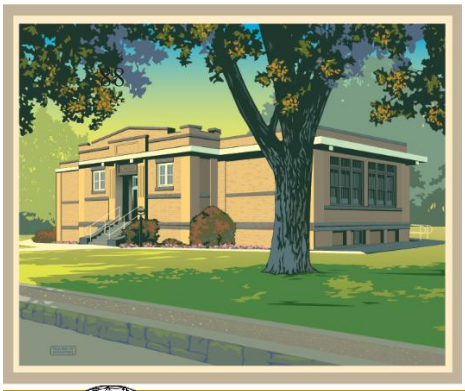

Twin Falls County Historical Society Museum

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The Official Newsletter of the Twin Falls County Historical Society Museum

September 2026

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German POW's to Work On Sugar Beet Thinning

RUPERT (UP)—Spring beet thinning work in southern Idaho will find 3121 German prisoners of war on the job, Col. D. E. Smith, commanding officer of the Rupert prisoner of war camp, said today.

The colonel said R. K. Pearson, head of the extension service labor setup, has approved the following assignment:

Idaho Falls 370 prisoner workers; Wilder 250; Marsing 250; Franklin 250; Filer 330; Minidoka county 325; Cassia county 325; Fort Hall 250; Thomas 250; Sugar City 200; Preston 250; Hazelton 71.

Idaho Statesman
March 14, 1946

The Filer Fairgrounds – A WWII P.O.W. Camp?

By Judy Lea Smith, Ph. D.

"We could not understand why, when the young men who were German P.O.W.s were taken out for exercise, marching North along Fair Street, our mother would come out of the house and would make us go inside until they had gone past our family home located on Fair Street in Filer. These P.O.W.s looked like young boys who should have been in our classes at school." (Williams & Potts, 2016).

A piece of Idaho history, many may not know, is that the Filer Fairgrounds was an Allied P.O.W. Camp where German and Italian prisoners were housed from 1942 – 1946. (https://www.kivitv.com/news/camps-rupert).

England, during World War II, asked the U.S. Government to help with housing prisoners of war. After the defeat of Marshall Rommel's tank forces in the deserts of northern Africa, thousands of German and Italian POWS were shipped to Britian and then transported on to the United States. Great Britian did not have the land space and facilities to handle the number of POWs being taken by the Allies. By 1945, when the war ended, more than 400,000 prisoners of war had been sent to America. (American History & Genealogy Project: WWII POW Camps, diggin4treasure).

These WWII POWs were housed in 900 camps scattered throughout the United States (https://www.genealogy-bank.com/blog, Little-Known WWII Facts: German POWS in the U.S., April 16, 2015).

The idea of the Filer Fairgrounds as a WWII POW Camp may seem bizarre. Yet, the WWII Allies captured POWs, and they had to house them somewhere. These German and Italian prisoners were sent around the USA during WWII, often to help farmers and ranchers when their crops needed tending or harvesting. In many camps, across the United States, these prisoners became a part of everyday life – actually working on individual family farms. POWs assisted with the shortage of laborers, in the U.S., by working on all types of farms in rural areas where they were held captive. As the POW Camps were filling up, the farms and the factories across America were struggling with acute labor shortages. Our American Boys had gone off to War.

> *"The Scott Homestead on Fair Street was surrounded by apple trees. This was Dad's business. One day the wind had blown quite a few apples on the ground. When the German POWs marched by, one stooped down to get an apple. The guards immediately jumped on him and restrained him. A big commotion followed. Mother went to the window to see what the noise was about.*
>
> *Mother told Dad about the episode. Dad went to the Fairgrounds and made arrangements for the soldiers to stop by the next day and to pick up all the apples on the ground alongside the road*." (Williams & Potts, 2016).

The United States faced a dilemma. According to Geneva Convention protocols, POWs could be forced to work only if they were paid. Accordingly, the United States Government put tens of thousands of enemy prisoners to work, assigning them to canneries and mills, to farms to harvest wheat or pick potatoes, and other places they were needed and could work with minimum security. (https:///smithsonianmag.com/history/germans-pows-on-the-american-homefront-141009996/)

Surprisingly, little is known about the WWII POW Camps and the men who lived and worked in America while war raged on (Larsen, J. M., 2010).

