

Aytes, Erlene Interview, 9-7-93

[Speaker 1]

I don't know exactly what you're interested in.

[Speaker 2]

Well, I'm interested in your experiences during World War II, particularly, and what went on around here that you can tell me about.

[Speaker 1]

Well, the prisoner of war camp, and there were three camp commanders, and I was secretary to all three of them. I have a card on all the officers, their duties and everything there. And LaGuardia was a friend.

During the time he was mayor of New York, he was a friend of one of the prisoners of war.

[Speaker 2]

Oh, really? He had Italian prisoners there?

[Speaker 1]

No, just nothing but German. Wait, let me correct that. We had some Italians, and they didn't get along too well, so we shipped them to Alva, Oklahoma.

What I was starting to say, they call it the Jap camp, you know. There never was a Jap there.

[Speaker 2]

No Japanese, all Germans there.

[Speaker 1]

Germans and Italians for a while, and then the Italians we shipped to Alva, Oklahoma. I thought you might like to have a copy of that.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, I'll do it.

[Speaker 1]

Or read it or whatever. If you'd like a copy, that was in the paper not long ago, I think the date's on it.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, 92.

[Speaker 1]

Fairly recent. When we go out there, they've got a copy machine, and we'll copy it there. And this is some more stuff of that.

And we'll get to the pictures later. I don't know whether you are interested in Conlon County. In this book that this man from Cookville wrote.

[Speaker 2]

I know Calvin Dickinson. I know Calvin.

[Speaker 1]

He mentioned the prisoner of war camp being it. And when he was up at the bank selling the books Christmas time, he found out that I had worked out there. So he sent a man up, and I took him out there and showed him all around and answered a lot of questions of his.

[Speaker 2]

I've tried on two or three different occasions to put students on the topic, either for a senior honors thesis or a master's thesis or something. And in each case, it hasn't worked out.

[Speaker 1]

You mean at Cookville or UT?

[Speaker 2]

No, at UT. I just haven't gotten it done. I may have somebody again this fall going to do that.

[Speaker 1]

I have a request that two or three people have made. As we go in out there, see, there's an awful lot of meetings held out there. Our Duke Bridge Club meets out there in October, and we have all people from several states come.

And they thought it would be nice to have a sign out the front saying that was the 4-H camp. We'll talk about that when we get out there. Now, this is all, well, telling about the camp and pictures of it and what have you.

You might look through that and see if there's anything in that that you'd be interested in having.

[Speaker 2]

Where does this come from, this material?

[Speaker 1]

Well, most of this is when I took this fellow's assistant out there, and the man that's in charge out there gave us copies of it.

[Speaker 2]

I see.

[Speaker 1]

And some of it I had already. Here's the table of contents. I should have put that on top.

See, Camp Forrest, here's, see, they, we would send, we got all of our supplies from Camp Forrest during the time. Once a week, they sent a truck down there after supplies of all sorts. And we sent prisoners back down there sometime.

And you can see all of that, if you want. Now, this, when we gave this talk at our church on it, this, we had this, this shows what the prices were back during that time.

[Speaker 2]

Oh, those were wonderful.

[Speaker 1]

And I didn't know what you'd be interested in, what you wouldn't. And here is the article. The winter of 1943 was rough in spots.

See, let's see. They started bringing them out there in 43, I guess, wasn't it?

[Speaker 2]

Probably, yeah.

[Speaker 1]

I think that was right. And I started to work out there right soon after they opened it. And I worked there, and the camp commander says, when do you want to leave?

When we were closing the camp up, and I said, well, I want to be the last one to leave. So we closed the camp on Friday, and I went to Oak Ridge on Monday and started working. Oh.

After the federal government over there. I had gone over and been interviewed and had gotten a job before then.

[Speaker 2]

Now, let me be sure I've got the chronology straight. You started at the camp when?

[Speaker 1]

When it first opened. I think it was 43.

[Speaker 2]

43.

[Speaker 1]

I think it was about the time it opened.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah. You knew there was a camp. Did you go up and apply for a job?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah. I was working for the state at the time in the welfare office, and they started hiring them out there. And there were several of the people in Crossville, and out there were girls and secretaries and so forth, you know.

[Speaker 2]

How far out of town was the camp?

[Speaker 1]

We can measure it as we go out there. We'll go in my car and we'll go out that way. There's two ways of going.

I like to go out like you're going to Sparta, and there's a big sign there saying Clyde York 4-H Camp and all there. And you turn left. Now, you can go a back way.

