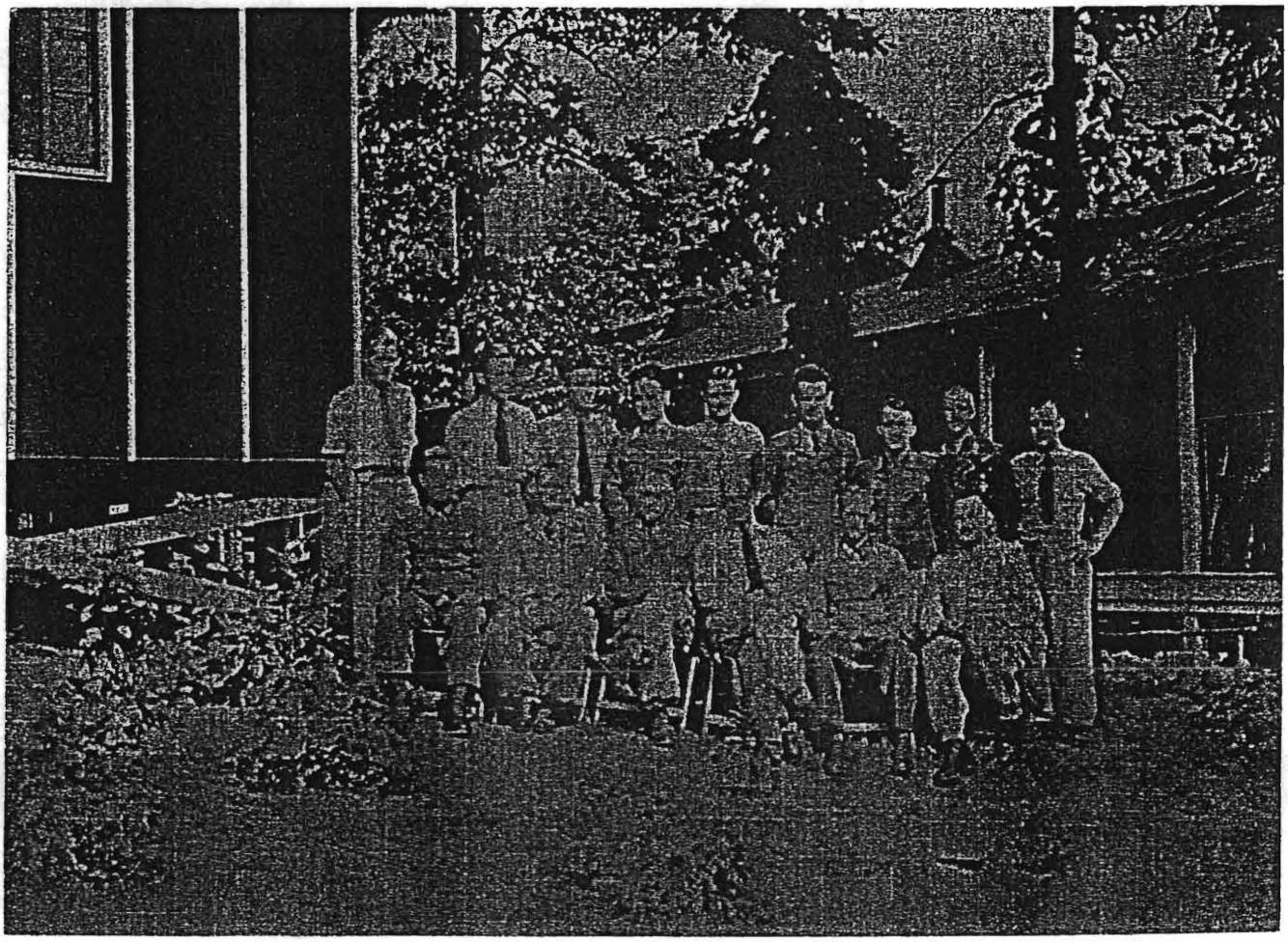
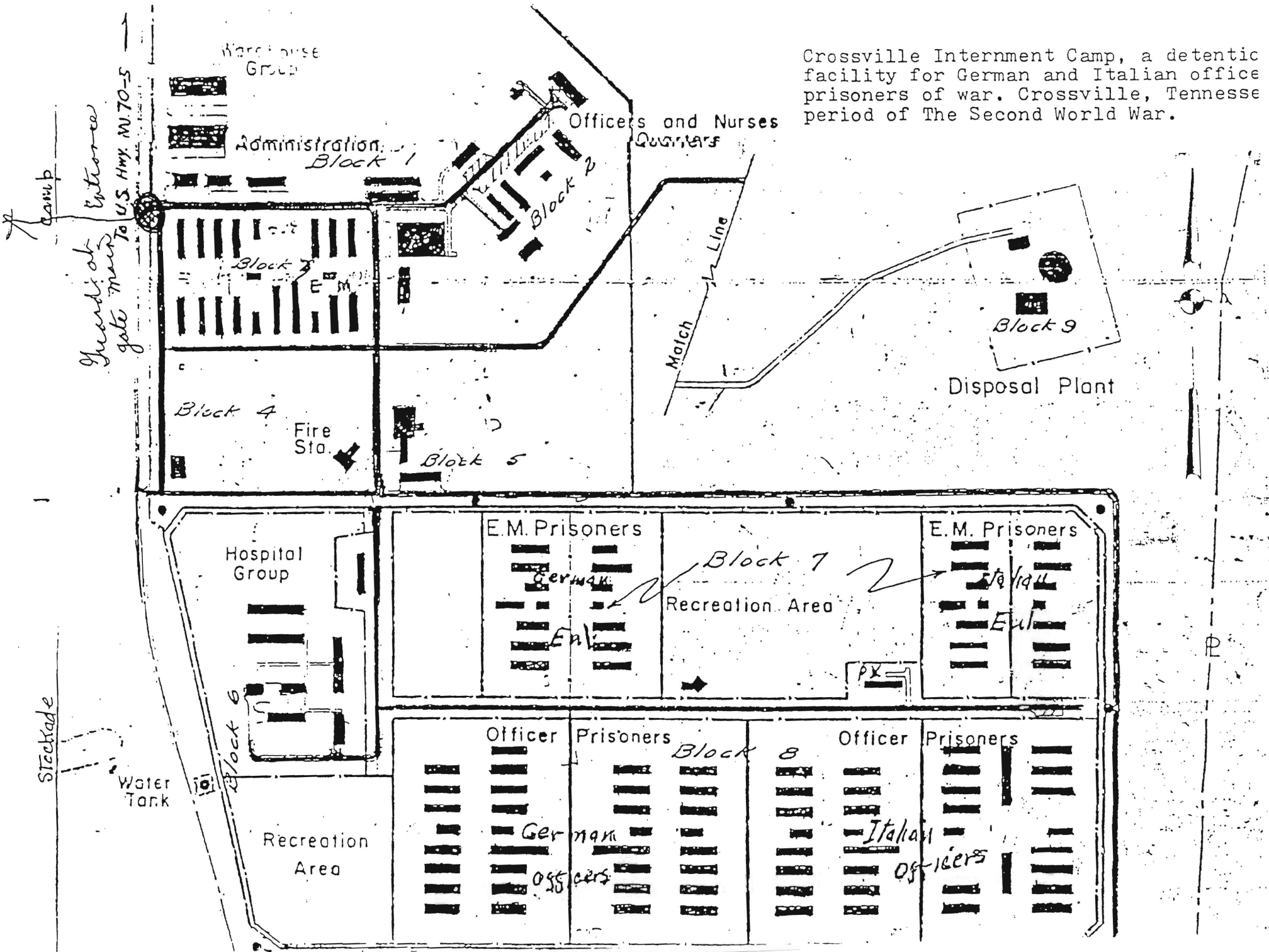
The Crossville Internment Camp:

Nazi Prisoners On The

Tennessee Home Front



Christopher Hogin
31 May 1995
Normandy Scholars



Crossville Internment Camp, a detentic facility for German and Italian office prisoners of war. Crossville, Tennesse period of The Second World War.

