like that.

JM: I have no idea of how the money worked, if they were paid by the hour or by the piece or what.
RL: But, they brought their own meals. The farmer did not have to provide anything for them?

JM: Yes. They unloaded it off the bus. Usually sandwiches as I remember. But, I really do not remember that. I just remember them unloading it. I can remember them offering us coffee, and we were kids – Mormon kids, besides that! 

[laughing] We didn’t take it, but they offered it. Then they laughed, so maybe they knew that we weren’t supposed to be drinking it.

RL: They were testing you.

JM: I guess. [laughing]

RL: Were there other incidents that you remember? With you and your brother working, were there other teenagers working?

JM: Yes.

RL: About how big of crew of you were there?

JM: There were about five or six of us kids and about the same amount of them.

RL: Was it always the same prisoners that came, or were there different ones each time?

JM: I think they were the same ones. I think the second time it may have happened over two or three days, but they were the same German GIs. I didn’t work for him that often. We would come and work a week or ten days, then we would be gone.

RL: Sure. Are there other instances that you can recall that you would like to share with us? This farm was in American Fork?

JM: Yes.
RL: You lived in town?
JM: I lived close to town, yes.
RL: On your grandfather’s farm?
JM: No.
RL: Oh, you had worked on your grandfather’s farm.
JM: My grandpa’s, on my mothers side, farm was about a mile from our house.
RL: Did your father farm, also?
JM: Well, he was a farmer. He didn’t own a farm, he was a transit farmer from Nephi, Utah, but he did farm work until they started building Geneva Steele and the WPA and the CCC camps that they had in those days. That’s the only kind of work he could find was farming. In fact, that’s how he met my mom. He tended chickens for a farmer down there that had big chicken coops. My grandpa ran the farm and my mom was one of the cooks for the men.
RL: Do you know if the POWs worked at the chicken farm? I know they did poultry work up in this area.
JM: I don’t know. I have no idea. The only contact I had with them was on Rulon Nichols’ farm.
PU: Did they just camp right there for the harvest period, or did they take them back to wherever they lived?
JM: There was, I understand but I never did see it, a stockade over in the middle of an orchard in Orem. That’s where they came from and at night that’s where they would go sleep.
RL: At the end of the season, do you know if they brought them back up here?
JM: I don’t know. I guess if I had been an adult I would have known all those things.

RL: Sure, sure. But, we came to you knowing that you were a 12-year old, but we wanted to get your perspective. You never felt threatened by them?

JM: Well, the first day we saw them we thought, “German prisoners – wow!” But, after working with them they were just normal kids.

PU: Did your parents have second thoughts, wondering if you should actually work with them?

JM: I don’t remember it being an issue with them.

RL: You were getting your 25 cents an hour and that’s what counted.

JM: Yes, and they trusted Rulon Nichols that he would take care of us. I am sure we went home and reported that we had been working with German prisoners, but they didn’t seem to be upset about it. I don’t remember it being an issue.

PU: I was just wondering if parents hesitated to let their children go with the POWs.

JM: Well, at first they probably had their fears.

RL: What was their demeanor as they were working? Were they singing or talking to one another?

JM: I don’t remember them singing, but they would talk in German and then they would laugh. Sometimes they would try to include us in their conversation by trying to explain things to us. There was one there that spoke fairly decent English. He would kind of interpret for the Germans.

RL: Where had he learned English?

JM: I don’t know. It wasn’t that good of English, but it was a lot better than the others.

RL: Did they try to learn English from you?
JM: Yes.

RL: It was reciprocity.

JM: Yes. They would point to things and signal, “What is it?” We would say it and then they would say it. Sometimes they would tell us the equivalent German word and we would try to say it, then they would laugh. [laughing] We would sometimes laugh at the way they said our words. Generally speaking, their conversation was with each other because they spoke German and ours was English.

RL: But your memory, basically, is of young guys who were drafted who probably would have been doing something totally different, being young, if they had not been in war.

JM: Yes, they were caught up in a war. I probably heard some adult conversation and that might be where I got my mind made up that they were just kids like us, just normal 20-year olds.