I think that is the best way to go. And this is a book on these two are on Crossville.

[Speaker 2]

They each have something in them about them?

[Speaker 1]

Uh-huh. You might just glance at that. These belong to a man from our church, and he's my attorney, and his wife and I play a lot of bridge together.

And she brought me these for you to look at, and it tells a lot of stuff about Crossville and so forth. I don't know whether you'd be interested in it. It tells here about Camp Douglas near, I don't know whether you'd be a bit interested in it.

You can look at it as we go out or whenever you want to. And I wanted to tell you about one thing. I don't know exactly what you're interested in knowing or what, but during the time we were out there, the girls in town formed a club, and it was Maidens United for Fun service.

And we met once a week in town and entertained the enlisted men, you know.

[Speaker 2]

Oh, who were out at the camp? Yeah, that were out there. How big a group was it?

How many enlisted men did they have out there? A few dozen or a few hundred? I just sort of wanted to get a ballpark kind of figure.

[Speaker 1]

I don't know. I'll see if I can come up with a figure. I don't think anybody's asked me that.

Everybody else knows how many prisoners were out there.

[Speaker 2]

Well, I'm interested in that, too.

[Speaker 1]

The enlisted men, there was two MP outfits, 316, 318 MP. And I don't remember how many was in that, in either one of them, I don't guess.

[Speaker 2]

I think it was enough to get a party together.

[Speaker 1]

Oh, yeah. This is the man that I, he is a prisoner of war out there, and he comes back over here to see a woman. I don't think he came this year.

I don't know how they became friends or what in Mississippi. His friend, through my sister-in-law down there, found out that I lived here, and they came up one day, and I took them out and showed them all around. He wanted to see where he had been in prison, you know.

But he, of course, didn't recognize any of them because he was never outside the stockade. Uh-huh, right. So he didn't.

And I wanted to tell you about prison. There was, we had one prisoner of war escape, which was bad for everybody, and I tell you that camp commander was hard to live with during that time. And he went out on a garbage truck, and he flipped out with it and somehow got out, and then he started hitchhiking up towards Kentucky.

And the first one that picked him up was some highway patrol. And he rode a while with them, and he saw his picture on the dash board, and they, it scared him, of course. So he says, I believe this is as far as I need to go.

They never did even recognize him or anything. And he got out and hitchhiked on up into Kentucky, and he worked on the bluegrass farm up there. He was gone, I don't, I remember how many months, probably about eight or nine.

And as I say, the colonel was hard to get along with during that time. But the day they caught him and he came back, and he walked in, and my desk was right out in front and the colonel's was back here, and he said, oh, I want to apologize because I haven't shaved today. The colonel told me later, he said, I wouldn't care if he hadn't had a stitch of clothes on, just get him back.

[Speaker 2]

So he wasn't, he just got as far as Kentucky?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, and worked on the bluegrass farm up there for a while. And then he decided he wanted to come on back.

[Speaker 2]

So he just came back, turned himself in?

[Speaker 1]

Uh-huh, yeah. And this is the secretary's book on, you're not interested in this, I'm sure, on what we call the muffs, the girls that help entertain them once a week, and the enlisted men, you know.

[Speaker 2]

I'd like to take a look at it. This is what the group did?

[Speaker 1]

Here's some of the enlisted men's pictures. And this was, well, let me let you look at that, and then I'll tell you.

[Speaker 2]

Well, I can pick that up later.

[Speaker 1]

This man was chief warrant officer out there, and he had this dog. I can't tell what his whole, anyway, he had this cute little dog that he was keeping for a friend of his who was overseas during the war. And when they came out here, asked me if I'd keep the little dog.

Manchester Terrier, it was a registered dog, cutest thing you've ever seen. And I kept her, and when he got ready to leave, he left her with me. And that little dog could come as near a talking as anybody you've ever seen.

I could not even look at her or anything, and I'd say, lady, let's hang out. She'd run to the door. I wasn't living here.

I was living over in the town there with my wife Mary. And she'd go to the front door and sit and wait on me. And one time I took her with my mother, and I were going to Georgia.

I was born in Georgia. We were going back down there, and we took her with us, and she'd always get on the back seat and put her feet right up on my shoulders here, and she just loved to ride. And we stopped, got jazzed, and let her go to the bathroom and so forth.

When I got back in the car and went off, I forgot about her. I was in a hurry getting down there, and got way down to this, where's lady? I turned around, went back, and that little dog was sitting right where I let her at, just as far as she could be, and she belonged to him.