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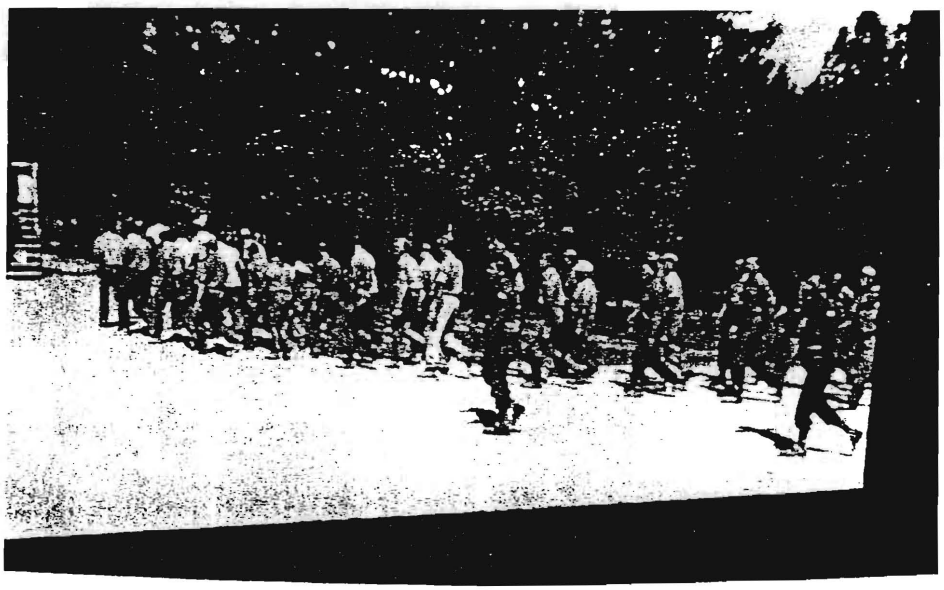
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Introduction

At 7:30 PM in the last week on November 1942, a train pulled into the tiny station of Crossville, Tennessee. Blinding spotlights flooded the plank where the cargo was to be unloaded. Trucks of United States military personnel armed with machine guns and bayonets assembled to meet the arriving train. As the locomotive came to a halt, a group of soldiers formed several lines, and pointed guns towards the plank. As soon as the engine stopped, an officer ordered the latch to be unlocked. Peering within the darkness of the car were hundreds of ragged men. They were tired, filthy, and emaciated. Lice and fleas crawled over their bodies as they huddled together. No talking was allowed, and they were told to cooperate or else they would be shot. With hands over their heads, they walked single file towards the awaiting bus.

When the last man was seated, the entourage of military vehicles pulled away from the station. The operation of unloading was swift and organized. The whole process took only fifteen minutes to complete. The bus drove around a winding road deep within the forest of the Cumberland Plateau. With the exception of a few farms and houses, the men saw no visible signs of civilization. They were in the middle of nowhere. The condition of the road was barely fit for mobility as narrow curves and deep embankments threatened their safety. Around one sharp curve; which had taken the lives of previous travelers, was an infamous sign that read, "Prepare to meet thy God!" Eventually they came to an enormous 200 acre compound. The compound was surrounded by tall fences, barbed wire, and guard towers. With hands still placed over their heads, they were marched towards the medical center. There they were showered, deloused, and given fresh clothes. Doctors and nurses administered shots and attended to the sick. Some men suffered from diseases caught in the African desert. Others had infected wound from artillery blasts. All men were given the best possible treatment. After the medical exam, they were divided up and sent to their quarters.

Later that evening the soldiers were assembled on the front lawn. The commander of the camp addressed the men and began reading rules and regulations over a loud speaker. Aided through the assistance of a German interpreter, the men were informed that they were prisoners of war, and were being held in the Crossville Internment Camp where they would stay for the duration of the war. Amassed before the camp commander stood hundreds of German prisoners captured during the African campaign. The majority were high ranking officers who fought in Rommel's Afrika Korps. Some officers were submarine commanders in the Atlantic fleet. Others were simply enlisted men who would later be used as valets and personal servants for the officers. The men were told that any effort of escape back to Germany would be futile. They were in the middle of nowhere surrounded by vast fencing, barbed wire, and dense forest. Crossville, Tennessee would be their home for the next three years.



German and Italian prisoners being marched to their quarters for the first time as they arrived in Crossville.

From the period of November 1942 until May of 1945, Crossville Tennessee would be one of the major sites for incarcerating German and Italian prisoners of war. Over 1,500 prisoners would be detained in this area guarded by over 2,300 military personnel.[1] Once the camp became fully operational, it would have a higher population

than the entire city of Crossville. Yet surprisingly enough, the camp itself was kept relatively secret. Contact between the outside world and prisoners was kept at a minimum. Only when work needed to be done did prisoners interact with the locals.

As soon as the war ended with Germany in 1945, the prisoners were quickly rounded up and sent to France to be repatriated back to Germany. The camp was immediately closed and sealed off. By the 1960's, the camp was purchased by the University of Tennessee, and converted into the Clyde M. York 4-H camp. Most of the buildings were destroyed and only a few relics are left remaining. Even today, there are many citizens in Crossville who never even knew German and Italian prisoners were held in their city. Even fewer citizens of Tennessee have knowledge of the camp and the importance it played in the war effort. Very little has been written about the internment camp, and only recently with the celebration of V-E day, has interest resurfaced. Fortunately there are still survivors who had a direct role with the operation of the camp such as Mrs. Margret Baine, A.J. Wyatt, and Joe Palma. They serve as valuable links to the past, and their testimonies are as priceless as any rare book could offer.

Many questions arise when examining the Crossville camp. In the first place, why were German and Italian prisoners sent to the United States instead of England? Why was Tennessee chosen as a site for prisoners? There were many developed areas in the United States which could have easily been chosen. Why Crossville? An even more difficult question to answer, is why were Nazi prisoners treated so well? As early as 1941, the government had knowledge of the brutality Nazis were inflicting on the Jews. While the rest of the world was suffering under the cruel hand of Germany, Nazi prisoners were treated above and beyond humane standards in America. The United States strictly upheld the provisions of the Geneva Convention which guaranteed rights for prisoners. They were fed, given clothing, medical attention, and a salary. They had access to education, recreational facilities, and even purchasing power in a Sears Roebuck catalog. One guard renamed the Crossville Internment Camp, "Camp Country Club."[2] Another citizen of

Crossville made the comment, "It is one thing to treat a prisoner humanely and another thing to treat them as hotel guest!"[3] Even today, there is still some resentment held by a few citizens who knew how well the prisoners were treated.

Finally, there is the question of how the Crossville camp impacted the lives of German P.O.Ws. What sort of lessons did they leave with after returning to Germany? How did Crossville affect their lives, and what impression did it give them of the United States? Even more so, how did the prisoners affect the community of Crossville? The remnants of their legacy can be seen today through works of art, wood carvings, and buildings within the city. The years of the camp's operation are a significant piece of Tennessee history which should be preserved and remembered. An important cultural exchange took place during those years that helped wipe away some stereotypes and misconceptions each side had of the enemy. It was also the beginning of a partnership between two nations which would ultimately endure through the trials and tribulations of the post-world war period.

The Beginning of the Crossville Internment Camp

When people first learn a P.O.W camp was located in Tennessee during World War II, the first question usually asked is why Crossville? There were so many places available in the United States for prison camps during that time. Why was a small town in the middle of nowhere selected to hold high ranking German and Italian officers? Before discussing Crossville, it is important to examine why Axis prisoners were sent to the United States in the first place. It had been a long time since foreign prisoners were held in America. Prisoners had not been sent to the United States during the Spanish American War or World War I.[4] The last time P.O.W camps existed on American soil was during the Civil War. It seems as though the process of sending Axis prisoners to America would

have been enormously expensive and complicated. Other locations in Europe such as England, Scotland, or Ireland could have easily been used instead.

By 1942, American production had risen to an enormous rate. With this production boom, the idea was conceived to send prisoners over to the United States. England and Africa were constantly being sent weapons and supplies to fortify the Allied campaign against Rommel. Transports deposited supplies then head back across the Atlantic empty. As Patton and Montgomery slowly defeated sections of Rommel's army, the Allies found themselves in possession of prisoners. How were they going to deal with captives in the middle of a desert while a critical war was waging? Troops were much too valuable for combat rather than to be used as guards. Possession of a large number of high ranking officers was a valuable commodity. The Allies could not afford to lose these dangerous men if they escaped. They were the ones influential in planning military strategy. Sending them overseas reduced the threat of escape and weakened Nazi military command.

The United States was the most logical place to send the prisoners. England, Scotland, and Ireland were very limited in their resources. Food, gas, and manpower had to be used for the survival of the British Isles. Operation Sea Wolf was slowly decimating the country as bombs constantly fell. It was also too risky to have prisoners so close to important military installations. In time, the invasion of the continent would have to begin planning, and the threat of a prisoners escaping with damaging information could not be risked. Having U.S transport ships going towards the British Isles only increased Naval vulnerability from German subs. The U-boats might also be less likely to attack transport ships carrying officers across the Atlantic. America had the resources, land, and manpower needed for a prison installation.[5] Furthermore, it would not only be difficult, but virtually impossible for a prisoner to escape back to Germany.

The question still remains as to why Crossville was chosen as the site for a prison camp. Interestingly enough, Crossville was only one out of a hundred P.O.W camps in America by 1943.[6] Over 200,00 German prisoners were sent to the United States by the

end of 1945. Camps were situated in many parts of the country such as Arizona, California, Texas, North, and South Carolina. Tennessee had two major P.O.W camps. One was located in Tullahoma and the other in Crossville. Most high ranking officers were sent to Crossville while enlisted men were transported to Tullahoma.

