

The Death of Gerhard Stucky

by Jeffery W. Koller

"During the six-month period November 2004-April 2005, the Monthly Features will comprise six personal accounts, mostly by past or present members of the Eden Mennonite Church, Moundridge, KS, of their experiences as conscientious objectors during times of war. They will include experiences during World War I, World War II, the Korean War and the war in Vietnam. These accounts have been written by the individuals concerned. They are part of a larger collection of stories contained in a book published in 2004 by Jebeko Publishing entitled The Eden Peace Witness: A Collection of Personal Accounts and edited by Jeffrey W. Koller. The Eden Mennonite Church and Jeffrey Koller have kindly agreed to the publication of these accounts as Monthly Features of the Swiss Mennonite Cultural and Historical Association website. Editors of the website are profoundly grateful for this courtesy. -The Editors"

It is ironic that a reference to G.P. Stucky in Noah Leatherman's WWI diary is part of what sparked this entire project, yet the records that detail the story of Gerhard are the most elusive. There is just a handful of his family around today who remember anything about his life, and what little they can recall is from family stories. As far as written documentation, I have had to put together bits and pieces from the records of other men whose experience at Camp Funston was documented. This account will be rather sparse and sketchy, but I believe that what I am presenting is accurate, based on the information that I have been able to gather.

When Gerhard was drafted, he reported to Camp Funston. His family had concerns about his going to camp – not only the natural concerns that all draftees' families shared, but, according to comments attributed to his brothers Chris and Val, Gerhard had been "kind of slow" in his schooling. This raised a concern that he might not fare well under hard mental testing or duress. Once in camp, Gerhard was one who followed the directions of his pastor to resist the orders of the military authority. He was one of the boys that absolutely refused to wear the uniform.

N. Paul Stucky shared the following experience from his college days at Bethel College: "Abraham Warkentine was a history instructor at Bethel at that time. While teaching Mennonite history, he recounted the story of a young man at Camp Funston during the World War I timeframe. This young conscientious objector refused not only the orders of the military leadership but also refused to wear the uniform of the army. For his refusal, one of the punishments he endured was being placed in a pit dug in the ground, tied or chained so as to immobilize him, and then being subjected to a steady dripping of cold water on his head for long periods." N. Paul clearly remembers this account of punishment, largely due to the fact that the name of the young CO was none other than Gerhard Stucky, a member of N. Paul's home church, and also his father's cousin.

In addition to this account of specific action taken against Gerhard for his refusal, records from numerous sources establish what punishments were doled out to the resisters as a group. In addition to beatings and general rough treatment, there are many incidents of more severe punishments. In Gerhard Zerger's account, he witnessed the resisters being forced to stand on the north side of a barracks building with their hands extended above their heads for long periods of time. This was conducted in the harsh cold of a Kansas winter, with the men not allowed to wear

shirts or any protection. In other incidents the resisters were made to stand upright on an oil drum for extended periods, again without shirts in the wintertime, but this time with a heavy weight tied around their necks. They were, on other occasions, tied or chained to posts outside the barracks in the cold of winter and then doused with buckets of cold water. The resisters were put on a rotating diet of bread and water for one week, then normal rations for the following week, followed again by bread and water. Between the exposure to elements and the inadequate diet, the resisters were physically weakened, yet they remained spiritually strong and faithful to their understanding of God's call to peaceful living.

In the case of Gerhard Stucky we learn from the diary of his campmate Noah Leatherman that Gerhard died in camp on April 14, 1917. The cause of death, depending on the account that has been given, has been reported as flu, pneumonia, and in one report, consumption. Regardless whether it was pneumonia or flu, it isn't a stretch to connect the abuses given the resisters through the frequent wintertime exposure-type punishments with the ailment that cost Gerhard his life. If he had been regular army, he would not have been abused in the cold for his beliefs. He would have been fed, clothed and given warm accommodations in camp, and most likely, would not have been susceptible to the disease that took his young life.

A memory shared by his niece, Geneva Stucky Wedel Kaufman, is probably one of the most painful parts of Gerhard's story. Geneva recalled family members describing Grandmother Stucky (Gerhard's mother) and the way Grandma Stucky would fight back tears when she described that when the army sent Gerhard's body home from Funston in a flag-draped coffin, he was dressed in the very army uniform that he had resisted so hard. The painful thought of her son buried in full army uniform never eased for her.