Now, this is the minister of our church, which is the oldest church in town, First Congregation. And he helped out there more than anything. He would, every Saturday night, he would have enlisted men, some of them that wanted to come in and eat, and they'd play, I guess, games, card games or something.

I don't know, but he helped entertain them. What was his name? And this was the Camp Adjutant, and this building's been torn down.

I'll show you where it was, but that's our headquarters building. And he's been coming through here, going to Knoxville to see his son, that lives over in Concord, and he usually stops to see me. And he's having his 50th wedding anniversary this year, and I got an invitation the other day to come visit in Little Rock.

I don't know whether any of these pictures you'll be interested in or not. Let's see what you've got.

[Speaker 2]

This is... Looks like Master Sergeant here.

[Speaker 1]

This has been torn down, but this is as you go into the camp, and that was the guardhouse. And this was right in front of the administration building.

[Speaker 2]

It's part of the staff, or most of it, or just...? Yeah.

[Speaker 1]

These are all girls that worked out there. Let's see. This one.

Where is Margaret? And that one. The three of us go to the same church, and we had a program a while back on the prisoner of war camp.

Our minister was fairly new here, and he wanted to know all about it. I took him and his wife out there and showed them around. But we gave a program one night, and this fellow from TPI taped it, and he said he'd send me a copy of it, but so far he hasn't.

And this is some more of the enlisted men. And that's the same picture. And here's where the muffs had picnics and entertained them and all that kind of stuff.

And...

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, a lot of guys long ways from home.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah. And this has nothing to do with the prisoner of war camp. These are just real old cards of Cumberland County.

So I don't think that you'd be interested in any of that. I told you about the prisoner escaping. We had one camp commander that every time...

He liked to play golf. At that time, I don't think there's any golf courses around here. But when we didn't have anything to do, we'd get out behind the administration building, and he'd hit golf balls, and you know who had to pick them up and bring them back to him.

But he enjoyed that a lot.

[Speaker 2]

I have a hard time writing that into a job description these days.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah.

[Speaker 2]

Now, these cards are all the officers.

[Speaker 1]

That's one I actually used the whole time, and I put their... He was one of the... These are the three camp commanders.

[Speaker 2]

And this one...

[Speaker 1]

You see, this one was a real good friend of Harry Truman.

[Speaker 2]

Dudley was?

[Speaker 1]

Uh-huh. And we... I had to send him a Christmas card, you know, fix it up and all.

Now, this man right here, stockade commander, he wrote a book on my way back there.

[Speaker 2]

Kirsten Cooper. Is that... This is his book.

Is it one of these?

[Speaker 1]

Is it? No, there's another. Well, there's another.

[Speaker 2]

Kirsten Cooper.

[Speaker 1]

I didn't care too much for him, but you can't like everybody, you know.

[Speaker 2]

What was it you didn't like about him?

[Speaker 1]

Oh, he didn't tell us some things just exactly like the rest of us agreed with about the stockade and so forth, but it wasn't bad, nothing bad. And this was the camp age for a while. And...

[Speaker 2]

Well, this lists his duties?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah.

[Speaker 2]

That's what you have here.

[Speaker 1]

This is actually what they were... As they were assigned these duties, I put them on here, see? Uh-huh.

And, of course, kept them the whole time. These were official duties.

[Speaker 3]

Uh-huh.

[Speaker 1]

And Brindle was his camp agent, too, after... He was before Brelcombe. And...

There's another one on Brelcombe. And these were camp commanders. Not camp commanders.

The 316th and 17th.

[Speaker 3]
Oh, the MPs.

[Speaker 1]
Commanders, yeah.

[Speaker 3]
Uh-huh.

[Speaker 1]
And this one was the finance officer. Just, I don't guess you'd be interested in that, but that's just some of their duties.

[Speaker 2]
This is a terrific record of what went on in there. Well, I... Chaplain.

[Speaker 1]
If... If you want to take any of this stuff, you can take it, and you can give it to Woody and let him bring it back to me.

[Speaker 2]
Would it be possible for me, say, to copy these?

[Speaker 1]
You want to take them with you and do that?

[Speaker 2]
Or copy them out there? No, it would take too long to do it out there.

[Speaker 1]
That's what I was thinking. Well, and you might not want to do them all. For instance, that one doesn't have anything on it.

There's a few that don't. I was trying to see what others might be of interest. That's the chief nurse.

[Speaker 2]
Colonel Patrick J. Hurley. That's a name that I know, too.

[Speaker 1]
Well, he was the camp commander.