There were also many logistical advantages to Crossville; the most obvious being its isolation. Crossville is located on the Cumberland Plateau which is about 2,000 feet high. In 1942 the road systems running through Crossville were some of the worst in country. Interstate 40 had not yet been constructed. Vehicles could travel to Crossville only through the winding road of highway 70. Not only was it dangerous, but very few people took this route since so many accidents occurred. The prisoners held captive in Crossville would literally be in the middle of nowhere. If they escaped, where would they go? The nearest coastal port was hundreds of miles away, and travel through the rugged Cumberland Plateau was difficult. The train system also ran through Crossville. This made it easier to load and unload prisoners. If needed, the prisoners could be readily transported to another camp.

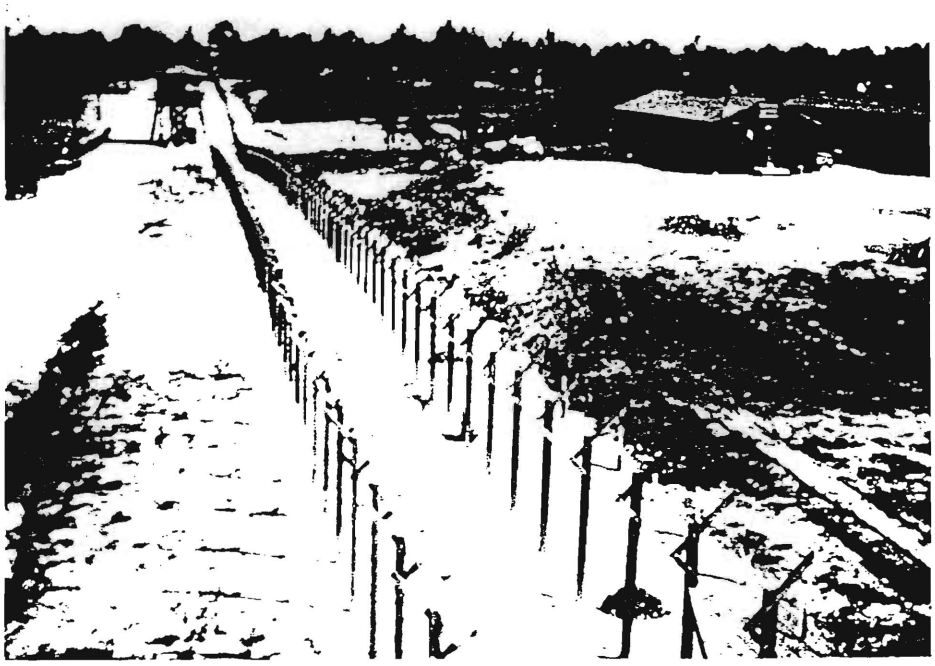
Crossville was also fortunate enough to have an abundant amount of natural resources. Timber and mineral supplies could be used in excess to help with the construction of the camp. The Army Corp. of Engineers was also impressed by the enormous amount of rock deposits within the soil.[7] It would be difficult for a prisoner to build a tunnel because there was so much hard rock underground. Another valuable resource was water. In 1938 under one of Roosevelt's new deal projects, the Meadow Creek dam was built.[8] The dam supplied water throughout Cumberland and the surrounding counties. It was estimated that the prison camp would need 200,000 gallons of water a day for effective operation.[9] The Meadow Creek dam could easily supply this demand while still serving community needs.

The people of Crossville and Cumberland county were also another reason why the camp was built. The citizens were hard working and industrious people.[11] For the most

part, Crossville was a large farming community. With the advent of war, many the area's young men were sent off to fight and the need for labor was high. The enlisted prisoners could be used to work on non-military civilian projects. The government also did not have to worry about the community interfering with the camp. Many people kept to themselves and avoided meddling in military affairs. Some citizens in the more rural areas had cut themselves off completely from the rest of the world.

Major Herston Cooper was one of the top U.S commanders in charge of the camp. In his book, Crossville: How We Treated P.O.W's, he recalls traveling through Cumberland county for the first time. The road was so bad and the weather was frightfully cold. He had to stop at a small cabin along the side of the road to warm himself. The old man who lived in the house welcomed the Major inside and invited him to the fire. As the Major stood over the stove, the old man's grandson noticed his uniform. He asked why he was wearing it. The Major explained that there was a war going on, and that he was in charge of running a P.O.W camp. The old man sat in his rocking chair, turned to his grandson, and exclaimed, "Ah hell, it sounds like those damn Yankees are acting up again!"[12]

The construction of the camp began less than a year before it opened. The site chosen was on the land of former U.S Marshal Amos Wilkes. Against his will, he was forced to sell his property to the government. He was never told why his land was needed or what it would be used for. The whole operation of building the camp was kept in complete secrecy. No local labor was used, and only military personnel were allowed on the site. Bob Mitchell, who owns the local drug store, remembers his family opening up their guest house to an engineer working on the project. Every morning the engineer would wake before sunrise and return late in the evening after dark. Some members of the town began to speculate what was being built. Many people believed a chemical weapons factory was being constructed. Others reasoned a plant similar to Oak Ridge was being developed.[13]

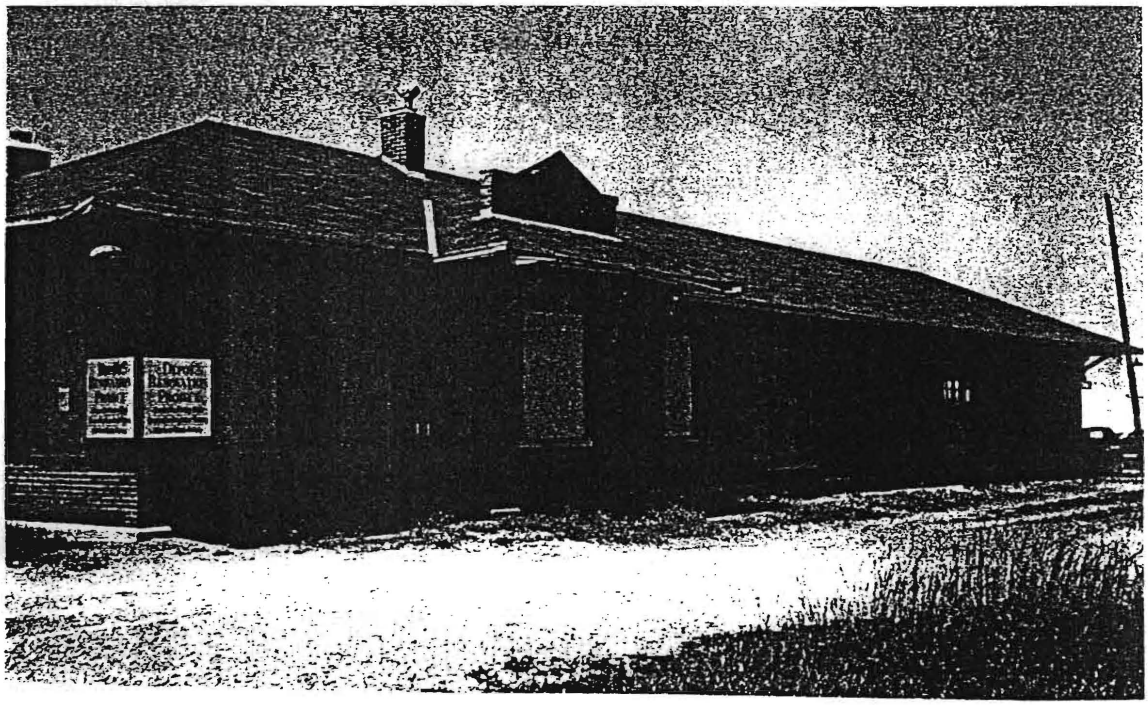


Completion of the Crossville camp as it looked one week before opening in November of 1942. Early camp photos are courtesy of the University of Tennessee Clyde M. York 4-H Camp.

It was not until two months before the camp opened that the town learned prisoners would be held in their community. Immediately, everyone assumed Japanese soldiers would be sent to Crossville. It is interesting to note that most people considered the Japanese to be the real enemies of the United States. The memory of Pearl Harbor still burned in the hearts and minds of most American citizens. After the U.S entered the war, a heavier amount of propaganda was geared towards the Japanese than the Germans.[14] This fueling of racial animosity helped contribute to the American view of Japan being more of an enemy than Germany.[15] Many Americans subscribed to this notion and Crossville was no exception. Even though there was never a single Japanese soldier to enter Crossville, the path leading to the prison compound was named Jap Camp Road. Even today many older citizens refer to the stretch of highway running past the 4-H camp as Jap Camp Road.

