

Photographs from the Library of Congress are on display at the Joseph F. Glidden Homestead & Historical Center as part of the museum's permanent collection.

Barbed Wire

A Cultural History through Photographs

Barbed wire excludes and includes. Its function is always to magnify differences between the inside and the outside. Barbed wire was added to preexisting elements in order to enhance separation. Thus, it was a supplementary element in protecting fields and herds, in separating whites and Indians, in defending trenches, and in imprisoning.

Oliver Razac, *Barbed Wire*, p. 75.

Since its invention and perfection in the 1860s, barbed wire has changed very little in design and function. But its symbolism and meaning have changed dramatically. Originally designed for restraining animals, it was quickly adapted for use against humans. Barbed wire is a simple concept and is equally simple to produce. Its practical uses span the agricultural, political, military, and economic realms of modern society. Barbed wire has played an essential role in the territorial expansion and settlement of the United States, been used as a weapon of war, is readily identified with incarceration, and has even become a tool for oppression, exclusion, and, sadly, extermination.

Barbed wire was a wall without being a wall. It presented a substantial obstacle to be overcome, easily withstood the elements, was invisible from a distance, impervious to weapons fire, and yet somehow it was capable of stopping an entire army and was the demarcation the separated opposing sides in war. In World War I the Western Front was defined by more than 1,300 miles of snaking barbed wire from north to south and in most areas the wire was over a quarter of mile deep. Barbed wire's use as a boundary is both a symbol of law and has sparked law-breaking. It remains a central element of almost every prison boundary just as it seems to present an obstacle which many seek to render meaningless. Barbed wire is a ubiquitous reminder of oppression, indelibly linked with the efforts to exterminate Jews, Roma, Sinti, and others deemed undesirable by the Third Reich during World War II. Those who were determined to control their own destiny, however, would throw themselves upon the wire, often electrified, in an action that came to be known as "embracing the wire."

Barbed wire has also taken on metaphorical and imaginative uses. People have also domesticated barbed wire (just as it was meant to domesticate animals) and have used it against each other and in different ways. Barbed wire led to hardships for the Native Americans as a result of its use in and facilitation of the system of land parcels, as exemplified in the Dawes Act. Simply put, it rendered arbitrary boundaries visible and made them concrete, leading the Native peoples to call it "the devil's rope." It was also the source of significant tensions, ultimately violence, between ranchers and cattlemen who had different conceptions on how the plains were best used.

Movies and novels have been written where barbed wire has been a central, if unnamed, character. From Kirk Douglas' movie *A Man Without a Star* to novels such as E. Moore Davis' *The Wire Cutters* (1899) and Cameron Judd's more recent *Devil Wire* (1981) Most recently, barbed wire has become a symbol of oppression, used by groups who protest the actions and policies of governments and groups who curtail the rights of others around the globe. It has been used as symbol of protest against Apartheid, communism, and, as exemplified by the Amnesty International logo, human rights abuses.

Reviel Netz has argued that barbed wire has been “at the forefront of the major events of history,” its employment marked “the coming of modernity.” In fact, he writes, “barbed wire was what [modernity] required” (p. xiii). Indeed, barbed wire is one of the few inventions of the 19th century that remains current. It transcends the rural and urban divide and is equally at home in both realms. It has been equally disruptive and beneficial, depending upon which side of the wire one has been on.

We invite you to step back, consider the multiple dimensions of barbed wire from its invention to the present, and view the images depicted in these photographs in both literal and metaphorical terms. Ask yourself, what has Joseph Glidden wrought?

What ideas do you have about barbed wire? How have you seen it represented throughout your life—in person and in the media—and what meaning does it have for you?

The cultural impact of barbed wire has been significant and extends into many different and seemingly unrelated facets of life. But this exhibit has only presented a few ways that we use and can see barbed wire. What themes have we left out? What other aspects of barbed wire can you envision?