[Speaker 2]
Yeah, but... Why Patrick J. Hurley?

It's the name of either the State Department or... Well, I'll find out.

[Speaker 1]

Well, let's see if there's anything. This was all back before they had electric typewriters. I was trying to think if there's anything I can think of interest to tell you about any of these.

[Speaker 2]

Was there a lot of turnover on the staff? Did a lot of people come and go, or was it fairly permanent?

[Speaker 1]

Not too many. Yeah, a little, but not much. For instance, that one is discharged soon.

Some of them I don't really remember. That's one I don't right now remember.

[Speaker 2]

It would be hard to remember them all.

[Speaker 1]

He's in the signal car, see? The signal car wasn't in my office.

[Speaker 2]

No, they're not. They're operating. He's having trouble with the telephone, isn't he?

[Speaker 1]

Well, he could charge it here. Just let him.

[Speaker 2]

Camp Athletic Council.

[Speaker 1]

I guess I should tell him. Let me tell him. Okay.

He doesn't quit calling me Ms. H. I've been telling him the time. Let's bust at him about that.

We're not used to that. Well, now, let's see.

[Speaker 2]

Can you tell me? What... Gene Truckee had nurse.

Was there a hospital there or a dispensary?

[Speaker 1]

Oh, we had a hospital. And it was, you know, for everybody. The prisoners and the other two.

[Speaker 2]

How large people you said have asked you, how big a group of prisoners did they have?

[Speaker 1]

We've disagreed on that. I wish I could find out for sure. The number that sticks in my mind, we had 2,200.

But somebody told me I was wrong. It wasn't that many. So, I'm not sure.

I'm going to find out from Truckee the next time I see him. If he knows how many. There's not anybody that I can actually contact that knows, you know.

Except if I could get in touch with one of the officers like that. Oh, and I wanted to tell you, this picture right here, I set it down to show you. That is painted by one of the prisoners.

Oh.

[Speaker 2]

Somebody with a lot of talent.

[Speaker 1]

Uh-huh. See, doesn't it look like Germany?

[Speaker 2]

Looks like Bavaria.

[Speaker 1]

Uh-huh. Up in that vicinity.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, uh-huh. Looks like home to him, I imagine.

[Speaker 1]

I imagine that he is painting like his home. I don't know. But that would be my guess.

[Speaker 2]

I imagine those people felt that they were a long ways from home.

[Speaker 1]

Oh, you know they did. And there was another story I was going to tell you now. I'll think of it later as we go along, I guess.

But now, if you want to take all of this, you can take it. If you're going to take this, I'm going to need it back soon. I don't guess you'll want to take this, whether you or not.

Because this doesn't actually belong to me, you know. But...

[Speaker 2]

Looks like you've got two copies of this here.

[Speaker 1]

Uh-uh.

[Speaker 2]

This is not the same thing.

[Speaker 1]

Uh-uh. Is it? Or is it?

Maybe I'm... I don't know. See the table of contents.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, it is.

[Speaker 1]

Oh, it is?

[Speaker 2]

Uh-huh.

[Speaker 1]

Well, then... You could take one of them.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, if I could take one of them and go through it, take a look at it, and...

[Speaker 1]

And Woody could get it back to me.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, uh-huh.

[Speaker 1]

Soon.

[Speaker 2]

But I mean, if you need one of them quickly, then I could take the other one.

[Speaker 1]

Well, since they're the same, why don't you take just one of them Uh-huh. and let the other one...

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, then I can get it back to Woody.

[Speaker 1]

Get it back to him. Um...

[Speaker 2]

And I'm careful with these kinds of things. I haven't lost anything yet.

[Speaker 1]

Well, that's good. You hope. Um...

These are things that were cut out of a paper. See? It tells about the Tennessee Central Train coming in and time.

[Speaker 3]

Uh-huh.

[Speaker 1]

And it tells all about that. See, when they brought the prisoners in here, they were so afraid that the people in Crossville would not like it. And they brought them in and unloaded them in the middle of the night down at the station here in town and took them out there so the population didn't really know it.

You know, it was even being done. And, of course, worked out there wasn't allowed to tell anything, so that was one of the things that they did. I noticed that in there where the train coming in.

And, um...

[Speaker 2]

Was that with just the first group of prisoners that came in, or did they do that pretty regularly?

[Speaker 1]

Well, they brought them all pretty much at the same time.

[Speaker 2]

Oh, I see. They brought just a big bunch of people.

[Speaker 1]

A trainload. And they did it all that way, best I remember. But they brought them in the middle of the night and brought them all out there.