The Arrival of War Prisoners

The first trainload of sixty-eight prisoners arrived in Crossville on November 28, 1942 at exactly 7:30 PM.[16] Just seventeen days previously, they had been captured in North Africa. They were driven to Casablanca and loaded on transport ships. Johannes von Fehrn arrived in Crossville suffering from a chest wound. His plane had been shot down from an anti-aircraft blast during a Luftwaffe bombing mission. Georg Naumann was a Lieutenant Colonel in Rommel's Afrika Korps. He was captured during an Allied desert raid. Most prisoners came from North Africa, and had fought in Rommel's Afrika Korps. High ranking officers did not arrive by train to Crossville. Instead, they were delivered to Knoxville via the L&N station. From there they were transported by bus.



Train station and loading dock as it looks today where prisoners first arrived in Crossville.

The army tried its best to keep the arrival of prisoners a secret from the town. Unfortunately the word leaked out, and a group of citizens showed up at the station hoping

to get a glimpse Japanese prisoners.[17] The town was so frightened, that a group of men armed with shotguns and rifles climbed to the top of roof of Mitchell's drug store. It was rumored that they planned to shoot as many prisoners as possible. The FBI had to be called in to maintain civil order. Bob Mitchell as a young man, remembers taking away the guns and escorting the men off his roof.[18]

One of the reasons the prisoners were incarcerated was for their own safety. Several families in Crossville had lost loved ones in the war. They were not pleased at the idea of living in the same community as Nazis. Within the next two weeks, over 1,371 prisoners from the German and Italian army would enter the small town of Crossville. After the November 28 fiasco, the trains never stopped on Main street again. The prisoners would arrive in the middle of the night, or early in the morning. Each arrival would be at different times and locations. After a while, the town no longer concerned itself with the prisoners, and accepted the fact that Crossville was greatly needed by the Allies.



Mitchell's Drugstore where local townsmen perched on the rooftop and attempted to shoot P.O.Ws upon arrival.

Life the Prison Camp

The Crossville camp was different from other camps in the United States because it was primarily an officer's camp. Some of the top minds of the German and Italian army were incarcerated in Crossville. The only enlisted men sent were used as valets and personal servants for officers. Every officer was assigned one enlisted man who attended to their needs such as shining shoes, pressing uniforms, and cleaning quarters. Under the laws of the Geneva Convention, officers were not required to work and had to be paid a monthly salary. Officers could work only if they chose to do so. The pay scale for Warrant Officers was $20.00 a month. Majors and other high ranking officials made a salary of $40.00 a month. It is interesting to note that Japanese prisoners of war were paid considerably less than their German counterparts.[19] On average, Japanese prisoners were paid ten dollars less than the German P.O.W's.[20] Enlisted men however, were required to work on non-military projects. They were responsible for the upkeep of the camp grounds and buildings.



One of several guard towers in the compound. Each tower was equipped with two machine guns.

The camp itself was divided into two sections. One side was for the prisoners, and the other side for U.S enlisted men who ran the camp. Barbed wire and guard towers surrounded the compound with spotlights and machine guns. Each officer had his own room and was equipped with a bed, table, chair, and pot bellied stove. The enlisted men were quartered in barracks across from the officers section. The compound contained an infirmary, bathhouse, dining hall, and recreation building. Several wide strips of land were later converted into tennis courts and a soccer field. The prison camp itself became a miniature community equipped with its own fire station and post office. A canteen was also available to the prisoners where they could purchase tobacco, fruit, candy, cokes, and beer (only one pint of alcohol was allowed a day.)[21] Besides freedom, the prisoners essentially had access to almost anything they needed or wanted.

With the salary each prisoner earned, they were able to order from a Sears Roebuck catalog. The catalog was considered the bible, and was the most sought after book in the compound. The Italians were noted for buying record players and opera recordings, while the Germans bought wedding bands for their girlfriends or wives.[22] One German officer ordered a tailor made uniform. When the package arrived, he immediately had his German rank sewed on the sleeve. Every Sunday he would wear the uniform and goose steep around the grounds shouting "Heil Hitler." The most popular item purchased from the catalog was lady's lingerie. The soldiers kept ordered lingerie with the hope of delivering it to their girlfriends or wives when they returned. Although the prisoners bought an enormous amount of merchandise, none were able to bring it home. Donald Brookhart was a soldier stationed in Europe when German prisoners returned. They landed in France and were kept in prisons before being sent across the boarder. He remembers how the French stole every item from the Germans before they were repatriated.

To maintain order in the camp, the Army encouraged the Germans to become self-sufficient. Within six months time, the Germans had set up a division of labor amongst themselves. Some were in charge of growing vegetables while others cooked food in the

kitchen. There were tailors, carpenters, builders, and physicians. Over fifty physicians had been captured in the African desert during the Allied raid.[23] When division of labor began, the physicians ran their own infirmary. Once the small clinic became operational, most Germans refused to be treated by American doctors. Some prisoners feared American doctors would slowly try to kill them with poisonous injections.[24] The clinic was given as many supplies as needed, and the Germans took care of their sick and wounded.

The prisoners elected a spokesman to act as a representative to the Americans. If there were any complaints or requests, the spokesman was usually the one in charge of negotiating. Even though the spokesman seemed to be the leader, many former guards suspect he was just a figure head. Joe Palma was a guard at the Crossville camp in 1945. He worked in the quarter masters office which distributed supplies to all American personnel. He suspects that there was a hierarchy among the Germans committed to upholding the principles of the Nazi doctrine.[25] Many officers viewed Americans as an inferior race. There was a distinct difference between officers and enlisted men. The enlisted men were friendly, down to earth, and obeyed orders easily. The officers could be stubborn, arrogant, and snobbish. They avoided the American guards as much as possible and remained within their own circle.[26]

For nine months between 1942 and 1943, Italian prisoners were also held captive in Crossville. Like the Germans, each Italian officer had an enlisted man who acted as a valet. Most people who worked in the camp agree that the Italians were much easier to manage than the Germans. They rarely caused any trouble, and were contented to wait patiently for their release. For recreation, the Italians enjoyed lounging in bed and listening to opera. None of them wanted to work, and most viewed their stay as only temporary.[27] Since there were no tennis court on the premises, the Italians requested permission to build one. They were given supplies and materials needed to build five tennis courts. When construction was completed, most of the officers spent the day relaxing and scheduling court times.

One of the highest ranking officers in the Italian army was held captive in Crossville. General Pietro Gazzeri was the ex-minister of war and military governor of Abyssinia. He was known to be very low keyed and quiet. While in prison, the only demand he ever made was to have access to a bath tub because he refused to shower.[28] Another top ranking official was General Annibale Berg who was more commonly known as, "Gen. Electric Whiskers." He was given the nickname because of his red bushy beard which looked electrified.[29] It was rumored he had close connections to Mussolini and was very influential in decision making.[30] Mrs. Margret Baine, who was the camp secretary, remembers Mayor Fiorello La Guardia of New York making a secret visit to Crossville in 1943. He met with General Whiskers in hopes of convincing him to influence Mussolini to surrender.[31] Unfortunately the discussion failed, and Gen. Whiskers refused La Guardia's proposition. A few months later, Italy surrendered.



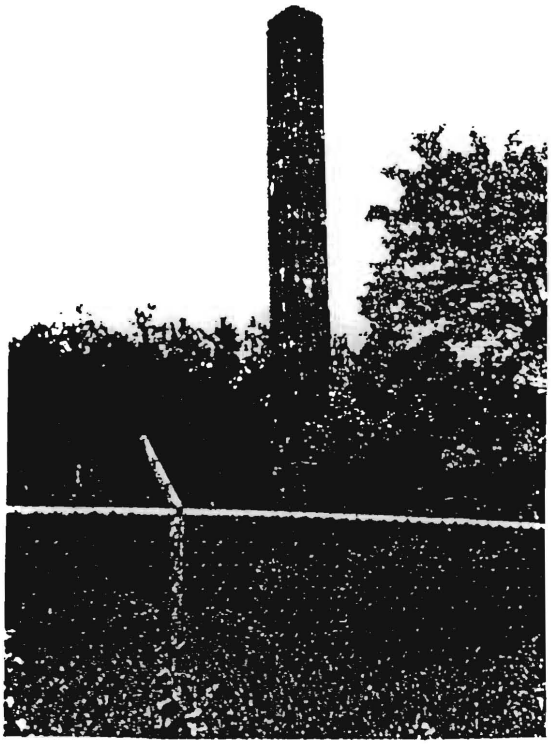
It was in this area of the compound where German and Italian prisoners were divided. So much animosity existed between the two that officials had to construct a barbed wire fence in the middle of the camp. Italians were housed on the right side and Germans were kept on the left. Even with the physical divisions in place, conflicts between the two groups still erupted.