County and State Fairgrounds usually bring to mind, images of carnival rides, cotton candy, displays of farm animals, and farm machinery. Not so for several thousand World War II Prisoners of War who were housed at the Filer fairgrounds (No Cotton Candy and Pony Rides – WWII POWs housed in U.S. Fairgrounds/ War History Online).

The Twin Falls County Fairgrounds, in Filer, Idaho served as a Branch POW Camp under Camp Rupert (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camp_Rupert). Camp Rupert, located near Paul, Idaho, was the Base Camp for the southern part of the state of Idaho, housing about 15,000 POWs across eleven Branch Camps, which included the Filer County Fairgrounds. (American History and Genealogy Project).

The Filer County Fairground was designed originally around the concept of a self-sustaining living community, a Fair, within a small city. The fairgrounds had its own sewer system, medical facility, barracks, commissary, and track & field areas. The fairgrounds were designed to house around 3,000 people, but at its peak, the Filer POW Camp held more than its intended capacity, along with about 1,000 U.S. military personnel.

"The prisoners were kept on the fairgrounds which was entirely fenced in with reinforced barbed wire in many places.

A Filer Home Guard was formed in 1942 with most of the local Filer men acting as members. The Filer Home Guard was called upon to volunteer when a group of German POWs were sent as prisoners to the Filer Camp. I remember going to the Filer Fairgrounds with my dad when he built a tall watch tower which would house a huge spotlight and Filer Home Guardsmen. My dad was a member of the Filer Home Guard. He would take his turn as a guard on the night shift. He would come home for breakfast and take a nap before going to his regular job." (Williams and Potts, 2016)

The Home Guard lined up at the Fairgrounds — 1942

The German and Italian POWs were sent to work in surrounding agricultural fields to help local farmers. This work assistance program was part of a broader U.S. effort to address labor shortages during the War. The POWs traveled by bus to and from their worksites, with the Fairgrounds serving as their living quarters (Https://www.bing.com/search?q=German POWS at Filer%2C ID Fairgrounds).

The Filer 1945 Potato Harvest

"World War II ended officially after September 1945. The U.S. troops had not come home and a dilemma existed. "How do we harvest the potato crop without help?" The German Prisoners of War who were stationed at the Twin Falls County Fairground would be needed to come to the aid of the local Filer farmers.

The POWs were under military guard and could be dispatched into the fields to help harvest the spuds and sugar beets. Three of the neighbors decided to work together in the spuds and to use a crew of POWs. Our crew averaged about twenty-five to thirty years old men. They were good workers. The crews consisted of twenty prisoners.

They had a guard in the fields with them. They were transported to and from work in School buses owned by H. L. Cederholm. After about two or three days, the guard became ill and could not come out to the farm. My dad, Fred Williams, took his spot.

He made hot coffee for them and cooked their noon meal in a big iron kettle over a fire. The prisoner's job was to pick spuds into wire baskets and dump two full baskets into each burlap sack. They worked in pairs and were to pick a determined number of sacks each day based on the size and yield of the potatoes.

One day, on Fred Reichert's Farm, we had dug a lot of spuds. The prisoners said they had picked their limits. No more. One of the farmers went to the Fairgrounds to get an officer in charge.
The picked spuds were measured for yield, and it turned out they did need to pick more spuds.
All of the farming operators gave a sigh of relief! They needed the POWs to finish picking the year's spud harvest."
The spud harvest took about three weeks. The Filer High School was closed the entire time to allow the students to pick potatoes with their families and to earn money. It was a very interesting and an educational Fall … ***One you could never forget!"***

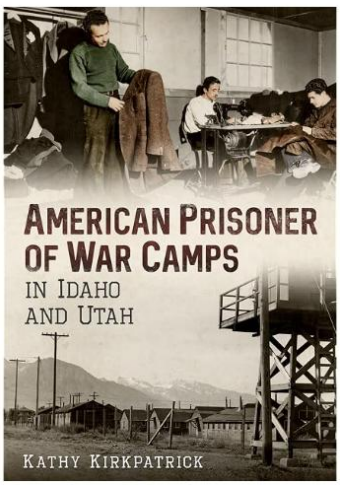
(Williams, D., 2016)

