

An Interesting Life
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- J. Shefchik 2/17/2015

PREFACE

All of the information in this paper is based on the personal interview with Joseph St. Andre on October 5, 1994 and the unpublished manuscript of Joseph St. Andre entitled " The Memoirs of Joseph St. Andre".

Joseph Carr St. Andre has led a very fascinating life through his eighty-six years of existence. On the outside, Joe looks like a simple man who tends to his turkeys while living in his one story house in a tiny location called Jacobsville; about fifteen miles from Lake Linden, Michigan. The two signs you see when turning down Joe's driveway, Turkey Town, U.S.A. and St. Andre Blvd., catch your eye and make you wonder if there isn't more to this old guy. On the inside, Joseph St. Andre is the most fascinating man I have ever met. This man has lived an amazing life and doesn't mind telling his story.

Joe is an expert on lighthouses. This is evident by looking around his tiny home and seeing the dozens of pictures and replicas of lighthouses. When I asked him how he had developed such a great love for such a strange thing as a lighthouse, he told me he was born into it, literally. Joe was born in a lighthouse in East Tawans, Michigan on August 16, 1908 and he has the certificate to prove it. Having lighthouse keepers for parents, Joe didn't have much choice other than to become a lighthouse keeper himself. It shouldn't come to anybody's surprise that Joe married a lighthouse keeper's daughter, Margaret. Margaret has since passed away a few years ago, and it is evident that Joe still misses her. He is currently a member of an association on lighthouses in Michigan and has helped to build eighteen harbors and lighthouses throughout the state.

Being born in a lighthouse, as interesting and odd as it was, was only the third most interesting story I heard that day. Sometime after World War II (Joe isn't very good with exact

dates), Joe was hired by the Attorney General Frank Kelly. Joe's job was simple: catch one of the most prominent members of the mob. Joe doesn't know how he ended up with such a job, but he was happy to do it, especially since he was being paid fifty dollars an hour. I thought that was kind of high, even for today, so I questioned him on it. He stood firmly about being paid that amount, and said it was because he was doing a very dangerous job. He told me about attending all these secret meetings and how he was only allowed to talk with certain people because of the importance of this job. He told me about a certain day when he was in a meeting. His superior came up to him and told him he was going to have to go and hide out for a couple of months because the mob had found out about him and they were probably after him right then. So Joe packed up his stuff and went to hide out in his little home in Jacobsville. Joe objected, but he was assigned a live-in bodyguard for that two months of hiding. He told me his house was just too small for three people to live in, but his wife thought the body guard couldn't hurt. Obviously Joe didn't end up like Jimmy Hoffa, but that put his undercover agent career to an end.

Although chasing the mob may have been the most exciting thing do, Joe also did his part to help out the FBI. Shortly after World War II, Joe was an informer for the FBI. While living in his small home out in Jacobsville, Joe had an agent come to see him approximately once a month. Joe would tell the agent about certain people he had found out were communists. There was a general store near the Chassell area where Joe knew the owner, and

was able to find out a great deal of information about a lot of people. Since there weren't very many stores in the area, the store owner knew just about everybody in the area. This man would then tell Joe about the certain people who were practicing communism or even thought to be communists. Joe would then relay this information to the FBI agent and nobody was any the wiser. Joe told me he really believed the communists were trying to gain political control; that was the only reason he did what he did.

These are all amazing stories from a man who has seen a lot in his day. I think all of these stories are even more amazing considering the man only has an eight grade education. In fact, he was the valedictorian of his eight grade class. But, then, he was the only student in the class. I saw a copy of the diploma Joe received from the tiny school in Jacobsville; the original copy is in the archives at Michigan Technological University.

There are numerous other amazing stories I heard during this interview that were almost unbelievable, but the major part of this interview was spent talking about the prisoner of war camps throughout the Upper Peninsula. To be exact, there were six camps in the Upper Peninsula and ten altogether in the section for which Joe was in charge.

During World War II Joe was working for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Although Joe never actually enlisted in the army, he still had a lot of power during this time. Joe's commanding officer, Colonel Allen, sent him to St. Paul, Minnesota for a special assignment. The assignment was the

opening of prisoner of war camps for German prisoners of war. Joe remembers the importance of secrecy stressed to him while receiving his instructions. Joe was to prepare the camps for the prisoners. By this I mean he had to furnish guard towers and perform the maintenance needed to ready the former Civilian Conservation Corps camps for the prisoners. Joe had to install three guard towers in each camp as well as installing high powered search lights and machine guns in the towers.

There were ten camps in Joe's district, but only six were located in the Upper Peninsula; the others were in northern Wisconsin and Minnesota. The six camps in the Upper Peninsula were Camp Autrain, Camp Sidnaw, Camp Evelyn, Camp Pori, Camp Raco, and James Lake. There were only two people who were permitted twenty-four hour permission to be in the camps: Joe and his interpreter, Ed Platzke. Ed Platzke has since passed away a few years ago, so Joe is the only living person who had access to the prisoner of war camps. James Lake was mainly used for a supply camp but still had a couple of prisoners. The other camps had approximately two-hundred and forty prisoners as chart 1^a on the following page shows; along with the number of officers in each camp as well as the number of guards.

The prisoners came from north Africa. They were fighting for the famous "Desert Fox" Irwin Rommel. These prisoners had not seen or heard from their families in almost two years before getting shipped to the prisoner of war camps. While in the prisoner of war camps, the prisoners were assigned work duty.