The Germans and Italians had to be separated from one another because of the hatred that existed between the two. The Germans viewed the Italians as lazy, overweight, and undisciplined pasta eaters.[32] Many thought they were not pulling their weight in the war effort and were riding on German glory. The Italians resented the Germans for

dragging them into a war which had cost so many lives. Italy had been ravaged and devastated, and the Germans were to blame. They viewed the Nazis as savage mechanical beasts.[33] A large chain linked fence with barbed wire had to be constructed to separate the two groups. Even with this physical division, trouble could not be deterred. From time to time, both sides threw rocks at one another and yelled ethnic slurs. There was one incident where a German officer continually insulted an Italian officer. He convinced the Italian to come to the edge of the fence. When the officer came to the edge, the German grabbed his arm and tried to saw it off between the barbed wire and chained links.[34]

On the night in which Italy surrendered, most of the guards anticipated trouble. Joe Palma recollects how every guard flooded the compound with spotlights. Prison officials armed themselves with machine guns in anticipation of a riot. Fortunately nothing happened. As soon as the call from Washington came verifying the surrender, the Italians were rounded up and shipped away. Within forty-eight hours they had left the United States and were heading back to Europe.

After the Italians left, the compound was extended to the Germans leaving much more room. The Germans constructed a soccer field and began playing tennis on a regular basis. As the months progressed, more German prisoners arrived until 1,500 P.O.Ws lived in Crossville.[35] The camp was partitioned off into tinier sections called towns. The prisoners were divided up and placed in over three hundred towns throughout the camp.[36] Each town had their own representative and was governed by high ranking officers. Conrad Welch, currently the director of the 4-H premises, is an expert on the camp's history. During his study of the P.O.Ws, he learned a disturbing fact about the naming of some of the towns. Most of the towns were named after a person's village or home community. However, a few officers decided to name two towns Auschwitz and Buchenwald.[37] In the town where Auschwitz was located, an enormous smoke stack towered over the camp.



This section of the camp was where the hospital was located. Towering above the compound was a smokestack used for burning wood. High ranking officers of the camp named this area Auschwitz.

Most American officials interfered as little as possible in the day to day activities of the camp. As long as order was kept, the Germans pretty much had free rein to do what they wished. Since Crossville was a farming community, able bodied males were needed for labor. In the beginning most enlisted men traveled to surrounding farms, and worked for minimum wage. After a while, many of the officers decided to work as well. Working and keeping busy was a way to forget about the war and homesickness.[38] When the project first began, the prisoners had to be escorted by two guards at all times outside the camp. After a while, both prisoners and guards realized this practice was somewhat ridiculous. Cumberland county was on a 2,000 foot plateau. They were hundreds of miles away from any major city. Where would they go? Even if they did escape, chances of reaching Germany was virtually impossible. Besides, the camp gave them excellent food, medical care, and a Sears Roebuck catalog. What more could any person ask for?

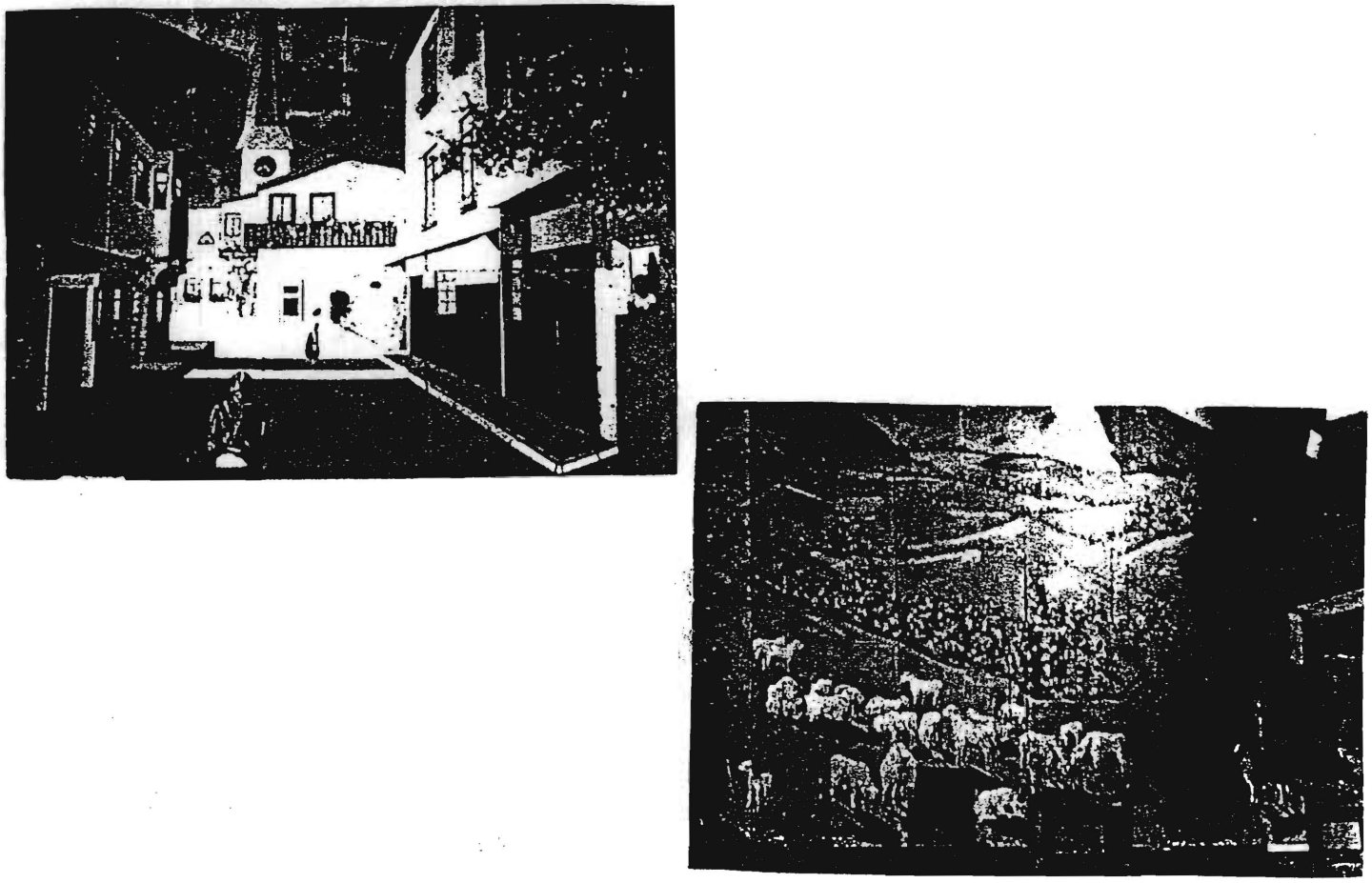
After a while the guards simply dropped the prisoners to the work site and headed into town to run errands. Margret Baine remembers when one prisoner called the camp because the guards had forgotten him. As time went by, the Germans also began doing odd jobs in town. Mending fences, paving a sidewalk, or mowing a yard became a common occurrence. One group of Germans even built a house for a couple on the outskirts of Cumberland county. The house still stands today.

Most of the prisoners in Crossville were some of the brightest minds in Germany.[39] About half of the men had a masters or Ph.D. in some subject. In the second year of the camp's operation, several officer decided to create a camp university. Subjects such as English, literature, history, Latin, and several sciences were taught. As the months went by, more subjects were added to the curriculum including agriculture, forestry, philosophy, political science, civil law, economy, bookkeeping, and Russian.[40] Physicians gave instructions in medicine, while veterinarians taught veterinary science. Books in English and German were donated by the Red Cross. Pretty soon a library was formed and classes were conducted on a daily basis. Exams were given at the end of every two months. When the camp closed in 1945, many P.O.Ws were able to return to Germany and enroll in a University.

