

ALONG THE RIDGES

Given were five walnuts, a special symbol



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The Christmas spirit is everywhere. Brilliant lights shimmer across spacious yards; doorways and windows are framed in gold and silver tinsels; shopping bags fairly burst with gifts for the traditional underscoring of love and caring among families and friends.

It's an exciting time, but more than that, a meaningful time, renewing the age-old message of hope. It's a time for remembering people whose determination to bring cheer to others has kept the Christmas spirit alive under the most difficult circumstances.

One of those people was Dr. John Creech, a resident of Flat Rock for some years now, but once a lieutenant serving in World War II. He was captured in North Africa and sent to a prisoner-of-war camp in Poland, and that was where he and some 1,500 other officers were at Christmas.

Lt. Creech had been there only a short time when he noticed an abandoned greenhouse and he persuaded the Germans to let him put it to use. Little did they know he was already considered one of the most accomplished greenhouse authorities and horticulturists in America, and that his knowledge of specific environmental requirements of plants was boundless. He went right to work in that isolated building, and although his hours were long and lonely, nowhere did he feel more at home than in a greenhouse, and his cheerfulness as he worked among his plants seemed to permeate the entire camp.

But the undertaking was not without problems. In the dead of winter, nighttime temperatures dropped to 30 and 40 degrees below zero and the plants could not survive without some way to keep them warm.

Lt. Creech was not long finding a way. He traded cigarettes to his German guard for black market — or stolen — coal. Then, in the dark of midnight when few people were stirring, he slipped over to the greenhouse to stoke his fires.

Lt. Creech had fellow prisoners ask their families back home to send packages of seed to be germinated in the greenhouse and ultimately planted in garden plots outside. The Red Cross in France and Holland, as well as in America, even the Royal Horticulture Society of London, sent seed.

There was the problem of spading the ground, for the men had no gardening tools. But the problem was short-lived when Lt. Creech and others convinced the Gestapo that something was hidden underground in the garden plots. A garrison promptly marched in and went to digging.

When they overlooked an area, the prisoners laughed and joked and made gestures indicating the Germans had missed the treasure they were expecting to find. Thereupon the diggers rushed to the spot and worked feverishly, unearthing no treasure, but leaving behind them a well-spaded garden with every inch suitable for planting.

The growing season was short, food packages from home arrived too irregularly to be counted on, and additional POWs came into camp, so the success of the garden was vital.

Lt. Creech had divided the space into plots, each plot the responsibility of a different group of men, and not a single space was left idle. The work was backbreaking and the men were weakened from hunger, but they knew the dire need to grow vegetables enough to supplement their starvation rations.

The venture proved successful, and so much so that John Creech was later awarded a Bronze Star for his contribution to the health and nutrition of his fellow prisoners.

As Christmas drew near, space in the greenhouse had necessarily favored vegetables, but Lt. Creech by no means set aside his flowers.

He put his fresh flowers in the chapel for each Sunday service, and he made wreaths for the graves of fellow prisoners. A flowering plant was sent to the bedside of every man who was ill.

And something extra was added for the Christmas season. A collection of tulip bulbs sent by the Dutch had been forced in the greenhouse and were in their full glory on Christmas Day, cheering the hearts of men who longed for home and family. Along with the tulips were potted plants from the greenhouse, some so large and luxuriant a man could carry only one at a time as he plodded through two feet of snow on the way to the mess hall. Music welcomed men who had no assurance they would live to see another Christmas.

The meager rations offered that day bore no resemblance whatever to a traditional Christmas dinner. Yet, in a simple, unmistakable way, the Christmas spirit was there.

Men who had kept vigil over a walnut tree, collecting the nuts as they ripened and fell, had stashed them away until Christmas. Then, at each fellow-prisoner's plate was laid five English walnuts, a symbol of the traditional giving of gifts that has a special meaning at Christmastime.