[Speaker 3]

Mm-hmm.

[Speaker 1]

And, um... Let's see. There was something else I wanted to tell you about that.

[Speaker 2]

How did the people feel about it around here?

[Speaker 1]

Well, oh, that was... One of the prisoners died. And they buried him over in the cemetery here in Crossville.

At that time, we just had one cemetery. Now, we have a city cemetery and a Crossville cemetery. Of course, a lot of little ones all out around, but these two big ones.

So when he died, they buried him over at the cemetery in Crossville here, the one on the left. And as soon as people found out about it, you have never seen such an uproar. They went, um...

Dr. Smith had a drugstore here, and he was the mayor at the time. And you'll see his name in there, Charles Smith. Angela Smith was his widow.

This article right here, that one. Anyway, the people, when they found out that the prisoner had been buried over there, they came out. I remember very well Dr. Smith and another one or two, seemed to me like Moses Dorton. He was president of the First National Bank, the only bank here at the time. They came out there, two or three of them, and talked to the camp commander and said, you get that prisoner out of over there, we're going to have trouble. Says everybody's up in arms about a German prisoner being buried next to their relatives in Crossville.

And he says, if you don't get him up in a few days or right away or something, says the people of Crossville are going to dig him up and hang him on Main Street in Crossville. Can you imagine something like that? But anyway, that's what they did.

And so they got him up and brought him back out to the camp and buried him out there for a while. And it seemed to me like there was two or three more dying. And they sent them all to Camp Forrest and buried them down there until the war was over.

And then when the war was over, they shipped them back to Germany.

[Speaker 2]

So people got pretty excited about that.

[Speaker 1]

They didn't like any part of that. They didn't put up with anything of that. That was something else.

[Speaker 2]

One thing to have the camp out there, but another, burying somebody permanently in the cemetery.

[Speaker 1]

And yet it gave a lot of jobs to people from here to see. And they should have appreciated it, I guess.

[Speaker 2]

They could appreciate it, but still not want somebody buried in their cemetery.

[Speaker 1]

My neighbor next door is out walking. I see he's taking on the mailbox. He gets my mail and brings it in and puts it on the front porch for me.

And I give him my newspaper. Well, that's fair enough. Now, what else do we...

I'll think of some more things as we go along.

[Speaker 2]

Oh, sure. You were there until the camp closed.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, the day we closed it, I left and went to Oak Ridge.

[Speaker 2]

Was the war over when they closed the camp?

[Speaker 1]

It was December 46. I don't remember. The 9th, I think.

It seemed like it was the 9th.

[Speaker 2]

So quite a while after the war ended, then.

[Speaker 1]

When did the war end?

[Speaker 2]

45. So maybe December 45.

[Speaker 1]

I guess it's December 45, yeah.

[Speaker 2]

There were prisoners in the United States through 46, so that's why I wasn't sure.

[Speaker 1]

I'll look at something in yonder. I think I can tell. I stayed until the war was over.

When the war was over, we sent everybody out. They went back to... sent them back over there.

Now, we were talking about the Italian prisoners. We had a good many Italian prisoners to start with, but they did not get along with the German prisoners. Germans?

And that was the reason they shipped them to Oklahoma.

[Speaker 2]

Were there fights?

[Speaker 1]

I guess.

[Speaker 2]

I don't know.

[Speaker 1]

That all happened behind the stockade, and I didn't know about that much. But they weren't getting along, and that's the reason they had to ship them out.

[Speaker 2]

So the way the camp was set up, you had a stockade, and then you had office buildings and things.

[Speaker 1]

When we go out there, I'll show you. It's changed a lot, and it's hard to visualize just what like it was, but I'll tell you the best I can. See, when UT took it over, they tore down our office building, the finance building, and all that kind of stuff, and built some buildings around the back, and I'll show you them.

I went out there just for curiosity. I belonged to Home Demonstration Club, which is run by UT, and the home demonstration agent left two doors down here for me, and she and her husband rented from me twice, two different houses, and now they bought that, and I moved over here after they were there. I didn't even know they were there, but we've been good friends a long time.

But anyway, I was going to tell something else about them, I guess.

[Speaker 2]

The redoing of the buildings?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah. I'll show you the ones that have not been changed at all. All the stockade's been torn down except one chimney, and the hospital and all that.

I'll just show you all that when we get out there. I think you'll enjoy that more. Why don't we leave all this here, and go out there and look around, and you may want to ask more questions, or I may think of more things to tell you.