

German POW to talk at TTU Oct. 28

TTU -- A former German POW who was detained in the Crossville camp will speak to Tennessee Tech students and to the Cookeville community in a morning and evening session on Thursday, Oct. 28.

Gerhard G. Hennes, will speak and answer questions from 11-11:50 a.m. on Thursday in the Multi Purpose Room of the Roaden University Center. He will give another talk with a question and answer session that evening from 7-9 o'clock, also in the Multi Purpose Room. A reception will follow the evening session.

There is no cost to attend the talk and the public is welcome to both sessions.

Hennes was captured in North Africa in 1942 and was among the first German officers interned in the Crossville camp, which today is the city's 4-H Center.

Hennes stayed at the POW camp until the end of World War II and then emigrated to America in the early 1950s.

His talk will be based on his manuscript, "Under the Crooked Cross," which chronicles the history of a German family who lived and survived WWII. His account is embedded in the events of the larger German society during Hitler's era. Hennes offers no apologies but, at the same time, accepts responsibility for his part in what he terms as "his people's march of folly and fury."

Hennes also sees an important lesson for us all from Hitler's Germany.

"Good and evil," he argues, "are never clearly apart but are interwoven in daily chores and choices. A proud past is no guarantee for a great, or even secure, future."

Hennes's talk is sponsored by TTU's Department of History, the History Club, the Stonecipher Fund and by the General Education Fund Center Stage series.

Hennes is available for interviews. For more information, call Heidemarie Weidner at (931) 520-7434.

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Cumberland County Film Society premiers documentary on

Crossville WW II POW camp

Cumberland County's Film Society is sponsoring the premier showing of a documentary on video about a little-known piece of Cumberland County history -- the Crossville World War II POW Camp.

The world premiere of "Camp Crossville: Prisoners of War on the Cumberland Plateau" will be held on Friday, Nov. 18, at 2 p.m. and again at 4 p.m. at the 127 South Senior Center (just south of the Miller bypass on Hwy 127) in Crossville.

"This may be one of our most important efforts to date," said Larry Drake, CCFS president.

The show will be somewhat less than an hour long, free and open to the public and will be followed by a discussion led by W. Calvin Dickinson, Ph.D., retired professor of history from Tennessee Tech in Cookeville. Cake and ice cream will follow the 2 p.m. showing.

Dickinson spent the last 25 years before his retirement teaching English history at TTU. A Texas native, Dickinson also developed an abiding interest in the history and the people of Cumberland County. He has tramped over most of the old route of the Walton Road that crossed Cumberland County on the way to Nashville in the early 1800s and worked with Bob Hoyt and Louise Gorenflo in developing the documentary of that name shown by the Film Society in 2004. He has published several historical papers on that subject.

In 1996 Dickinson published a scholarly paper in the Journal of East Tennessee History, "Number 68, Camp Crossville, 1942-1945." The POW video is based on that work. The production includes an on-camera interview with Gerhard Hennes, a German captain who was captured in North Africa and sent to Crossville as a prisoner of war, as was Hennes' father.

A.C. Clark, retired District Supervisor of the Upper Cumberland Region in the University of Tennessee's Extension Service, is also interviewed. Clark was supervisor of the camp area after it was turned over to the University of Tennessee to be transformed into a 4-H summer camp in the early 1950s. Many of the prison buildings were then still standing. Clark talked with guards and former prisoners who returned to the site after the war to walk the grounds once again.

Photographs of the camp, and artifacts salvaged from the camp, are included in the production. Rare pictures of the camp along with the interviews provide a film that will be of great interest to all.

The camp operated from 1943 to 1946 and primarily housed German and Italian Officers. The camp was designed to accommodate 1,400 prisoners and required over 400 guards to maintain the facility. The camp had several buildings and facilities that are lost to history, but with this film the camp is recreated for the viewer.

John Rayburn, Fairfield Glade resident and long time radio announcer and professional narrator, provides the narration as a public service. Many Cumberland County citizens contributed to making the video by sharing their knowledge of the camp.

Hoyt, of Fairfield Glade, did the camera work and video editing. He retired as communications director of the Schiefelbusch Institute for Life Span Studies at the University of Kansas where he was a technical writer, editor and film producer.

Their joint talents combine to provide a fascinating look at another Cumberland Plateau piece of history about the World War II Prisoner of War Camp near Pomona; that survives today as the Sgt. York 4-H Camp.

Seating will be limited, so reservations are essential. For advance reservations of this free, open-to-the-public presentation send your name, address, phone number, and number of reservations to CCFS, P.O. Box 102, Pleasant Hill, TN 38578 or call Bob Hoyt (931) 456-9105.

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Former German POW at Crossville to sign memoir here

Jill Thomas

Herald-Citizen Staff

In 1943, Crossville became home to 750 prisoners of war. For the duration of WWII, Germans and other soldiers from the Axis powers were housed in the camp up on the Cumberland Plateau about 35 miles east of Cookeville.

Ex-POW Gerhard Hennes, 82, will be signing copies of his book, *The Barbed Wire*, the story of his experiences as a prisoner of war who spent time in 16 camps in six countries, this coming Sunday afternoon at BookWorks in Cookeville and on Tuesday at Tennessee Tech.

He was in Crossville from 1943 until 1945, and Hennes devotes about 65 pages to his stay in Tennessee.

