

Garrett Lealand Hennisee

We never knew his real name. My folks simply referred to him as Old Man Hennisee. He lived down the road, behind the old abandoned general store. All by himself, no relatives, and no visitors we ever noticed at least.

He kept to himself, never bothering a soul. About the only time we saw him out was when he went to buy more liquor; which was fairly often. He drank. Everyone knew, but he never caused any trouble, therefore no one really cared.

Curious to know what the inside of the old store looked like, William and I walked down the fairly narrow road, along what the locals said was no wider than a cow path. Of course we picked a day we saw Mr. Hennisee drive past so we knew we would be safe during our snooping endeavor.

We did look into the windows, but all we saw were some old cans and bottles, a worn-out chair, lots of shelving, and a wooden counter stretching across one side. And on our way back home we almost got caught. When we heard his car coming we jumped across the ditch, and hid behind a couple of trees.

I was a few days shy of my seventeenth birthday when I heard Old Man Hennisee had passed away. And folks around here wondered what would happen to his property—the nearly falling down store, house, and the 30 some-odd acres to the east of those structures.

The town gossips said the property might be sold on the courthouse steps. And it wouldn't go for much, Mom figured.

I'd always wanted to see in the house, so one day I ventured that direction. To my surprise the back door was unlocked. The inside was somewhat a mess, but at one time it must have been nice.

My urge to snoop caused me to begin opening cabinets and drawers. I didn't find much, but when I opened the top drawer of his dresser, I found his medals. And beneath them were the accommodation letters from the War Department.

One was addressed to Garrett Lealand Hennisee, stating on D-Day, 6 June 1944, one officer and 69 specially trained enlisted Army and Navy engineers came ashore on Omaha Beach at H-Hour -1, to blow obstacles in the path of assault boats and landing craft carrying the Infantry. For this action, those 70 were awarded the Bronze Arrowhead device on their European Theatre Service Medal and the Distinguished (Presidential) Unit Citation. Garrett Lealand Hennisee was one of these men.

The other letter, also addressed to Mr. Hennisee, said ISG First Sergeant of Company A, 2nd Engineer Combat Battalion, was shot and wounded by a sniper, June 9, 1944, while observing from a hedgerow with field glasses. He was then sent to a field hospital. On July 10, 1944, he was awarded the Purple Heart.

I didn't find much else, so I started back out the way I came in. That's when I saw an old whiskey bottle on top of one of the shelves on his back porch. The bottle still had its cork in place, and inside I saw what looked like a rolled-up piece of paper. About that time I heard a car. And I knew I shouldn't have, but I tucked the bottle under my arm before I hightailed it out of there.

When I got home I took a pair of my father's pliers and by carefully working the cork back and forth, got it out. Then I turned the bottle upside down so I could get the paper out.

In what I assume was written during one of his stupors, were the words, "***I could have saved 'em.***"

There was no funeral, only a makeshift type service at the National Cemetery, south of town. Complete, I was told, with Taps by a bugler, and a 21-gun salute. I understand his brother was there, and I suppose he will get the proceeds from Mr. Hennisee's property.

I wish I could have talked to the brother or someone who knew the seemingly lonely and disturbed man. But none of us went, therefore I didn't have the opportunity.

"I could have saved 'em." Was he the only survivor in that particular battle? Did he wonder why he was saved, and the others weren't? I guess I will never know.