One prisoner, Hans Smolinski, studied veterinary medicine in the Crossville camp. In Germany he applied to the school of veterinary medicine where he tested out of the first three semesters. He later got his veterinary license and eventually returned back to the United States where he opened an animal clinic in San Francisco. He attributes his success as a veterinarian to the Crossville Internment Camp University.[41]

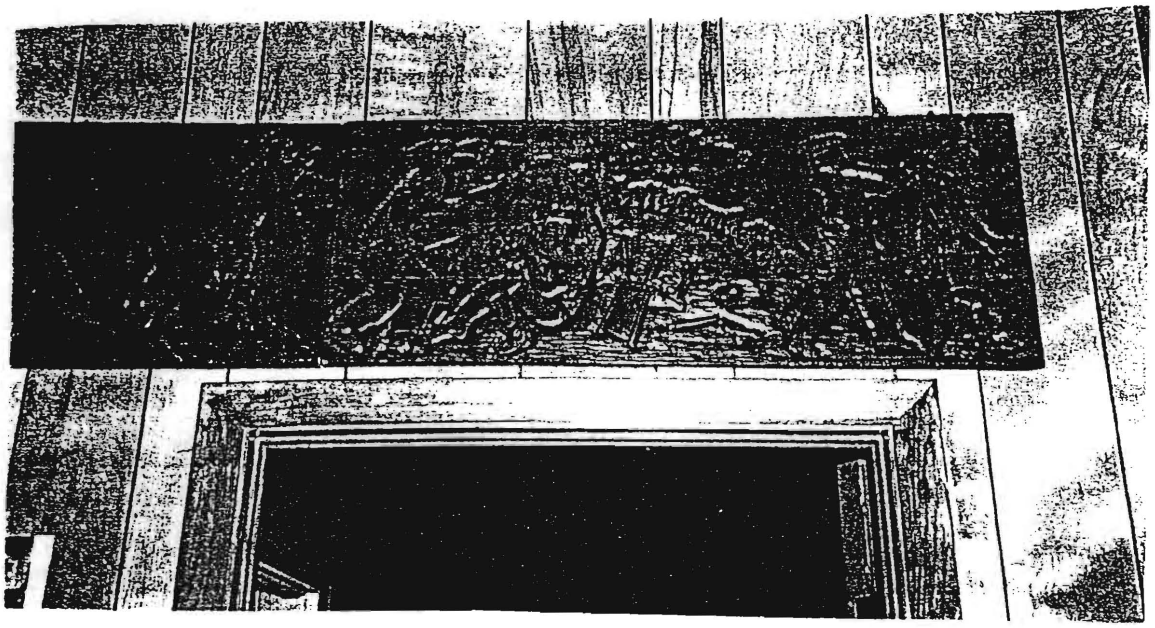
There were many P.O.Ws who were also talented artisans. Many built furniture and sold it to prison guards. Others painted scenes of the Fatherland. One enlisted man was mowing the grass one day and became weary of his job. He told one of the guards he was a painter back in Germany, and wished to paint one of the walls in the recreation hall. The guard assumed he would simply paint the wall a solid white to brighten up the place.

Instead, the guard painted an entire mural depicting his home town in Germany. He named the painting, "Sleeping in the nude."[42] To this day, no one really knows why that particular name was chosen, nor does anyone really want to know.



"Sleeping in the Nude" and another print painted by a German P.O.W. Most of the paintings in the camp were of towns and villages in Germany.

One prisoner took a large piece of wood and carved scenes from his memories as a youth in Germany. Oddly enough, the story portrays a man walking into a beer hall and ordering several beers. After a while, the man has too much to drink and starts a fight with several other men. The final scene shows a police officer dragging the man out of the bar by the collar of his coat. The prisoner gave the carving to the citizens of Crossville after he left. Today it can be seen in Mountain Builders wood and supply warehouse located on Main street in downtown Crossville.



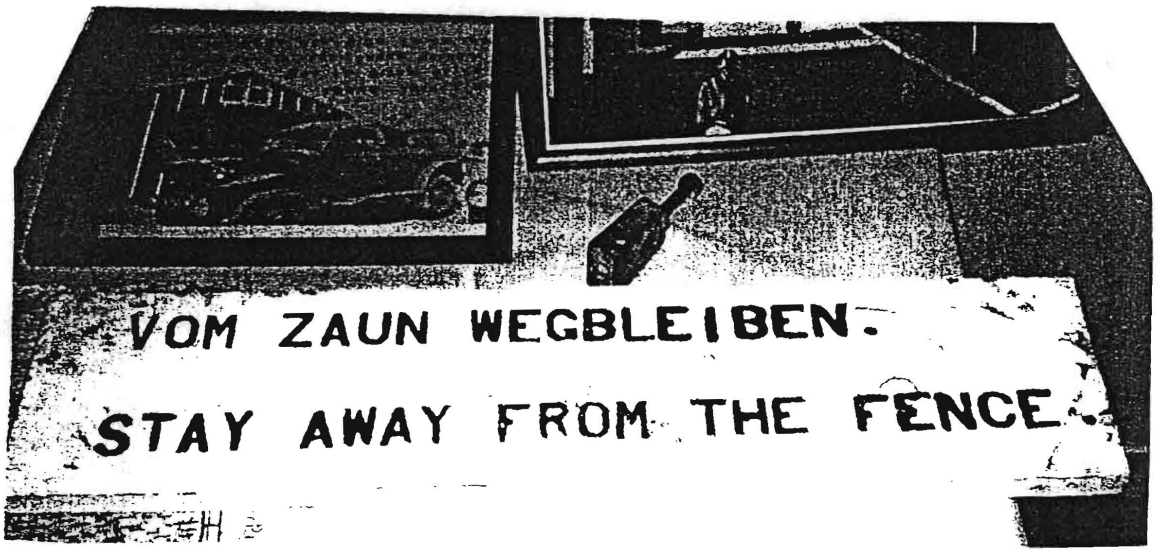
Woodcarving done in 1943 which was given to the city of Crossville by a German prisoner upon his release. The carving can still be seen today in Mountain Builders Supply Shop.

Critical Moments in the Internment Camp

About forty deaths occurred in the internment compound from 1942 to 1943.[43] The majority of deaths happened to prisoners who were either sick, old, or suffering from wounds in battle. There were no suicides recorded, but several murders took place. Only two Germans were killed at the hands of American guards. Most murders that occurred, happened internally within the Germans ranks. The towns were kept in a very orderly manner, and the government of each town was run effectively by a high ranking officer. If a prisoner broke any rule or violated a Nazi code, they were subject to punishment within their own court system. The Geneva Convention disallowed the United States from placing prisoners in solitary confinement or engaging in the practice of cruel or unusual

punishment.[44] The camp officials strictly adhered to these guidelines and rarely interfered with German prison court organization.

There was one instance where an American GI returned home from the war due to shell shock. As part of his recovery, he was sent to Crossville as a prison guard. A German officer discovered that the new guard had returned from fighting in Europe. The prisoner continually approached the guard and insulted him by calling him a weak soldier. He also recited Nazi ideology and proclaimed the Germans were the master race. The young guard's hatred for the prisoner increased as the taunting continued. A ten foot line was drawn from the fence, and there were signs all over the camp which told prisoners to stay away from the fence. If any prisoner crossed the line, they would be shot. The guard continually dared the German to cross the line. One day the two men got in a heated argument. The German accidentally crossed the line. Immediately, the guard pulled out his revolver and shot the prisoner on site.[45] The officer was killed instantaneously. After the body was buried, the guard was given five dollars, a pack of cigarettes, and a train ticket to another camp.[46]



Signs such as these were located around the perrimeter of the prison compound warning prisoners to stay away from the fence. If a prisoner stepped beyond the ten-foot line, they were shot.

The other death occurred when officials suspected a few prisoners trying to tunnel their way out of the compound. There was really no need to build a tunnel because if a

prisoner really wanted to escape, they could have done so easily during the work projects in town. Part of the reason they were tunneling was for a challenge.[47] When the prisoners first arrived, a U.S commander addressed the men and said he would have no respect for them if they did not attempt an escape.[48] A year later, several knives were missing from the dinning hall. The camp operators decided to search every room on the premises. One officer was exceedingly arrogant, and refused to have his room searched. The military personnel forced their way into his room with bayonets. One of the guards got carried away and stabbed the officer with the rifle blade. After the body was removed, no signs of tunneling were found in the officer's room. He had not been a part of the tunneling project. Margret Baine remembers how the government's report attributed the officers death to pneumonia.[49]

The next day many fellow officers demanded an official Nazi burial for their slain comrade. In compliance with the Geneva Accords, the men were allowed to bury the body in the local cemetery. The officer was to be given complete military honors. During the funeral, a officers unit dressed in German uniforms, goose stepped around the grave, and carried a Nazi swastika flag. They fired a U.S issued rifle, lowered the body in the ground, and shouted, "Heil Hitler!"[50]