RL: Did you go in the military later after you were of age?

JM: No, I didn’t.

RL: I was just wondering how that experience with the POWs might have colored your views about the military or about wars.

JM: It didn’t one way or the other. I remember my grandpa came home everyday at 12 o’clock and the news came on and they would tell about the war. He had a son-in-law and a son that was in it and he didn’t miss that news report everyday. That is the thing that probably shaped how I felt about Germans and war. Germans were bad people and Japanese were bad people. Later on I worked
with some Japanese.

RL: Were they internment Japanese?

JM: No, they were the ones that went down to Topaz. I worked side-by-side with them and worked for them and I'm still in contact with some of them that are in California. Good people.

RL: But, they had been brought from the west coast to the internment camp?

JM: Yes.

RL: You say you worked for them?

JM: Yes.

RL: How so?

JM: They farmed; they raised celery. There were a lot of them that came here. There are several families that I know. They were pushed off the coast and went into these camps, like Topaz, but were told if they wanted to farm and stay inland they could do it. So that is what this family did. They would go contract with a farmer and be a subcontractor, I guess.

RL: They would rent the land – tenant farmers?

JM: Yes. They would work the farm and hire us kids. They were good people. Of course, these were all born in the United States. Their mother wasn't and their dad wasn't, but the kids were. In fact, we went to school with them. One of them was my age.

RL: And you say you are still in contact with them?

JM: Yes. I still keep in contact with the one that was in high school with me.

PU: How were the Japanese different compared to the Germans in a working sense?
Were they hard to work for? Did you enjoy it as much as you did working with the Germans?

JM: They had a very strong work ethic. They were good, honest people so it wasn’t hard to work for them. The Japanese were shorter and we were raising celery. By the time I was working for them I was a sophomore or junior in high school. On the truck that you load the celery on, they would drive down the rows of celery on both sides and the Japanese would have to lift it about that high [lifting his arms up over his head] to get it on the truck.

RL: And you had to bend over? [laughing]

JM: Well, not really, but it was only a lift up to here [lifting his arms to his chest] instead of up to here [lifting his arms up over his head]. They only had one white guy on their crew and that was me. There was another crew of Japanese and they only had one guy on their crew and that was my brother because we were bigger. So, when the trucks came to be loaded it usually took two of us. One of us would get on the truck and the other would be on the ground. Well, the Japanese guy would get on the truck because he would not have to lift it so high, and we would be on the ground and lift them up. I got pretty strong. [laughing]

RL: Going back to the POWs for just a moment, were they pretty good about keeping working or did they have to be prodded?

JM: No, they did not. When they saw the frog and the snake and that, I think we working with onions. They would go down ahead of time with a cultivator, a tractor, and cut all the weeds out except just a little bit on each side. Then they would come down with a hoe and get the ones they could; of course you would
have to stoop over and pick the ones that were close to the plant.

RL: What other kinds of crops did you work with down there?
JM: Cabbage. Cabbage and onions are the only ones I remember. The first time I'm pretty sure we were working with cabbage, and they were small cabbage so it would had to have been spring of the year. It might have been 1945, I don't know.

RL: So it was pretty much row farming: bending over and stooping?
JM: Yes, with a hoe. The other time I'm pretty sure it was onions.

RL: And it was mostly the harvesting?
JM: Well, they were young plants so we were weeding them. When onions first start to grow, you can't even hardly see the onions if you have very many weeds so you have to get them out of there.

RL: You have to get them out of there, and you also have to stamp them down or something, don't you?
JM: Well, that's for harvesting?

RL: Oh, is that for harvesting? I'm not a farmer. [laughing]
JM: You don't really stamp them down; they have a lifter that lifts them out of the ground.

RL: I know, but I thought you did something to the tops.
JM: Well, we topped them.

RL: Oh, okay. I saw people walk on them to stamp them down, but what do I know? [laughing]
JM: They had a lifter that would go down there and it would pull the roots up, then
they would just sit on top of the ground; now that the roots were not connected, the tops would start to whither. A few days later we would go and top them. But, we weren’t doing that, we were weeding with the German prisoners – cutting the weeds out.

