

The GALEN FLICKNER STORY

MOUNDRIDGE -- Galen G. Flickner, 76, died Tuesday (May 17, 2005) at Via Christi-St. Francis campus in Wichita.

In the 1940s I was still in high school. The war was on, and we had rationing and were on a war economy. My brother had to go to service. He went as a conscientious objector. I took it for granted, I guess; I didn't know any better. When it came to high school, there was a lot of name-calling, like "Krauts" and "yellow bellies" and things like that. I was lucky I didn't have to put up with much ridicule. I did not have to make a decision yet so I didn't think much about it.

The war economy had affected us so that we could not do things in school that we wanted to. After high school I didn't know what I wanted to do. "Lord, what do you want from me? What occupation should I get into?" I helped on the dairy farm and then decided to try some college, so I went to Bethel in the late '40s. College was not for me. I found it very difficult. About this time the voluntary service program opened up. So I decided I'd like to go to Europe. They said Espelkamp needs construction workers. This suited me, so I decided I would apply. I was accepted in the second voluntary service group.

I was supposed to spend one month in Akron, Pennsylvania, before going to Germany. It was quite an education for me because I learned of all the different Mennonites and other things too. It seemed like the GCs (General Conference Mennonites) were blamed for everything that went wrong there, and that bothered me. When I grew up, I learned about the love of Christ. It seems like the first song I ever learned was "Jesus Loves Me" and this has stayed with me.

One incident I remember in Akron was when a lady said she was "going to go west. I asked, "Going to California?" "No to Ohio," she said. She was from Canada. I learned about different Mennonite groups and we got along really well. We had Amish in our group and I learned to respect the Amish. After a month in Akron, I was supposed to go to Germany, but my papers, (military permits and different permits) for Germany were not ready and they said it would take about three months to get them. They wanted me to go to Skillman, New Jersey, until my papers were ready. I was told it was an epileptic hospital. I found it was a mental hospital. I got to Skillman and worked as an aide, working a different ward every two days. I guess I got into the "real world." I learned a lot in Skillman, working with blacks, homosexuals, and alcoholics. We lived on the top floor of the ward. The blacks were good workers and I got along well with them, but the morals of those I worked with were not what I was used to. I also had to learn a different language, as the ghetto language was used pretty frequently. There was an aide that lived right beside us who was an alcoholic. Every paycheck he'd go and get drunk, blow his paycheck and come back to work for two weeks for the next paycheck. He said being an alcoholic was plain hell. I learned that alcoholism was an illness. Another incident I observed with alcoholics was this. I was on the ward on the afternoon shift. The morning shift aide had come in and wanted to have the keys to the medicine cabinet. I figured he had as much right to them as I did, so I gave them to him. He filled a little bottle full of rubbing alcohol. I was suspicious he was doing

something he shouldn't, but I didn't know what. He took it, gave the keys back to me and went on. At noon I went outside and by the steps a bottle was laying. So I knew what it was. He had drunk rubbing alcohol.

Since the patients in Skillman were epileptics, there were a lot of seizures and quite a lot of medication. The wards were not locked, except in the evening. There were some runaways, but not too many. One day I was on a ward and the supervisor came in. We got to talking and he told me to go upstairs and have oral sex with one of the patients. He did not believe me that I wouldn't do a thing like that. So there I learned about homosexuality. I also found a lot of homosexual patients. It was nothing to find two males in a bed.

Another incident that kind of woke me up to reality was while working in the hospital ward, I worked with a child who was about six years old. His head was big, body was like an infant. He had to be spoon-fed, diapered, and changed. I asked what was wrong with him. They said he was a syphilitic child. This really scared me about sexually transmitted diseases.

While working in Skillman, I had a lot of time to read while working nights. An incident that happened shortly after I got there one night was when a patient came tumbling down three flights of stairs. He had a seizure on the stairway and just kept rolling down. He was bruised up pretty bad from seizures before that. It got me wondering about epileptic seizures and the large amount of medication given to the epileptic patients.

