Although such work could be demanding and entail injuries or frostbite, it appears that in most camps internees worked as little as possible. “Ignorant, sullen [bad-tempered], inert [unmotivated], the mass of these internees were the very incarnation [embodiment] of passive resistance [non-compliance],” reported Watson Kirkconnell, who had served at Kapuskasing. “They worked because they were compelled [forced], and they exerted [applied] themselves as little as possible, though by dawdling steadily [working unhurriedly], they accomplished much through sheer force of numbers.” A Ukrainian internee confirmed the assessment: “We worked pretty poorly, goofing off most of the time. We’d pretend to be working while really we were relaxing in shifts.”

Conditions in the Brandon camp, where 820 of 950 internees were Ukrainians in the fall of 1915 were especially lenient. The American consul-general, who inspected the camp, reported that “To a prisoner who conducts himself properly and obeys camp orders, life in this camp is not a hard one.” Camp routine consisted of roll calls and inspections and two daily one-hour exercise sessions. Occasionally, the men took walks in Brandon, accompanied by camp guards .... In their spare time craftsmen carved picture frames, made necklaces and trinkets and fashioned at least fifty violins ....

Needless to say, such conditions did not prevail in all camps. At the other extreme was the notorious Castle/Banff compound .... Here, the inmates slept in tents on rubber sheets with only one blanket, the food was bad, men fainted at work and suffered from rheumatism .... Camp guards abused and mistreated the men. Internees were prodded with bayonets, slapped, forbidden to speak or smoke while at work and strung up by the wrists as punishment. How widespread such conditions were is not known, but escape attempts were common .... Indeed, six men (at least two or three Ukrainian) were killed by gunshot while trying to escape ....