Feel free to fill out one of our comment sheets at the end of the exhibit and add your own reflections about the cultural meaning and history of barbed wire—from agriculture to oppression.

Suggestions for further reading:

Alan Krell, *The Devil's Rope: A Cultural History of Barbed Wire* (Reaktion Books, 2002).

Reviel Netz, *Barbed Wire: An Ecology of Modernity* (Wesleyan, 2004)

Oliver Razac, *Barbed Wire: A Political History* (New Press, 2000).

Agriculture and Westward Expansion

1. **Piles of barbed wire.** New Roads, Louisiana (1938). These rolls of wire were part of a stockpile of wire for the U.S. military. Barbed wire was cheap to manufacture, easy to install, and virtually impervious to sustained attack, making it the perfect tool for use in war. These rolls later found their way to Europe for use in World War II. Photograph taken by the United States Office of War Information. Courtesy, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



2. **Steps for crossing a barbed wire fence.** Sheridan County, Montana (1937). Barbed wire's success at confining livestock presented an impediment to the movement of people. While many used gates or other devices to create people-friendly access, others developed more ingenious methods such as these stairs, thus eliminating the need to cut a gap (seen as a potential weak spot) in the fence. Courtesy, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



3. **East Texas farmer rolling up old barbed wire.** Near Harleton, Texas (1939 aprx.). Barbed wire was the most versatile, inexpensive, and mobile fence available. One or two people could construct and maintain a fence. The design of the wire also meant that it was not lethal if handled carefully, as demonstrated by the fact that this farmer is not wearing any gloves or other protective devices as he undertakes his work. Courtesy, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



4. **Rail fence joining barbed wire fence.** Carter County, Missouri (1942). John Vachon, photographer. This image depicts the merger of two different kinds of fence, both deployed with effectiveness throughout the nation's agricultural heartland. The barbed wire represents the modern, steel-dominated and labor-efficient fence, as juxtaposed with the labor intensive, wooden rail fence employed throughout much of the nation since the colonial era. Why did barbed wire win out over a fence that had shown its ability to survive through the ages? Courtesy, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



Confinement and War

1. **Still photo from film *Stosstrupp***. Munich (1917). This photo is taken from a scene in a German propaganda film. It shows French soldiers with fixed bayonets passing through barbed wire as they seek to achieve their objective to take the nearby trench during fighting on the Western Front in World War I. This type of scene is perhaps one of the most iconic of all images of barbed wire. The brutality and destructiveness of early fighting along the trenches of the Western Front was considered to be the most barbaric form of warfare ever undertaken and exemplified the evil aspects of unchecked technological developments, one of which was barbed wire.



Impervious to traditional methods of bombing, soldiers quickly developed ways to protect themselves from barbed wire, to throw themselves upon it so that others behind them could pass over, and even methods of gathering the wire and using it as a weapon against the enemy. Courtesy, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

2. **Concentration camp**. Emsland, Germany (1939). The German watchtower stands outside a fifteen-foot tall, electrified barbed wire fence at a camp constructed to hold prisoners of war. To what extent is this extension of the original intended use of barbed wire acceptable? Courtesy, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



3. **Barbed-wire enclosed camp for migrant workers at the Cannon Company**. Bridgeville, Delaware (1940). Migrant workers were often seen as a threat to the social and economic stability of the nation and thus companies enclosed their living quarters in a protective fence. But whom did the fence protect? Courtesy, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



4. **Union Laguna players, Mexican Baseball League**. Mexico City (1946). Fans and players have often had a love-hate relationship. When players perform well the fans adore them; but when they play poorly the fans can quickly turn on them. Fans are often particularly hostile toward players from the visiting or “opposing” teams. In this photograph players from the visiting Union Laguna team are separated from the fans by barbed wire in order to keep objects from being thrown at them and to keep irate fans from attacking the players. Courtesy, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



5. **U.S. POW of Japanese.** Cabanutuan prison camp, Philippine Islands (1946). Ben Steele, artist.