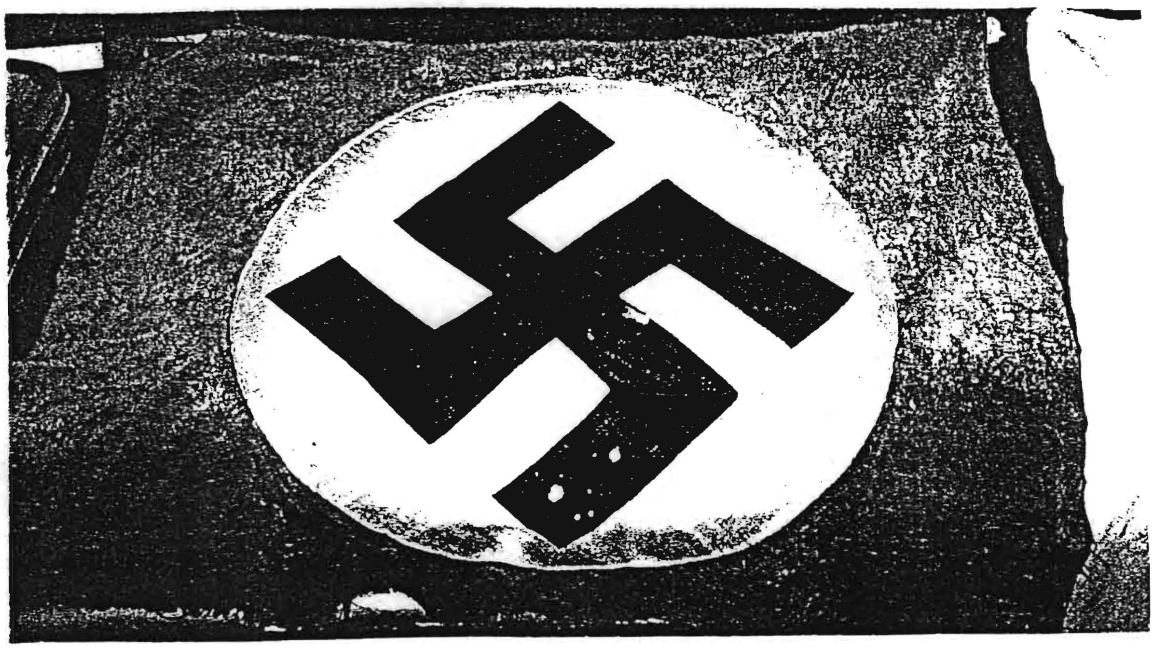
The town of Crossville was enraged at what the United States government was allowing. Geneva Convention or not, they refused to allow a Nazi criminal to be buried alongside family members. Many of the townspeople decided to dig up the grave and hang the body from the nearest tree.[51] When the mayor of the town learned of the plan, he contacted the camp operators. In the middle of the night, the body was exhumed and transported back to camp where it was later buried. The next week a group prisoners decided to construct a camp cemetery. For the remainder of the camp's operation, twelve men were buried on the grounds. Each man who died was given a full fledged Nazi ceremony.



These pictures were taken by a prisoner of the Crossville camp after an officer was killed by an American guard. To the left are the headstones that were used to mark several other graves. On the right is a photo taken shortly after the officer's funeral. All deceased P.O.Ws were exhumed and sent back to Germany after the war.

The suspected escape plan which had caused so many problems was actually taking place. Five men had dug a tunnel ten feet below the ground hidden beneath a pot bellied stove. They had also constructed an effective ventilation system for breathing. The tunnel ran all the way to fence, but was stopped by large slabs of concrete. The prisoners tunneled five feet to the left, five feet to the right, and three feet below. Still they continued to run into large slabs of concrete. Finally the tunnel project was abandoned. Years later after the camp shut down, several American engineers discovered the tunnel. Had the men continued to dig two more feet below the surface, they would have made it past the fence. All around the compound, the prisoners had planted a wide variety of flowers. The dirt used to dig the tunnel was hidden in their clothes and deposited on the lawn for planting.[52]

Most of the prisoners were still adamant Nazi believers. Although there were never any SS members in the camp, many high ranking officers were still fanatical in their ideology. An underground movement was prevalent within the camp which made sure all prisoners were loyal to the Nazi party. If any prisoner spoke out against Hitler or the Third Reich, he was mysteriously found dead a few days later. One enlisted man became weary of the war and the Nazi party. After discovering a member of his family had been killed, he ran into the compound and began cursing Hitler. A few days later, the man was found dead along highway 70. He had been tied up and thrown out the back of a speeding truck. No one confessed to the murder and each man remained silent during questioning. The man was killed for breaking the Nazi code of honor. No prisoner dared to speak a negative word against the Third Reich. The threat of losing one's life was too great.[53]



One of the original swastika flags carried by Nazi P.O.Ws in the camp during funerals and holidays.

In 1945 Margret Baine remembers when the Germans first realized they were losing the war. In her office, there was a map of Europe. Each day as the Allies took over a piece of territory, she would shade in the area on the map. One day a young German soldier was sent to the office on an errand. As he walked into the office, he noticed the map of shaded areas. He stared at the map for a long time and began crying uncontrollably. He then looked up at Mrs. Baine, and told her she had just marked in the village where his family lived.

From that moment on, the news spread throughout the camp that Germany was losing. The goose stepping and Hitler "heils" which were common practices, soon began to stop. The prisoners were weary of war and homesick for families. Worst of all, they began to accept the fact that the strong pillars of the Third Reich were slowly crumbling. It was only a matter of time before Germany endured another humiliating defeat.

In midsummer of 1945, the army rounded up every man, and marched them into the local movie theater. Every seat had been removed and they were ordered to sit on the floor. The officers complained of such disrespectful treatment, but made no argument when they were ordered by gun point.[54] The lights were dimmed and the film projector began to play. A film made by Allied liberators of the Jewish concentration camps was shown on the screen. Images of murdered men, women, and children at the hands of the Nazis flashed before the prisoners. Many Germans began laughing and hollering. They claimed the films were nothing more than propaganda created in Hollywood. Some Germans even stood and cheered at the grisly spectacles.[55]

To reinforce the knowledge of the atrocities, the film was shown three more times. After the third showing, most of the prisoners were silent with shame. At that moment they began to understand the crimes and horrors their government had inflicted on innocent lives.[56] Many Germans broke down and cried while others were stunned with shock. Still, a few officers scoffed at the films, and exulted over the power the Nazis had attained during the war.

The Closing of the Camp and Afterwards

In August of 1945, the prisoners said good-bye to the Crossville Internment Camp. Many Germans did not want to leave the United States. Some even tried to stay and attain a work visa, but the government required every P.O.W to be shipped to Europe. They knew their country was in ruins, and were frightened at what the future held.[57] America had been good to them. They were fed, clothed, and given work opportunities. They were in a country where food and resources seemed plentiful. Most of all, they had been prisoners of war who were not only treated humanely, but with respect and dignity. No other nation on earth treated its prisoners as well at the United States. If they had been captured by the Russians, they would have been tortured and killed. Now they were leaving this great nation and heading towards a bleak and uncertain future.

When Germany was defeated in May of 1945, the world slowly began to discover the brutality of the Nazi regime. Many innocent lives were violated by the tyranny of evil which plagued Europe for over a decade. Not only were millions of Jews murdered, countless others were treated inhumanely. At the arrival of the first load of German prisoner in Crossville, Hitler denounced the Geneva Convention. He openly proclaimed that Germany would not abide by the provisions.[58] Propaganda spread throughout Germany claiming Americans and Canadians were brutally scalping innocent German P.O.Ws.[59] Josef Goebbels, minister of propaganda, censored every letter that came from American P.O.W camps. An insert was placed in each letter stating that the pictures of healthy, happy Germans were misleading. They had been doctored by American propagandists to hide the emaciated looks. The German people were told that prisoners were being starved and tortured by the United States army.[60]

Surprisingly, propaganda of this nature did not have the negative repercussions for American P.O.Ws as were expected. In no way were they treated as well as the German

P.O.Ws, but surprisingly enough, they were treated the best of any prisoners captured. Crossville resident Pat Patience spent 27 months in a German prisoner of war camp. During his stay, he was fed one meal a day which consisted of cabbage soup. Occasionally on Sundays, he would receive a few potatoes in his soup. Patience commented that the entire German population was starving, and really no better off than the prisoners. During his stay, the Red Cross distributed food, books, and medical supplies which was a privilege few P.O.W.s enjoyed.

Despite the relatively adequate treatment American prisoners received, the Nazis were still the most terrifying force in the world. They were destroying millions of lives and spreading chaos throughout the globe. A question still difficult to ask, is why Nazis were treated so well in American prisons? There is a difference between treating a prisoner humanely and treating them as dignitaries. In Crossville, the prisoners were fed better than most people in the community. Vancienetta Wisdom, a Crossville businesswoman, remembers how most people in Cumberland county could not afford to buy steak.[61] Yet most prisoners were fed steak at least once a week. They could watch movies in the evening, recreate in the day, and pursue an education in their spare time. They were paid a salary, and had access to a Sears Roebuck catalog. For many people in the town, it seemed as though the provisions of the Geneva Convention were taken a bit too far. What was the reasoning behind this special treatment? What exactly did the country have to gain?

World War II brought America to the forefront of the international stage. It was a nation flexing its power against the Third Reich. So much evil, destruction, and chaos was occurring in the world, that the United States wanted to set an example. As the first ship load of German prisoners arrived in New York harbor, President Roosevelt made the comment,

> "We Americans, together with the Allies, are passing through a period of supreme test. It is a test of our courage, our resolve, our wisdom, and our essential decency."[62]

Roosevelt wanted to show the world that Americans would not reduce themselves to the level of the Nazis. The United States would be the only nation to uphold the codes of the Geneva Convention. By strictly adhering to humanitarian provisions, America would gain honor and dignity within the international community.