After three months I got my papers to go to Germany. I went back to Akron and got my clothes all packed and left for Montreal on the train. We were boarding the ship in Montreal. It was a troop ship and had brought about 3,000 refugees to Canada. It also took refugees to Paraguay. It was an old Dutch ship but still useable. We boarded ship. The first day was through the Saint Lawrence seaway to the ocean and I got seasick. What an experience! I wasn't feeling too good during the trip, but it was still enjoyable. There were three of us traveling to Espelkamp. There wasn't anything to do on the ship because there were only eighty passengers on it. So the boat was pretty empty. We toured the ship and it was interesting. I thought the sea was pretty rough, but the last day the captain had a banquet for us and he said that was the smoothest sailing he had ever had. I thought, "Boy, what would a storm be like?" I still did not have my permits to go into Germany, so I had to stay at Herwaghe for a month until the papers to go into the British zone of Germany came in. I was sent to work at a Dutch children's home. We did maintenance work. We did not do much with the children because we didn't know the Dutch language, and they had Dutch workers. One day while eating the grits cereal (like Ralston) at breakfast, I bit into something bitter. I laid it to the side and didn't say anything. A few days later it happened again. I still didn't say anything about it. Then one day they told us to get a bag of grits from the warehouse, which was on the top floor. We went up and found the hundred pound bags that had been donated by the Americans. When we got up there, we noticed moths flying all over and around the bags. When we opened the bags, the moth's cocoons were all in the grits. So then I knew what I had bit into. That's one of the appetizers we got broke in to.

The Dutch had lots of bicycles, so we bought a bicycle and got around on bicycle. We made the twenty-mile trip to Amsterdam. It was an interesting country. After a month we got our papers so we went on to Germany. So we went to Espelkamp. It was an ammunition storage place in a forest with barracks or buildings. (See picture on this page.) The buildings had thick walls on

three sides and a very thin wall on one side. This was in case of a fire explosion. It would blow off the front wall and leave the other three standing. These barracks were made into living quarters for refugees. We had to put in chimneys and plumbing and divide the barracks into two apartments. This was done with mud bricks. Most of my work was laying chimney bricks. I was enjoying myself pretty well. There were young people coming from all places. We had a Swedish boy and a British boy, and several German girls who came in as volunteers for a couple of weeks or a month. It was an interesting place. And of course the refugees. The stories they told! Everyone of them had a heartache story. Most of them were from the East, either Russia or East Germany or Poland. They didn't want to emigrate and leave Germany.



Barrack at Espelkamp

At Espelkamp a gas factory was being built at the time of the war and it never was completed. It was supposed to make mustard gas or some kind of poisonous gases for the war. It never was discovered during the war because it was camouflaged.

I got a call from MCC that they needed mechanics. So two of us went to Neustadt, which was in the French Zone to work in the MCC garage. They had a fleet of about thirty to forty vehicles. MCC had military vehicles, Volkswagens and a few American cars, and they were replacing a lot of them with German cars. I learned all about a Volkswagen. You could take a motor apart with two Allen wrenches. It was all you needed to overhaul them. Another part of our job was to deliver commodities, transport people to camps, and pick up old people for funerals. So we had things to do. But, we also had a little spare time. There were three of us working in the garage. We decided to take a jeep and make a station wagon out of it. We just worked on it whenever we

had time. It took us about six months to build. We found out that it did not have enough power for a station wagon, but it transported. One experience we had with it was when hauling some workers from the children's home. We had to go up a mountain. We had a half a tank of gas so I wasn't too concerned about anything. We got into a pretty steep incline and I ran out of gas about a quarter mile from the top. I figured out what happened. Our fuel tank was long and underneath the vehicle, and we were drawing from the front of the tank. We had quite a number of passengers and rolled back a ways. Then turned around, got the thing started, backed up the hill and kept going. We made it! That was a laugh for the girls. They thought that was funny and called the station wagon Adam, the first of its kind. I don't know what ever happened to it. When I left, it was still operating at the children's home.

One of the fellows left for Groenau working with refugees and there were only two of us left toward the end. They closed the Neustadt office and moved us to Bad Durckham, about ten miles from us. So everyday we'd be driving to work in different vehicles. I had to take my lunch. The kitchen at the Bad Durckham Children's Home prepared it for me. What they prepared was an Argentina mutton sandwich. It was a cold mutton sandwich, another appetizer.



Adam, a station wagon made from a Jeep by MCC workers.

On another trip I took young people to camp on the Boden Sea, right between Germany and Switzerland, a real nice location. We decided to go to Switzerland. The Germans couldn't go, but the Americans decided to take a boat across and go into Switzerland and found it very

interesting. The city was damaged by the Allies during the war. But the stores were full. You could buy anything. We loaded up on chocolate because there was very little chocolate available in Germany. It was a treat for the Germans too.