When he joined the German army in 1939, he was convinced of the righteousness of the German cause. He was 17 and fought with Rommel in Africa.

"We had a saying early on -- 'By the German character, the world will become good,'" Hennes told the H-C in a phone interview from his home in Whitehall, Penn., where he has lived for a number of years.

"We believed in our own virtues," he said of himself and his fellow Germans.

"And Hitler seemed to make sense when he said that by fighting a war now, it would prevent war later on."

Later, when the young soldier saw the evidence of German atrocities at the concentration camps, his faith in nationalism vanished and his disillusionment over the people he had followed so loyally devastated the 24-year-old.

When he was a soldier and later a prisoner of war, he had little interest in church activities. After the war, he searched for a way to atone for the cruelty of the German Third Reich.

After his return to war-ravaged Germany, he studied modern languages and became fluent in several. In 1947 he joined Church World Service, an American Protestant organization engaged in international relief.

He has lived, worked and traveled in 80 countries. His almost-50 years in church work included six with the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland.

In 1958 he became a US citizen.

But in 1943, the young man had been fighting for his country for four years. And Germany as well as the other European nations had been struggling with shortages of nearly every kind for years.

What he remembers first about coming to Crossville, Tenn., was the food.

"The first supper in the company mess hall was nothing short of spectacular: breaded pork chops, mashed potatoes with delicious gravy, string beans, corn muffins -- a new one for most of us -- and Jello for dessert. Also a new treat, real coffee, milk or tea. Seconds could be had; and I had two ...," he writes in his memoir.

The shortages which would hit the United States a couple of years later were absent in 1943 and for more than a year the POWs had better food than they had been fed for years.

The men relished their three square meals a day although it took them a while to get fit enough to finish them.

"Hearty eaters, we could yet not eat all the food, much though we tried ...

"And we learned to eat, and appreciate, corn-on-the-cob -- we had always believed that corn was for cattle only ..."

The men were given, or made for themselves, sports equipment and spent their days in physical activities and, later, in educational pursuits as they developed a 'university.' Hennes remembers that at one time they had a written catalog of 501 course offerings for one semester.

Hennes also describes their American guards.

"I was intrigued by the guards' comportment. It was downright lax by German standards. Sitting comfortably in their towers with their feet not infrequently dangling over the railing, they struck me as being hopelessly civilian. They hardly moved when an officer, even the camp commandant, stopped by.

"I do not remember that they saluted or snapped to attention or used the word 'sir.' There were 'yeahs' and 'yeps.' The talk between men and officers was casual and cordial. Rank made little difference."

Yet Hennes found that the informality and equality of the men made sense to him.

He goes on to describe the daily routine at the camp and how things changed as the war began to run down and the prisoners had to come to terms with being on the losing side.

He writes about his relationship with his father, also a POW, who was transferred from a camp in Colorado to Tennessee to be with his son.

But a talk with Hennes brings out much more than is described in his book. He emphasizes that the title of the book, *The Barbed Wire*, is describing more than a barrier to keep prisoners incarcerated.

"Barbed wire is thought of most commonly as a barrier between nations," he said.

"But barbed wire should be a mental barrier in each of us to separate good from evil. That's a much more subtle division and applies to everyone," he said.

For Hennes, the 'barbed wire' he saw surrounding the thoughts of his former nation's leaders prevented them from changing course and resulted in the loss of his nation and its pride in itself.

* He will be signing his book at BookWorks from 2-4 p.m. Sunday and discussing it and other subjects at Tennessee Tech on Tuesday from 6 p.m. until 8 p.m. in Room 205 in South Hall, just off West 7th Street. The price is \$18 plus tax.

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Calvin Dickinson, right, of TTU interviews former prisoner of war Gerhard Hennes for the POW Documentary to be shown by the Cumberland County Film Society on November 18 at the Senior Center on Hwy. 127 South.

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Former POW to speak at TTU:

COOKEVILLE: He first came to the Upper Cumberland region as a prisoner of war in Cumberland County's Camp Crossville in 1943.

Former German soldier Gerhard Hennes is set to return to the area to talk about his World War II experiences in a presentation titled "Under the Crooked Cross," at 6 p.m. on Thursday in Tennessee Tech University's Derryberry Hall Auditorium.

In addition to discussing his confinement at Camp Crossville, which was opened in November 1942 to house German and Italian officers and was one of the first camps in the nation for World War II POW's, Hennes will describe his life, work, fears, hopes, compromises and survival during the Hitler years.

A video highlighting Camp Crossville and including an interview with Hennes will also be a part of the program.

"He's a fascinating individual who has the ability to keep his audience engaged," said Calvin Dickinson, emeritus history instructor at TTU, who himself has written and studied Camp Crossville.

He was one of about 1,500 German and Italian officers housed at Camp Crossville. Among the other POW's was a lieutenant colonel in the German Panzer Corps and several Italian generals, including Pietro Gazzeri, the highest-ranking officer in the Italian army.

Following World War II, Hennes joined Church World Service, and American Protestant organization that provides international relief and refugee and development work.

He has spent nearly 50 years in church service and has lived, worked and traveled in about 80 countries. Hennes became a United States citizen in 1958 and now lives in Pennsylvania.

The former site of Camp Crossville now houses a University of Tennessee Extension Office and serves as a location for summer youth camps.

The presentation is a Center State event and is free and open to the public

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