

Buffalo Tales

May/June 2012

Lifelines (pt. II)

By Nathan Piper



Other historical authors have chosen to avoid broader areas such as the Great Plains and have focused instead on specific states, communities, or individuals. The Nebraska State Historical Society has compiled in recent years an admirable collection of World War II-related studies that illustrate a diversity and variety of topics. The NSHS's collection of manuscripts, films, audio recordings, periodicals, articles, books, and photographs demonstrate the growing efforts being made in interpreting influences of World War II on Nebraska. Among these historical articles are works that delve into Nebraska's treatment of Japanese-Americans. In "Admitting Nebraska's Nisei Japanese American Students at the University of Nebraska, 1942-1945," Andrew B. Wertheimer details the experiences of Japanese-American students coping with anti-Japanese sentiment while attempting to pursue higher education in Lincoln, Nebraska. Included in Wertheimer's article is the addition of an informative biographical piece about Japanese-American, decorated war veteran, and Nebraskan, Ben Kuroki.

Relating the work experiences and training of women in Nebraska encountered during World War II is a 1992 article entitled "Nebraska Nursing Education during World War II," authored by the head of the Department of Special Collections at Memphis State University, Michele L. Fagan. Other historians who have explored the economic and social impact of the war in Nebraska further demonstrate topical variety. Such efforts are illustrated in the articles "Kearney, Nebraska, and the Kearney Army Air Field in World War II," authored by Todd L. Petersen, and "Nebraska's World War II Bomber Plant: The Glenn L. Martin-Nebraska Company," written by retired Air Force officer and resident of Bellevue, Nebraska, George A. Larson. Other NSHS articles explore the experiences of non-native Nebraskans, as in the article "Nazi Influence at the Fort Robinson Prisoner of War Camp during World War II" by Thomas R. Buccker, who details the influences and daily encounters of thousands of Germans prisoners of war in Nebraska. No work concerning Nebraska during World War II, however, has received as much attention and critical acclaim as author Bob Greene's work *Once Upon a Town*. In this 2002 book, Greene popularizes for the broader reading audience the nostalgic, heartwarming story of North Platte, Nebraska, and its "Canteen." In this particular central Nebraskan community, continual efforts were made during World War II to provide food and patriotic support to servicemen traveling by train through their home town. What began as a modest display of warmth and compassion quickly grew into a daily, ongoing effort that would later be remembered with deep appreciation by countless American soldiers.

It is also here at North Platte's Canteen where readers of Nebraska history encounter the story of Ethel Butolph of Tryon, Nebraska—a story that demonstrates the effect and importance of war correspondence. Butolph, a young woman barely beyond adolescence, began a correspondence with an American soldier—who later became her husband—after her address had been placed inside a popcorn ball given away at the Canteen. The shared letters between Ethel and the soldier eventually created a relational bond that, following the war, led to Ethel and the American soldier—Virgil Butolph—being married. Bob Greene's book may be considered less an academic treatise than an inspiring collection of stories gathered from one region of Nebraska during

World War II. Nevertheless, the book further exemplifies the type of contemporary investigations increasing their focus and attentions on specific regions like Nebraska.

One article that relates particularly to the story and experiences of Robert Sinkler is an article authored by native Nebraskan and National Guard historian Douglas R. Hartman. In "Nebraska's Lost Battalion," Hartman recounts the war experiences of a Nebraskan National Guard unit deployed to the Aleutian Islands. As a part of the 134th Infantry Regiment—a regiment later dubbed the "lost battalion"—this unit, mobilized in December of 1940, went on to conduct top secret missions in the Aleutians from 1942 to 1944.

It was to the Aleutian Islands that Robert Sinkler and the 159th Infantry were sent in the summer of 1943. Upon leaving San Francisco, California, in June of that year, Sinkler left mainland America for the first time for a scattering of islands off the west coast of the Alaskan peninsula. The Aleutians (a name derived from the region's indigenous Aleut population), had been selected by the U.S. military as a location vital to protecting American interests in the Pacific and to stopping any attempt by the Japanese to expand eastward. These islands were little more than windswept growths attached to long chain of mountainous islands arcing across the north Pacific for 1,000 miles. The barren nature of these islands is illustrated clearly on yellowed sheets of captured Japanese stationery that were sent home by Robert Sinkler to Nebraska. In these images, the islands are depicted as stark, cold, and barren, greeting recipients with salutations "From somewhere in the Aleutians."

Hartman's article explains that Japanese expansion, which by 1942 had already claimed such locations as Guam, Indochina, and the Philippines, was expected to arrive off Alaska's western coast. It is here in the Aleutians, like Nebraska's "lost battalion," that Robert Sinkler was stationed for much of the war. In fact, Sinkler arrived just weeks following an American assault on the Aleutian island of Attu. Dubbed "Operation Sand Crab," the 7th Infantry led an assault on Attu beginning on May 11, 1943. The Japanese, who had occupied Attu and the island of Kiska in early 1943, were hoping to control naval movements throughout the North Pacific. After two weeks of fierce combat, made more difficult by Attu's foggy, harsh Aleutian climate, American forces finally wrested 525 square miles of icy rock from the Japanese. In the attack, over 2,300 Japanese soldiers were killed. Also numbered among the dead were 548 American servicemen.