I got into Germany about three months after the Berlin airlift had ended. We made two trips to Berlin, one by truck and one by train. We left Neustadt with MCC commodities for Berlin and came to Checkpoint Charlie. At Checkpoint Charlie we were told not to get off the Autobahn. "Stay on the Autobahn. If you have trouble, wait. Every half hour an American MP will be coming through. Do not get off the Autobahn until you're ready to check in at Berlin." We went into Berlin and it was interesting to see the activity. It seemed like Berlin had more in their shops than cities in the West, but when you went to East Berlin, there was very little. There was a lot of damage and a lot of rubble. The only thing that really looked nice was the cemeteries. The Russian cemetery had beautiful gardens filled with flowers.

It was interesting to go into East Berlin by subway. In the West you'd find all kinds of advertisements. Then you'd find one station with nothing on the walls, only the name of the station. That's how you knew you were crossing the border into East Berlin. When we got into East Berlin there was all kinds propaganda. "Army, go home," and things like that on the walls. There was not much in East Berlin that I wanted to buy. Not much interested me. I did buy a few glasses, but basically there was nothing much else. This was before the wall was built.

While I was in Germany, the Korean War broke out. We thought for sure all the Americans would be forced to leave. We did have orders to be prepared to leave. Women and nonessential personnel were ordered to leave and report to the airports. Men were to report to the military. However, nothing developed. The Russians did not invade. But there was much fear among the Germans. We were told that if we were nonessential, we could go with the women; however, most of us said we'd stay and wouldn't leave.

About this time there was talk of the draft at home, but the 1-Ws were not drafted. I had a 1-W classification. It bothered me a little that I might be drafted, but I was hoping I would get some credit for being overseas. This did not happen.

On one trip we went to the Templehoff airport. That's where the airlift took place. We went to a church service there one Sunday and walked into the airport. There was very little activity - no planes coming in or anything. This was about three months after the airlift. An airman came up to us and asked what we were doing. We told them we had brought some relief supplies to Berlin (care packages and things like that). He said he didn't have anything to do but had to be on duty. He said if we had time, he'd show us around and explain what was going on during the airlift. That pleased us, so he took us around and explained how planes were coming in and taking off every five minutes day and night. Most of the planes brought in coal for the power plants in Berlin. He also showed us how the radar and communication equipment worked. He was real friendly and cordial and I had respect for their air force after that.

Another incident that happened was when we met a worker from the state department. He asked what we were doing. We told him we were working with MCC or with Cralog. It wasn't MCC when we did work like that because it covered all relief agencies. So he was curious. He asked what our belief was and we told him. He told us, "Don't hide your candle under a basket. Let your light shine." That was an encouragement to me and helped me.

I did learn how to ski in the Black Forest while in the camp. We went camping and had a German instructor who was working for MCC. He was in France during the war, but he had come back. He was back home and helped MCC most days delivering things. His home was in Heidelberg.

I also had the experience when I hired somebody that was German, who was a very indoctrinated communist. We discussed religion and politics, but he'd always come back, "If it were so, if you had as much as I had, everything would be just perfect." So he was really indoctrinated with the communist philosophy.

One of my experiences of taking commodities to the children's home in France, I came to the border and the passport showed "occupation-farmer." The question was: What was I doing as a farmer in Germany. He could not speak in English and I could not understand French, and he wouldn't speak German either, but he understood German. I finally understood what he wanted. He wanted to know what a farmer was doing in Germany. So I said, "MCC." My occupation was MCC. When I got to the children's home, we had the stew that I didn't know what all was in it. They called it eintopf. It was pretty popular among refugees. Everything was thrown together in kind of a soup-like stew. So I ate and found a bone and something shiny. I thought, "What in the world is in this?" It was rabbit teeth. So we found out it was rabbit stew. Between the mutton, the rabbit, and the moths, I survived. I did eat a lot of MCC canned goods. It was very good, but a lot of it was stew and one dish deals.

Time was nearing to come back home. When my time was up, I asked again, "What do you want from me, Lord?" I did not know. 1-Ws were not drafted, but there was talk they would be drafted. So I wondered how long before that happened. I arrived back home in the early '50s, about the time MDS (Mennonite Disaster Service) was born. I did some MDS work at Florence, Kansas, shortly after I got home and later in other places.

I took a job as a carpenter and just waited that summer. By fall I was pretty certain that I would be drafted and I wouldn't get credit for what I had done with MCC in Germany. Uncertainty again. "What do you want from me Lord?" I thought I'd try to beat the system and volunteer again and I tried to get asked to go to Paraguay into construction work down there. They didn't have an opening at that time but they did want an aide in Brook Lane Farm in Hagerstown, Maryland. They were desperate there for aides. So I said I'd go for the winter, for three months, and then come home. I decided if I was drafted, I might stay longer because I thought I would get credit for the three months then.