When World War II ended in 1945, the German and the Italian men who had been held as POWs at the Filer Fairgrounds began to be shipped back to their native countries. Reports reaching Military Commanding Offices and Filer Fairgrounds POW Camp officials suggest that the general feeling (among the prisoners) was that they were glad the War was over (Lyons, J., War History Online, Times-News, May 1945). Idaho Prisoners were well-treated, in accordance with the Geneva Convention. Little is known of these German and Italian POWs and their role in the history of Twin Falls County. Yet, they were an invaluable resource to the Filer farmers to harvest our famous Idaho spuds during WWII. No doubt the men who were held at Allied POW Camps across America reacted with equanimity because they were anxious to return to their families in Europe. The POWs were shipped home in 1945 -1946.

The Twin Falls County Fair for 1942 and 1943 were not held and then only a small Fair in 1944. Youth Fairs for 4-H and FFA Clubs were held as required by the original deed. The Twin Falls Fair Board's records show that during the War Years, the Fairgrounds were used to grow crops of potatoes and wheat. With peace finally assured on September 2, 1945, Twin Falls County could once again concentrate on rebuilding the economy and continue with its Twin Falls County Fair and Rodeo for the balance of the 1940s. (Gilbertson, 2016).

Imagine as you drive along Fair Street, heading to the Twin Falls County Fair, looking out and watching a large group of uniformed WWII POW regiments, marching in unison across the grassy grounds. A large watch tower standing in the distance, where Filer Home Guardsmen observe the exercise activities.

An image which once was …



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Buy a Brick Fundraiser

We are halfway to our goal of selling 100 bricks!

Commemorative bricks are a great way to honor your loved ones, promote your business or brand, and show support for your local museum.

We now have three options: a 4” by 8” with three lines of text, an 8” by 8” with six lines of text, and an 8” by 8” with four lines of text and a company logo or brand image.

All options can include up to 18 characters per line and text is automatically centered. Scan the QR code to order your bricks through our website: twinfallsmuseum.org or stop by the museum to fill out an order form.

Payments can be made in cash, check, card, or through the donate button on our website.

We greatly appreciate all the support we have received for this project! Brick installation is currently scheduled for spring 2027.

Scan for order forms

2026 Fair Display!

250 Years of the American Spirit

This year’s fair display explores moments in our county’s history that embody the American spirit.

A spirit of bravery, adventure, passion, ingenuity, determination, community, and hard work.

Stop by the Antiques Building during the Twin Falls County Fair, September 2nd through the 7th, to check it out!

October Lecture!

NATIVE AMERICAN FISHING

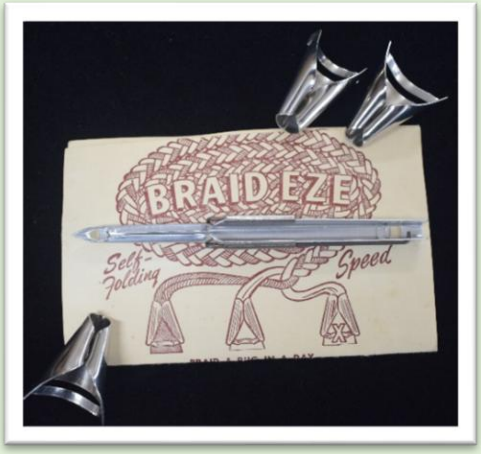
Saturday, October 17th, 1:00

Aarianna Harmon, Education and Collections Coordinator at the Herrett Center, will share the tools and techniques of Native Americans.

More information on this presentation coming soon! Check the events page on our website, twinfallsmuseum.org, for updates.

Donations

Merchant trade tokens donated by David Killinger



Braid-EZE Rug Lacer donated by Anita Nowak

Maroa Women's Club Signature Quilt donated in memory of Florence Cobb

Vintage dolls, antique clothing, baby blanket, hats, etc.. donated by Jana Wanman

Stave waterline donated by the West End Cemetery

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