Chart 1^a

Autrain	226 prisoners	2 officers	37 guards
Sidnaw	251 prisoners	2 officers	33 guards
Evelyn	247 prisoners	3 officers	43 guards
Pori	250 prisoners	12 NCO's	42 guards
Raco	215 prisoners	3 officers	43 guards

According to the rules of the Geneva Convention, no prisoners of war could be made to help the war effort, so these prisoners would spend their work days cutting pulp wood in the woods. There was a quota that each prisoner had to meet each day in order to get paid. They were paid approximately \$2.50 a day, but were paid in a script of paper called PX which enabled the prisoners to purchase things like candy, soap, socks, and other personal items. In no way shape or form were the prisoners to be given any money. It was believed that the prisoners would be able to get a bus ticket easily if they could get the money.

When I think about the words prisoner of war camp, I picture something like the death camps in Germany used to kill the Jews. The prisoner of war camps in the Upper Peninsula during World War II couldn't have been further from that thought. The prisoners were treated very kindly and with respect. In the two years the camps were open, there was not one case of violence against a prisoner or against an officer or guard. The prisoners had an overall feeling of relief from getting away from the war. Don't misunderstand, they weren't exactly overjoyed to be prisoners, but they were glad to be out of the war where they had some hope of returning to their families alive. I don't want to imply these camps were a nice place to live; there were armed guards all around, nose counts every night at midnight, and in the winter months the prisoners had to surrender their shoes before going to bed. There was only one known escape in that two-year operation from any of the camps in the Upper Peninsula. Two men had somehow gotten

out of the camp and taken off into the woods. Their hopes of escaped were thwarted by the mosquitoes and black flies, as they were drawn out of the woods and caught a couple of miles away. Since the prisoners had no idea where they were, they didn't want to escape. There was also one major reason the prisoners didn't try to escape. On the ride over, they were told they would be sent to a labor camp in Arkansas if they ever tried to escape. Joe doesn't know for sure, but he doesn't think such a camp ever existed. The prisoners knew they were near a great body of water, but had no idea it was Lake Superior. Eventually some of the prisoners at Camps Pori and Sidnaw were taken over to Ontonagon and permitted to view this enormous mass of water.

Joe was insistent that he had never felt threatened by any of the prisoners in any of the camps. One of the favorite stories he likes to tell is about one particular German prisoner. When Joe asked this man if he had a watch, the prisoner replied that he did but it was stolen by an American soldier on the way here, along with his ring and wallet. This really upset the prisoner for some reason. When Joe asked him why he was so upset, the prisoner told him he didn't care about the ring, watch, or wallet, but he missed the picture of his wife holding their newborn baby. Since he had been shipped directly from Russia to north Africa, he hadn't heard from his family in nearly two years. He couldn't help from wondering if his wife and young daughter were safe. Joe doesn't know how, but about two months later that same soldier came up to him and told Joe that he had heard from his wife and she and the baby were doing fine.

As I said, secrecy was very important. The army didn't want the people to know anything about the camps. Eventually some people found out about the camps, but that was near the end of the war. The only instance of people knowing about the prisoners coming was near Munising at Camp Evelyn. Somehow the news of the prisoners leaked out and the newspaper had a big headline the next day telling everybody about the prisoners coming to Munising. This caused fear among the townspeople. Parents even kept their children home from school. That was the only instance of an information leak. For the most part nobody else knew of the prisoners.

Joe was very insistent on telling me about a couple of articles written in recent years about the prisoner of war camps. He said there were stories about people coming to visit the prisoners, which was nonsense. The guards, officers, and Joe and Ed Platzke were the only people ever in the camp. Another story was about a guard letting a prisoner borrow his gun so he could go out and hunt. This was also ridiculous, because the prisoners were only allowed outside to cut wood and that was all. Besides, what guard in his right mind would give an enemy his gun?

When the war was over, the prisoners were sent back to Germany. There wasn't one single death in the two years; every German that was sent to the camps returned home after the war. As for the prisoner of war camps, they were dismantled and sent to Brule, Wisconsin. The only shred of any of the camps is a guard tower in Sidnaw. A visitor to the area wouldn't even be able to tell there was anything at any of the other sites. The Kelly Hotel,

which is located in Watersmeet, was Joe's headquarters. Joe thinks the hotel might still be open, but I did some checking around and couldn't find such a hotel in Watersmeet. My feeling is that the hotel no longer exists.

Joseph St. Andre has lived one interesting life so far. This man who lives in a one story house out in the boondocks and tends to his turkeys is just full of interesting stories waiting to be told. It is easy to forget about this man only having an eighth grade education because of the knowledge he possesses.

The main thing about the prisoner of war camps was the secrecy involved. The army wanted to prevent the American public from ever knowing about these camps. Its not that these camps were violent like the ones in Germany, but just the fact that there were prisoner of war camps is bad for the American image. The majority of the people in the United States still have no idea there were prisoner of war camps in the Upper Peninsula. It would be great if the camps were still standing today, and people would be able to go and explore them. They are a valuable part of Upper Michigan history during World War II.

I would like to emphasize that the prisoners were not angry about being in the camps; they weren't exactly thrilled, but at least they were out of the war. Again, each prisoner was returned to their home as soon as the war was over. I think the thought of having prisoner of war camps in the area shocked and scared some people, but once they realized exactly how they were run, how the prisoners were treated, and the feelings among the prisoners, people were able to cope with the camps.

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