

# a forgotten chapter of history found again

*It was a chance meeting, in an out-of-the-way place. Lipscomb history Professor Tim Johnson was eating breakfast in the Square Forty diner in Lawrence County, Tennessee, when the restaurant owner introduced him to a regular—a retired local history teacher.*

And from that small start came a big historical project that has captured the attention of people nationwide and promises to benefit World War II historians for years to come.

That day, Johnson was told the story of a batch of letters in the possession of Curtis Peters, president of the Lawrence County Historical Society. Did Johnson know that Tennessee had been the site of several prisoner of war camps during

World War II? And did he know that one camp, housing German soldiers, had been located in Lawrenceburg?

He did not; but now the world does, thanks to Johnson and Peters' meeting in that diner. The two kindred souls discussed how, in 1988, Peters' sister-in-law, Lynn Pettus, found a batch of nearly 400 letters from former German POWs stuffed in a Corn Flakes box in the home of her great aunt Jim Stribling Brock.

During the war, German POWs were sent to local farms as laborers, Peters said. The prisoners got to know the farm owners well, and the letters discovered in the Brock home were more than three decades of correspondence from at least 30 family groups of former German POWs. The Germans were writing from post-war Germany

to the Brock family, who owned the Stribling family farm where the prisoners had worked during their internment.

*"Naturally we were thinking about you all the entire day... First, the time I was cultivating under the peach trees... Of course, I pictured a part of our daily interaction at mealtimes, conversations and the countryside... Your ears must have been burning the entire day because we spoke the whole time about you all!"*

— **Eugen Hirth**, former POW, letter to Brock family, 1948

Peters had given several local presentations on the letters around Lawrence County, but the story was about to get a lot bigger.

At Johnson's urging, Peters brought the letters to Lipscomb University in July 2014, to be safely housed in the Beaman Library, which already holds special collections such as the Bailey Hymnal Collection, with works dating back to the 1700s, and hundreds of historical documents related to the

Stone Campbell Movement from as far back as the 1800s. The letters were officially donated to the university in April.

"Peters and the Stribling-Brock descendants wanted the letters to be available to



Sattendorf 28. Mai 1944  
 Liebe Familie Brock!  
 Ihren lieben Brief vom 14. Mai mit großer Freude dankend erhalten! Inwiefern wir wissen das Sie das kleine Paket von mir erhalten habt. Es hat ja sehr lange gedauert bis es zu euch gekommen ist. Es hat ja auch eine weite Reise hinter sich. Wie geht es nun auch immer liebe Grüße  
 E. Hirth





the public and to researchers nationwide, to be housed safely where they wouldn't decay and to be used at a faith-based university, as an homage to their patriarch James Stribling," said Sandra Parham, dean of the Beaman Library. "Lipscomb was able to meet all those criteria, on top of the personal relationship Peters developed with Lipscomb faculty."

The library secured institutional funding and grants for Lipscomb German Professor Charles McVey to translate the letters and for the library to make them available online. The library also hired Lipscomb student and German native Ines Kenschewitz to help McVey organize and translate the letters.

The library featured the discovery story and selected readings from the letters during a Sept. 10 event celebrating the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII.

"It's unusual to find this large a collection of letters," said Johnson. "This is social history, about their lives, their families, the hardships they suffered."

The former POWs had primarily returned to Germany, which went through much

greater financial hardship after the war than America. Much of the text of the letters is taken up with requests for needed items or retellings of fond memories of the Lawrenceburg camp.

"It was like they were writing to family and friends, not just writing because they needed resources," said McVey. "They talk about sitting on the porch and drinking buttermilk, and comparing that to Germany, where they can't get food and don't have enough clothes."

*"I thank you, for the wonderful Christmas present you sent for me... I have seldom been so richly gifted. The things you sent to me fit very well, except for a pair of pants which I will have made a little smaller. The shoes also fit very well... All these things are very seldom available here in Germany, only on the black market."*

— **Erich Thimmann**, former POW, letter to Brock family, 1947

One former POW wrote the family to get the address of the former Lawrenceburg camp commander, who he had heard was stationed in Germany. He wanted to correspond with his former captor, said Peters. The writers shared wedding photos, stories about family outings and tales about their children.

The locals appeared to be equally affected by getting to know the prisoners who worked logging on many local farms, said Peters. In the local newspaper, headlines at the start of the war referred to the local POW as "Nazis." As the war progressed, the newspaper referred to them as "Germans," and by the time they were leaving to return home, the newspaper referred to them as "our German boys," he said.

One member of the Brock family, took an oil paint set out to one of the prisoners in the camp. The artist POW painted a scene of North Africa, where he had been captured, on a starched bed sheet and gave it to the Brock family.



Vor allem ...  
 nichts von mir hören lies. Sie  
 irgend etwas zugestoßen ist, oder das ich nicht  
 bin. Ich bin wirklich neugierig. Aber wie Sie sehen ist alles in  
 Gesundheitlich gehtes mir gut. Was das tägliche Leben betrifft, könnte  
 es besser sein. Wenniel geant hätte, das es so in Deutschland aus-  
 sieht, das heißt in der Ost Zone, wäre ich nie hier geblieben.  
 Es ist kein Leben mehr. Man möchte bald den mut verlieren, aber  
 es muß doch immer wieder gehen. Vielleicht wird es doch mal besser.