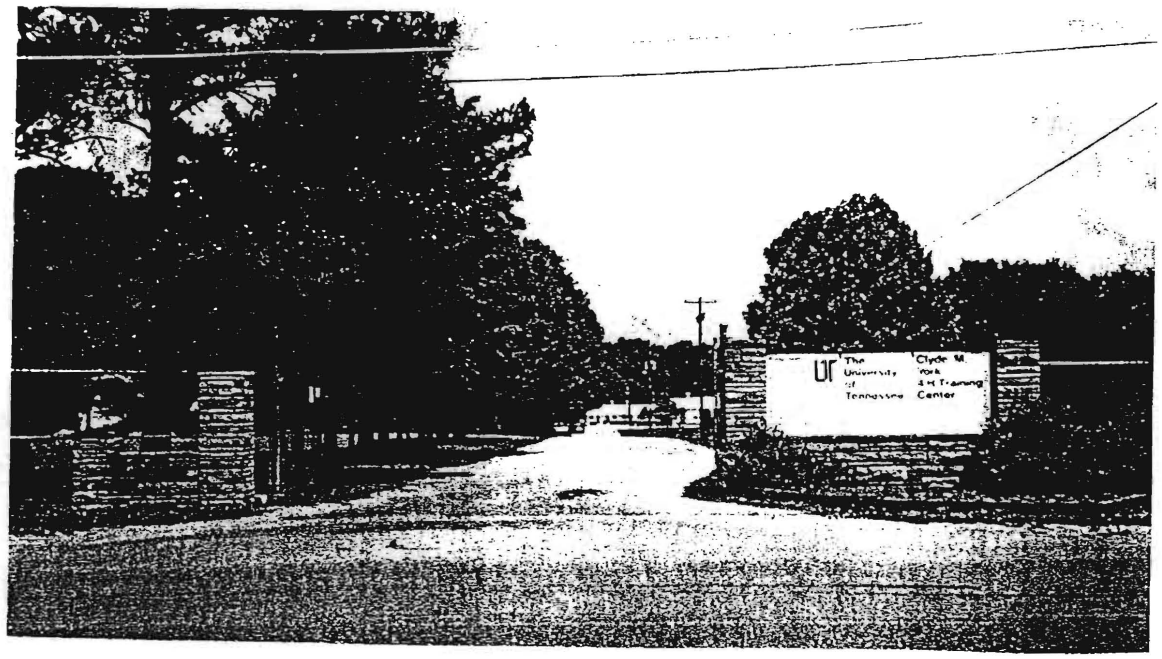
It was also hoped that our own P.O.Ws would be treated humanely. If the Germans knew we were treating their men with respect, they too might be more inclined to have mercy. Fortunately, the casualties of American P.O.Ws in German camps were very low. They were fed moderately and given medical attention. The Red Cross was also allowed to visit some of the camps and distribute blankets and clothing.

As the war waged on, the Germans began to realize the United States was a greater power than they ever imagined. While their country was starving and destitute, Americans had vast amount of food and resources. Evidence of this was through our treatment of prisoners. It became clear that Germany would not be able to overpower the United States. If America had the ability to offer prisoners excellent food, recreation, and even a salary, then they were far from becoming a defeated nation.

By 1944, it was only a matter of time before the Allies would become victorious. The foreseeable threat after the Nazis lay further East with the Soviet Union. Communism was just as deplorable as fascism, and there was the possibility that Europe could fall into the hand of the Russians. A race for the capture of Berlin had begun, and the Soviet Union was advancing rapidly towards the West. If Berlin fell to the Russians, Europe would be in a precarious position. Germany had to side with the West to avoid the spread of communism. German prisoners who spent their time in America saw first hand the innumerable benefits of a liberal democracy. The intellectuals and high ranking military officials held captive in America, had influence on public policy. The respect, dignity, and resources available in the states, would ultimately make Western democracy a more viable option than communism. Capitalism provided more options and opportunities than most

Germans had ever known. The Sears Roebuck catalog actually might have saved Europe from the spread of communism.

As for the city of Crossville, the Germans P.O.Ws played an important role in the community. At a time when labor was in great demand, the prisoners worked on farms, built houses, and planted flowers throughout Cumberland county. They left woodcarvings, works of art, poetry, and songs. Most citizens had never traveled beyond the boundaries of the Plateau. The nation of Germany was a far off place read only about in newspapers. The arrival of Germans brought a new culture to East Tennessee, and for the first time, the enemy was seen face to face. The guards who worked in the camp, such as ninety year old A.J. Wyatt, gained new respect for Germans. He made friends with a few soldiers and hated to see them leave when the war ended. A few residents in Crossville still correspond with former P.O.Ws.

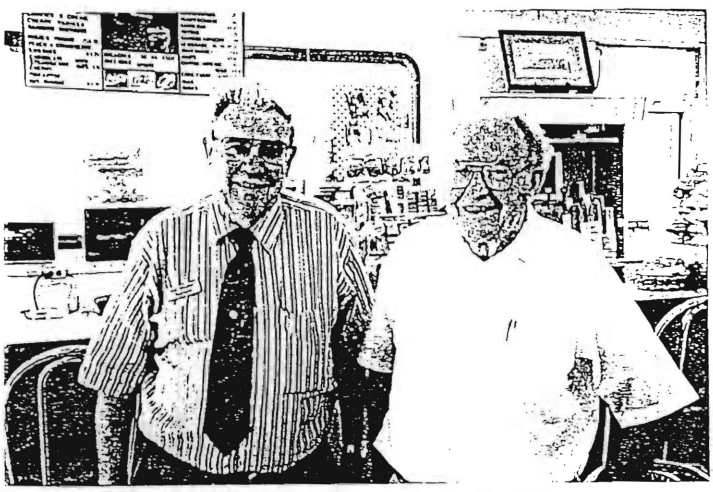


The Crossville Internment Camp as it looks today. The University of Tennessee purchased the property and now uses it as a retreat and convention center site.

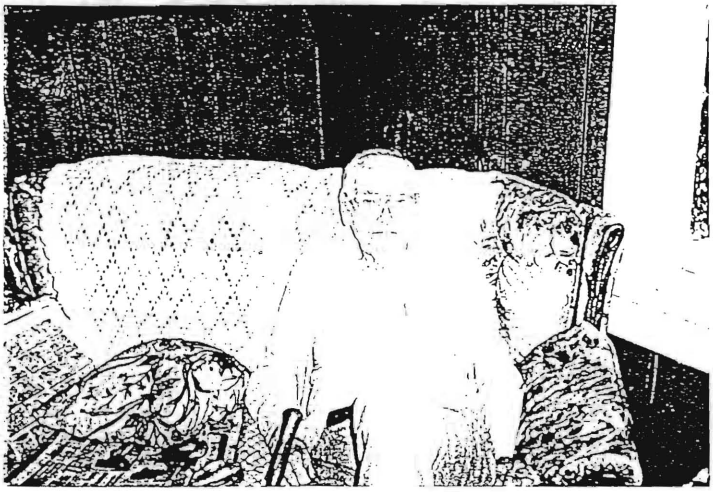
Several months after the last German prisoners left, the process of disassembling the camp began. The University of Tennessee later purchased the site and converted it into a 4-H camp still in use today. Only a few buildings are left standing. Most structures such as the guard towers, recreation hall, canteen, soccer field, and tennis courts were torn down in the 1950's and 60's. All that is left are a few photographs, and memories from the employees who worked in the camp.

American GI's stationed in Crossville married many of the local women. Some, such as Joe Palma and Reginald Rowell even settled in Crossville. Most areas of the P.O.W camp today are now overgrown. There is only a small museum left which houses a few existing relics. The Crossville camp has even been forgotten by many Tennesseans. Some have never even heard of the Crossville Internment Camp and the impact it made during the war years. The most valuable resources left are the men and women who worked in the camp. The P.O.W camp brought the war home to East Tennessee from 1942 to 1945, and made a greater impact in the lives of Germans and Americans than both would ever realize.

Those who were active in the Crossville Internment Camp.









Top left is Mr. Bob Mitchell and Mr. Donald Brookhart. Mr. Brookhart fought overseas at the Battle of the Bulge during W.W.II. Bob Mitchell now owns Mitchell's Drugstore and was a young man at the time of the P.O.W's arrival. To the right is Mrs. Margaret Mitchell who was the camp secretary from 1942 until closing. She played an important role in the operation of the camp and has an in-depth knowledge of the camp's history. Below left is ninety year old Mr. A.J. Wyatt. He was a guard from the time of the camp's opening until closing. Bottom right is Mr. Joe Palma who was stationed in Crossville as a guard from Brooklyn, New York. He ended up marrying a local woman and is now retired and works part-time in Crossville.

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