Brook Lane was interesting. It was different than Skillman. Patients would only come for two to three weeks, so there was a big turnover. There was electric shock therapy and insulin therapy. I had to learn to give insulin shots. I often worked nights and in the morning and I'd have to give insulin shots. One morning, a girl I'm guessing was in her twenties was crying real hard. Crying and sobbing. I asked her what she was crying about? "I'm pregnant and it can't be. It just can't be." How do you comfort people? I asked her, "Have you ever been drunk?" And that woke her up. She did not deny that she was drinking and that was a clue to how that happened. Another case of alcoholism.

I was not drafted during the three months, so I decided I'd come back and follow the harvest from Texas into northern Kansas. I got back and got my notice for draft in September. I'd be in

the second group to go to Topeka State Hospital. Again, I was uncertain but I did not have a choice. I had a problem communicating with people, but I did feel I had skills in other areas and I'd rather go someplace else, but the opportunity did not develop. I had to go as an aide. There was nothing new to me when I got there. It was very similar to Skillman. There were more blacks, more homosexual aides, and more alcoholics. Pretty much the same conditions. I was lucky. I got a ward that was pretty well self-sufficient. I did not have to do any of the cleaning, but I helped feed patients, give medication, and release patients. It was a locked ward. We were given orders for the patients who went out for work. But the ward was pretty well run by the patients. I learned a lot about different mental illnesses. Catatonics were plentiful and there were other types of mental illness. One day after my shift I was reading, had my feet on a chair and was sitting on the other chair. I heard the door come open. It was the supervisor coming in so I didn't think much of it. Every shift they made a round. Two of them came in. I did not get up; I just stayed put, with my book in my lap. She said, "You're sleeping." I said "No, I'm not sleeping; I'm reading." "Well the work isn't done in here, and you never get done with the work. The bathrooms aren't cleaned up. They won't pass inspection." They were really lowering the boom down on me. That was the first time I had to clean a bathroom on the ward. I didn't know what to think of it and why they wouldn't believe me that I wasn't sleeping. So they reported me to the head nurse. A couple days later, I got a notice from the head nurse that I was to go on night shift. I didn't have a choice. What do you want from me? I got into a discussion with the head nurse and she was very point-blank that I was very lucky to be living in a country where I had the freedom to be a conscientious objector. I accused her of being resentful. She told me we were not patriotic enough. She was a Veteran's Administration nurse, but she was a very good nurse. That was the first time I found anybody who challenged the CO stand. I later learned that she hired CO boys and a construction company to build her house, so she must have found something she liked about us.

A year passed and things were fairly smooth. When we started in Topeka, we were allotted \$130 per month and had to pay our board and room and everything. This was more of a drain on me than voluntary service financially. In voluntary service I got ten dollars per month and everything else was taken care of but clothing. I had another year to go. After about a year and a half in service in Topeka there were some hardship cases so they applied for release. However, our salary had gone up a little bit. We were paid prevailing wages. One person got his release because of hardship case and was given credit for the time he had served in Paraguay with MCC approximately six months or so. This gave me the idea that maybe if he got out I can get out because of my voluntary service work. So I applied and got released. Again, now what?

During the time I was at Topeka State Hospital the hospital was a training center for psychiatric nurses and student nurses from different area schools in the state. They'd stay there for about a month or two and take their psychiatric training. They were young girls and of course we'd start dating. It seemed like they didn't mind COs. Several of them found their mates there, and I was one of them. She was from the Emporia School of Nursing and I guess I just fell in love. I don't know what else to call it. We did get married after I got released. This again put a question in my mind. "What do you want from me, Lord?" I always look back to the song "Have Thine Own Way." What is Christ teaching me in this?

After I got out, I went into the construction business and started to work for a construction firm. But in the winter during cold weather they laid us off and shut down the site. There wasn't anything for us to do. So I got a welding job. This was very monotonous to me. With production work I'd weld the same thing over and over. I thought "There's got to be something better than this." I wanted to stay with construction. I wanted to go back during the summer and quit my welding job. However, the opportunity arose that I could work in a machine shop in Inman with a fellow 1-W. So we decided to move to Inman, and I worked there for two years and also did some work at Hesston and at Moridge in Moundridge during that time. Then the opportunity came to farm because my brother wanted to quit farming. So I took over the farm. I guess that was my calling. The opportunity opened up, and I always wanted to farm, but I felt I couldn't because I didn't have enough backing. I moved home to the home place and became a farmer.

What did I learn in my service? I did quite a number of MDS services and I felt that it was my calling to build. I could not communicate. At one time I considered mission work but knew that was out because of my inability to communicate and learn languages. So we settled down on the farm.