*"I have never in my life come across such good people as you all, or for that matter, such good people as those in Lawrenceburg. I would return to Lawrenceburg immediately... We'd like nothing better than to have just enough to live on."*

— **Gottfried and Maria Rest**, former POW and wife, letter to Brock family, 1947

"What these letters are about is development of relationships," said Johnson, one of Lipscomb's designated research professors and a national expert on the Mexican-American War. "It's easy to talk about war when it is at a distance. Part of war is to dehumanize your opponent. When you bring in the human element, it's a completely different ballgame. These letters bring you face-to-face with humanity."

Translation of the letters was still ongoing this summer when Lipscomb's student news network Lumination wrote a news

story about the donation of the letters to the Beaman Library. A reporter from the Nashville newspaper, The Tennessean, saw the story and wrote about the collection for that newspaper.

Printed on July 10, that story generated website re-postings on Gannett newspapers across the nation and in Europe and prompted NBC Nightly News to do their own story about the letters, which aired nationwide in early August. Each publication received hundreds of comments on their online bulletin boards, and McVey and the library began hearing from many families and historians who knew of the American POW camps and even had known prisoners kept at such camps.

America housed nearly half a million POWs on U.S. soil during WWII, McVey said. The Lawrenceburg camp housed a little more than 300 prisoners, said Peters.

"These letters are really bringing something that was old and forgotten to life again," McVey said.

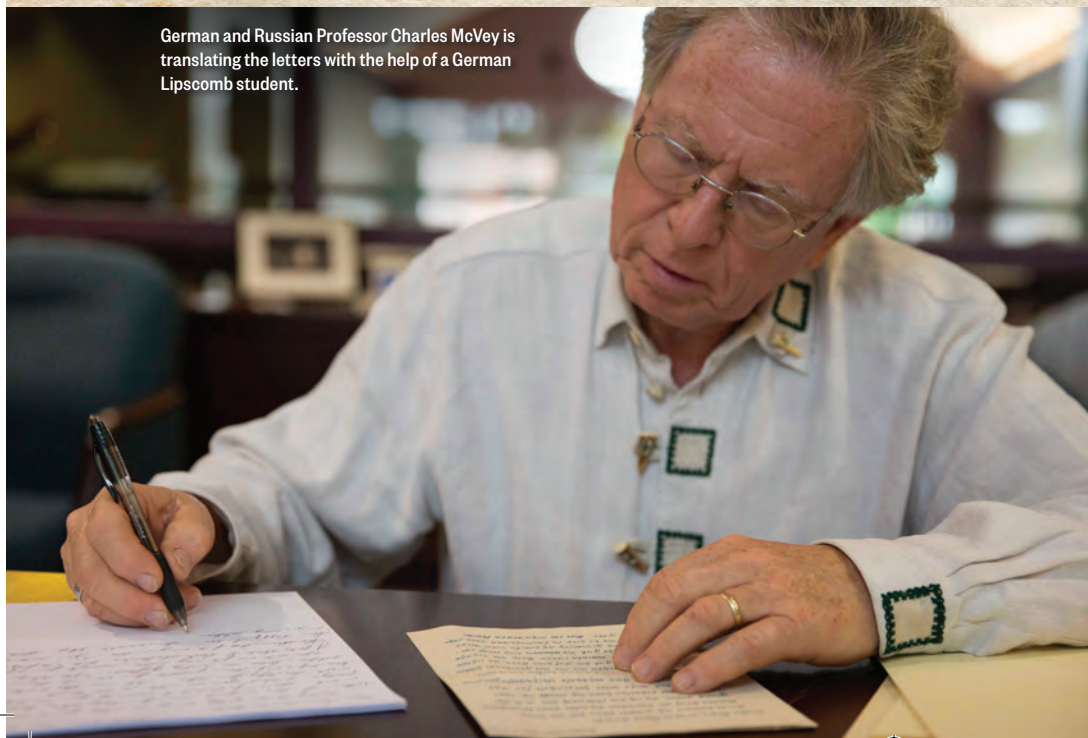
Thanks to the widespread interest, Johnson and McVey are now dreaming of a Lipscomb University research center for the study of American POW camps.

"Our library could become a center for the study of this aspect of WWII," speculated McVey. "It's a very interesting topic that is tied to military history but also tied to how people relate to each other today in conflict and in imprisonment."

Tennessee is a good place to start such a project, as there were 11 POW camps located across the state, Peters said. The South held the majority of POW camps because the weather was more conducive, he said.

"The story of these letters may seem like serendipity, but really they came to us and have been shared with so many people because of relationships—the library's strong relationship with faculty, our faculty's strong relationship with the community and both our relationships with Lipscomb students," said Parham. "That's certainly fitting for a collection of letters depicting how to love one's fellow man, much better than any textbook or essay."

German and Russian Professor Charles McVey is translating the letters with the help of a German Lipscomb student.



To see the Stribling Brock Letters Collection visit [lipscomb.edu/POWletters](http://lipscomb.edu/POWletters)