This American soldier stands at the perimeter of his prison. Barbed wire was a deceptive tool for imprisonment: a prisoner could see through it, lending it a sense of openness, yet in reality it was quite impervious, especially when accompanied by other methods of control, including watch towers and armed guards. Barbed wire, and its derivatives such as razor wire, continues to play a central role in defining the boundaries of confinement and prisons. Courtesy, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

Politics

1. **“The deadly wire fence, or how an eminent Senator may lose his seat.** June 26, 1895, *Washington Post*, George Coffin, artist. Barbed wire quickly became an effective metaphor for entrapment or a sticky situation. In this cartoon, Senator Blackburn gets caught up in the barbed wire fence of free silver and Populism, a dire situation for a senator who wished to keep a seat in a Republican-controlled Congress. Past and current politicians have also gotten caught up in issues that could easily be characterized in similar ways. One can see similarities in the recent primary defeat of sitting Senator Joseph Lieberman for his support of the war in Iraq. Courtesy, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



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2. **“A turbulent border, a cooperative spirit.”** Cover Page illustration, *Chicago Tribune*



“Perspective,” Sunday, April 2, 2006. Chuck Burke, artist. This illustration uses barbed wire as a symbol of the divisive nature surrounding modern immigration. The US and Mexico have long had a contentious relationship stemming from the earliest period of westward migration and nationhood. Should the United States fortify its border, as exemplified by the barbed wire, or should it open its doors? Courtesy, *Chicago Tribune*, Reproductions Division, Chicago, IL.

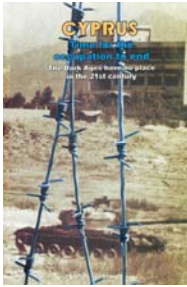
3. **“Welcome Home.”** Art Wood, artist. This cartoon depicts the Democratic Party welcoming back its Southern membership at the dawning of the Chicago Democratic National Convention held in Chicago in 1956. But the welcome is conditional upon the Southern Democrat accepting the terms and platform of the Northern and Western wings that dominate the party. He must pass over the barbed wire, avoid the “Left-wing Block,” step past the tacks (or thorny issues), over the nail-studded board of federal controls, past the broken glass and litter, and be willing to bury the hatchet. There is little hope of reconciliation. How could barbed wire be used to indicate modern divisions within and between the various political parties? Courtesy, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



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Oppression

1. **“Cyprus: Time for the occupation to end,” brochure.** Nicosia (2000). The island of Cyprus has been divided by a militarized line, secured by opposing Greek and Turkish forces, since 1974. Both sides have made claims against the other. The Republic of Cyprus claims that Turkey illegally invaded the island. In what ways are they using the image of barbed wire to represent their perspective? How might they be distorting the other side through such a depiction? Courtesy, Mission of the Republic of Cyprus, Washington, D.C., 2000.



2. **Solidaritat.** Berlin (1987). This German poster expresses support for the nascent labor movement, then already flourishing in Poland, and used barbed wire as a symbol of the oppression of labor at the hands of communist leadership. The symbolism of the strong and bold fist breaking through the barbed wire is unmistakable. The Solidarity Movement, most often exemplified by the Polish leader Lech Walesa, was credited with bringing down communism and spreading democracy and capitalism throughout Eastern Europe. Poster designed by the Solidaritatskomitee der DDR. Courtesy, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



3. **Solidaridad con el pueblo de Africa del sur.** Unknown (ca. 1987-1995). Stated in four different languages, this poster professes “Solidarity with the people of South Africa” who were, at the time of the poster’s creation, still hobbled by the system of Apartheid that segregated the South African people by race and ethnicity. The fact that the poster is printed in Spanish, English, French and Arabic indicates the extent of oppression throughout the world and also provides a glimpse into the spectrum of nations that participated in the systems of colonization that led to segregation and oppression. Courtesy, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

