Another Perspective

By Lori Pankonin

“Once Upon a Town,” by Bob Greene just opened a whole new perspective for me about the North Platte Canteen during World War II.

Wow! Wow! Wow! And might I say, WOW!

What started out as the intent to surprise Nebraska troops at the North Platte depot turned into an ongoing unselfish effort of indescribable Midwestern hospitality.

It was 10 days after the Pearl Harbor attack in December 1941. Rumor had it that the Nebraska National Guard Company D would be making a stop in North Platte, headed to the West Coast to be shipped overseas. Approximately 500 parents, sweethearts and friends were at the North Platte train station before the sun came up with food, treats, letters and love to share.

Alas, the train arrived and the folks scurried to meet their loved ones. But Nebraska boys weren’t on board. The troops were from Kansas. Yet the Nebraska folks graciously passed out their gifts to soldiers they didn’t know, thanking them and wishing them well.

A 26-year-old sister of a Nebraska military commander was touched by the boosted spirits and high morale among the soldiers. Smiles, tears and laughter spoke loudly with appreciation showing on more than 300 faces. It had been the first time anyone met their train.

The young woman wrote a letter to the editor in a local newspaper, volunteering her time to run a canteen and encouraging others to get behind the soldiers.

An unbelievable outpouring of love and labor commenced. Starting Christmas Day 1941, volunteers showed up in droves to meet trains filled with young Americans who were off to war.

Starting at 5 a.m. until after midnight, trains made stops where the guys rushed in to find sandwiches, hard boiled eggs, cakes, cookies, candy, milk, coffee, fruit, magazines, popcorn balls, notes of encouragement and treats of great variety awaiting them. It happened every single day for more than four years, even months after the war ended. Every day brought 3,000 to 5,000 soldiers with numbers growing to 8,000.

Just how in the world could they have enough help, enough food? People came from 125 surrounding communities to spend their committed days.

Just one group of volunteers brought a reported 480 candy bars, magazines, 10 crates of oranges, 80 cases of soft drinks, 400 loaves of bread, 300 pounds of meat, 3000 hard-boiled eggs, 75 sheet cakes and more.

People used their rationed sugar allotment to bake for the soldiers. Some would walk everywhere so that they could use their rationed gasoline to travel to North Platte.

Can you imagine the delight and spark felt by the soldiers? Many were teenagers who had never left home and fear and loneliness consumed them. That is until they made the stop and felt sincere love and compassion.

How key that this book’s author made the trip to North Platte 60 years later to capture first-hand stories, finding others from around the country to speak out . . . and to cry. Yes, emotion seemed to be a part of every veteran’s conversation as they recalled the North Platte Canteen experience and what it still means to them.

A 77-year-old veteran who was raised in New York City admitted that he hadn't grown up in a very happy home environment. With tears, he told how overwhelmed he was by the pure simple generosity in Nebraska. He felt the volunteers couldn't have treated their own sons with any more kindness than he was given. He brought that precious memory home from the war.

A native northeast Nebraskan dreaded the three-day trip from Omaha, Neb., to San Diego, Calif., where it was cold outside but terribly hot in the train cars. If you wanted to lie down to sleep, it was on the aisle floor.

He grew up with the impression that North Platte was a railroad town consisting of cowboys from the ranches. Much to his surprise, North Platte was the highlight of the trip where he first got a package from a little girl, then motherly hugs and food galore. He was more than astounded, recalling that that was the only stop where such kindness was extended.

Thank you notes came from wives and mothers after hearing from their loved ones about what happened in North Platte.

Nebraskans wrapped their kindness around an estimated 6,000,000 soldiers. That's SIX MILLION. And those who made it home didn't forget it. Many returned to North Platte to recapture the memory and to say thanks.

Not only soldiers carry heartfelt Canteen memories, but the volunteers fondly recall the days they devoted their labors to a rewarding cause. Some were young girls who went along with their moms. Some were from church groups or clubs.

Some put their names in popcorn balls and exchanged letters with soldiers, some of those connections resulting in marriage.

It's somewhat of a shame that the depot was torn down after passenger trains no longer passed through North Platte. Although museums take efforts and dollars to maintain, there certainly was a story there that should live on. On the other hand, it was the people that made the story, not the building.

It’s our job to pass it on!!

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