RL: And finding snakes to torment someone with?

JM: [laughing] Well, those things just happen.

RL: Sure. And, I am sure that you were like boys of any age: stepped back, laughed and watched them be deviled.

JM: I told you I learned some swear words. I don’t know if I told you today or not?

RL: Well, you mentioned it on the phone the other day. Did they stay with you?

JM: Some of them.

RL: I don’t care to have you repeat them. [laughing]

JM: Well, I heard some of them enough that I still remember them, yes. They would call each other “stinken German …” something. I know what the other word was, too. [laughing]

RL: I could imagine, and if you hear it in a movie you would know what they are talking about. [laughing]

JM: Yes. Well, it kind of almost sounds like the English. It’s close enough to it that you can tell what it is – after you know. At first you don’t know, but you finally pick up on it. They would also say this lingo if they were mad at each other. They would call each other “stinken German …” or “Gustunka Deutschland …” [laughing]

RL: Well, you have some memories of fairly unique experiences.
JM: Yes, for 12-years old.

RL: And it is amazing to have the memories! We have spoken with people who were quite a bit older than you are now, and it’s been years so I guess it’s harder to hang on to the memories.

JM: Well, somehow I got the opinion that all of those Germans wanted to come back here and live after the war was over. Now I never did hear them say that, but I probably heard the adults talking.

RL: Do you know if any of them did come back?

JM: I don’t. I often wandered. I sent an email to the Bob Lonsberry (KNRS) show one day and said, “Why can’t we use your show to see if there are any down there?” If he did, he didn’t do it while I was listening, but I was thinking he should put on the air, “Are any of you prisoners down there? Did any of you make it?”

RL: We did have an interview with the widow of a prisoner in Ogden and they came over here in 1952. He was an 18-year old as a prisoner here, but they came here in the early 50’s brought over by the Lutheran World Fund. She talked about their move here, and they had been offered some other countries and so forth but he ended up applying to come here. When they asked him where they wanted to go he said, “Ogden, Utah.” He was asked, “Why would you want to go there?” He said, “Because it’s a beautiful place!” They said, “But we have other states that are much more beautiful.” [laughing] He said, “No.” He wanted to come here. He had fallen in love with the landscape and the people. So, there may be others who came here.

JM: Oh. See, they would be 10 years older than me, or could be, so they would be in
their 80’s.

RL: Well, we have had people who responded to the first exhibit that we had. We had such a public response that we are now going to expand the exhibit and hope to have quite a bit of publicity about it, so we may have others that pop up. If there are any from American Fork, we will let you know.

JM: [laughing] Rulon Nichols has been dead for quite awhile, but this Junior Williamson – I sent you his phone number?

RL: Yes.

JM: He’s a little older than I am, about four years older than me, but he did work for Rulon and he does remember the prisoners. I asked him if I could give you his name and he said, “That would be fine. I don’t’ know if I can remember enough to help them any.”

RL: I'll certainly give him a call.

JM: If he was older, he might have a better recollection of some of that.

RL: And a little bit better understanding, because he would have had more interaction with the adults.

JM: Yes.

RL: As I recall in the 40’s and 50’s children were to be seen and not heard when the adults were around conversing. He may have had a better opportunity to interact. We appreciate that information. If you think of other incidents that you would like to share with us, or have any additional information we hope that you will contact us. We appreciate your time and thank you for giving us the opportunity to talk with you.
JM: My pleasure.

RL: Thank you.
ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW AGREEMENT

This Interview Agreement is made and entered into this ______ day of _____, 2005, by and between Weber State University Stewart Library (WSUSL) and Jack Mecham hereinafter called "Interviewee."

Interviewee agrees to participate in a recorded interview, commencing on or about ____ December 2005, with Ruby Licana 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:

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

INTERVIEWEE

(Signature) Jack Mecham
(Printed Name) Jack J Mecham
(Address) 217 Green Drive
(Layton, UT 84041)

INTERVIEWER

(Signature) Ruby A. Licana
(Printed Name) Ruby A. Licana
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