

Tennessee hosted German POW camps during World War II

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Carolyn Krause decided to include this additional information about Prisoner of War camps in Tennessee during World War II. She draws on my good friend Bill Carey's article for the information about the Camp at Crossville..

During World War II, Tennessee was the host for several camps that housed and fed German prisoners of war. In her recent talk to the League of Women Voters of Oak Ridge, Tennessee Supreme Court Justice Sharon Lee mentioned, in response to a question, the German prisoner-of-war (POW) camp in Tellico Plains, the birthplace of her father, who was an American POW imprisoned in Germany.

The German prisoners interned in the Tellico Plains POW camp did farm work, growing green beans on land owned by the Stokely Van Camp company, she said. The company sold canned beans. She added that some German POWs did work on her grandmother's farm in Tellico Plains.

"She always fed the German POWs very well," Justice Lee noted. "My grandmother said, 'I'm going to feed them well because I hope someone in Germany is feeding my son well.'"

After the Tellico Plains camp closed in 1945, some of the liberated German soldiers remained in Tennessee after the war. They didn't want to return home to a devastated Germany and they apparently liked the opportunities available to them in the United States.

There were at least four other German POW camps in Tennessee during World War II, according to a 2015 article in The Tennessee Magazine. In the article by Bill Carey entitled

"Former German soldier recalls life at Crossville POW camp," he reported that German POWs were interned at Camp Forrest, near Tullahoma; Camp Campbell, near Clarksville; Camp Tyson, in Henry County; and Camp Crossville, in Cumberland County.

Most of the POW camps in the state have disappeared but the land where the Crossville POW camp was is now the site of the Clyde York 4-H Center. The long, white building near the entrance used to be part of the POW hospital. The center has been used for church retreats, and each summer hundreds of children spend time there learning archery, swimming and teamwork skills.

Carey's article focused on Gerhard Hennes, a German officer who was captured in North Africa on May 13, 1943. "Five months later, after short stays in a dozen different holding facilities, he entered the gates of Camp Crossville," Carey wrote. "He was imprisoned there for two years.

"After World War II, Hennes would become an American citizen and in 2004 published 'The Barbed Wire: POW in the USA.' In it he gives a detailed description of life at Camp Crossville."

Carey stated that Hennes and his fellow prisoners were treated relatively well, adding that, "They were given new uniforms, they were not interrogated and they were mostly left to the authority of their own German officers."

Unlike the German camps for American POWs, including the ones Justice Lee portrayed in her recent talk, Camp Crossville offered three square meals a day – presumably plenty of nutritious and delicious foods. In his book Hennes wrote, "Breakfast included long-forgotten or newly cherished things like scrambled eggs, crisp bacon, fresh orange or V8 juice; all kinds of cereal; and hot cakes soaked in maple syrup."

Hennes wrote that all the German POWs were paid. As a lieutenant, Hennes received \$20 per month. "The German prisoners used this money to buy beer, cigarettes, books and just about whatever they

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chose to order from the Sears catalog," Carey wrote. "They passed the time taking classes taught by other prisoners, participating in tennis and soccer leagues they organized, playing cards and drinking beer."

Because of the manpower shortage in the area during World War II, the German prisoners were routinely allowed to leave Camp Crossville to work in factories and help farmers bring in the crops. That apparently was also the situation at the POW camp in Tellico Plains.

Carey noted from reading Hennes' book that there was "a turning point in his experience. It came in the spring of 1945. After Germany's surrender, all the POWs were herded into a Crossville movie theater where they saw a film containing footage from the liberation of the Nazi-run concentration camps."

"We saw the emaciated bodies and empty eyes of the survivors," Hennes wrote. "We saw the piles of naked bodies, starved to death. We saw the mass graves. We saw the ovens where tens of thousands had been cremated. We saw and stared in silence, struggling but unable to believe what we Germans had done to Jews, gypsies, prisoners of war and many others deemed inferior or expendable. None of us in Crossville will ever forget that documentary."

Hennes wrote that he and his fellow soldiers and officers were shocked to learn about the Holocaust. Viewing that film was "the day when I turned in one profound transformation from being a hero to being a villain."

Carey noted that "it was also the day the treatment of German prisoners of war changed at Crossville – and at probably every prisoner-of-war camp in the United States. The quality and amount of food were reduced, and the treatment of the prisoners by the guards was changed."

"Some of this appears to have been a deliberate policy change on the part of the U.S. military. It may have also reflected the attitude of the prison guards, who were no doubt also moved by the images of the mass genocide."

"Shortly after Thanksgiving 1945, Hennes and the other prisoners of war were sent by train to New York, then by ship to Europe. Hennes then spent two more months in a POW camp in Attichy in France. There, the food was scarce, the conditions were overcrowded and treatment was rough."

"Life as a POW ended for Hennes on Jan. 30, 1946. The war behind him, he moved back to the town where he grew up in Germany. He emigrated to the U.S. in 1953 and became a citizen five years later. Hennes later became an administrator for the New Brunswick Theological Seminary in New Jersey and spent many years providing disaster relief through an international organization called Church World Service."

Carey ended the article with a quote from Hennes, who at the time of the magazine's publication seven years ago was 92 years old and living in Crossville: "For most of my life, I have been an American citizen. I am very proud of that and thankful for the opportunities the United States gave me."

For more information on the American wars, visit the free Military Memorial Museum, 20 South Main St., Crossville. <https://militarymemorialmuseum-tn.org>

Thanks, Carolyn, for adding this information. And also glad Bill Carey's research was helpful. History for Kids web site is: <https://www.tnhistoryforkids.org>

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For the full article Bill Carey wrote for Tennessee Magazine: <https://www.tnmagazine.org/former-german-soldier-recalls-life-at-crossville-pow-camp/>



A former hospital building at the Crossville POW camp at the Clyde York 4-H Center. Photograph courtesy of "Tennessee History for Kids."