Another assault in mid August of 1943 on the island of Kiska resulted in Allied forces completely ousting any remaining Japanese presence from the Aleutians. Ironically, the Japanese had already evacuated Kiska via submarines in late July—weeks before the Allied assault on Kiska took place.

It is on the islands of Attu, and later, Amchitka, that Sinkler would author the vast majority of his letters to Evelyn Burson, a rural Nebraska woman whom he had met on furlough from service in November of 1942. Sinkler remained on the islands of Attu and Amchitka from June of 1943 until his deployment to the Philippines in the spring of 1945.

Other studies which involve Nebraska during World War II further legitimize the importance of war-time correspondence. One particular work, authored by Nebraskan and veteran of World War II, John B. Davis, contributing directly to Nebraska's World War II historiography, is the book entitled *War Letters: A Young World War Two Naval Officer Writes Home*.

Aside from this published sample, however, primary sources of Nebraska correspondence during World War II appear predominantly in either private familial collections such as Robert Sinkler's or in archives such as those found at the Nebraska State Historical Society. But it is precisely letters such as these that allow readers real, poignant encounters with Nebraska servicemen and women during World War II. And while these letters were the means by which soldiers sustained themselves and their relationship then, today they are the voices of Nebraskans at war. These letters have effectively preserved the war experiences of Nebraskans during World War II. And further, they add to an overall appreciation and understanding of Nebraska history. It is the evaluating

and the qualifying of these letters, the determining of their successes and failures, which reveals more than just insight into the lives of men at war writing home. These letters serve clearly to illustrate the complex lives that men like Robert Sinkler lived. They show how soldiers managed to maintain their personal lives and keep them intact during years away at war. The words found in their correspondence open up for readers the hearts and minds of Nebraskans fighting for their nation. And it is precisely studies of this nature that enrich and mature the historiography of Nebraska during World War II.

I'm sending this picture your way. This is me, Honey, even if it don't look like me. I'll be so glad to see you and our big daughter, and I'll bet she is big by now. I just wonder how she will take me—if she will be afraid or not. After all, I probably will seem like a stranger to her, although if she's still like she was when I last saw her, she won't be afraid of anyone. Well, sweetheart, I send all my love and kisses hoping my darlings are well and that I'm with you real soon. Love again, Honey, and millions of sweet kisses. Always, your loving husband and Daddy, Bob.

In the above excerpt from a letter he had written home to his wife from the Philippines in 1945, Robert Sinkler articulates the sort of strain that relationships of the time were undergoing. Sinkler was among the vanishing men of America. As they began disappearing from the national landscape, soldiers' absences created a kind of relational strain that profoundly affected both these servicemen and their families. The Great Plains were not immune to these disappearances or these strains. Prior to 1941, Nebraska, along with the other states of the Great Plains, had favored isolationism. But with Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the minds and homes of America from the coastal states across through the heartland were quickly committed to President Roosevelt's declaration that the United States would join the Allies in World War II. And by 1945, Sinkler had grown increasingly concerned that his extended military absence had made him a stranger to both his new wife and his new daughter—a child he would adopt with greater love than he had himself experienced as an orphaned child.

Resources

- Buecker, Thomas R. "Nazi Influence at the Fort Robinson Prisoner of War Camp during World War II." *Nebraska History* 73 (Spring 1992): 32-41.
- Fagan, Michele L. "Nebraska Nursing Education during World War II." *Nebraska History* 73 (Fall 1992): 126-137.
- Greene, Bob. *Once Upon a Town: The Miracle of the North Platte Canteen*. New York: Harper Press, 2002.
- Hartman, Douglas R. "Nebraska's Lost Battalion." *Nebraska History* 73 (Spring 1992): 82.
- Hurt, R. Douglas. *The Great Plains during World War II*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008.
- Larson, George A. "Nebraska's World War II Bomber Plant: The Glenn L. Martin-Nebraska Company." *Nebraska History* 74 (Spring 1993): 32-43.
- MacGarrigle, George L. *Aleutian Islands: The U. S. Army Campaigns of World War II*. United States Army Center of Military History. October 3, 2003. www.history.army.mil/brochures/aleut/aleut.htm (accessed October, 2010).
- Petersen, Todd L. "Keamey, Nebraska, and the Kearney Army Air Field in World War II." *Nebraska History* 72 (Fall 1991): 118-126.

Piper, Connie M. (Sinkler). interview by author, September 26, 2010, Burwell, NE.
Sinkler, Robert J.

- . Illustrated notes (printed on captured Japanese stationary) sent to Evelyn Burson, 1943-1944.
- . Personal deployment record, 1945-1977.

U. S. Department of Interior. "Aleutian World War II." National Park Service.
<http://www.nps.gov/alcu/index.htm> (accessed October, 2010).

Wertheimer, Andrew B. "Admitting Nebraska's Nisei: Japanese American Students at the University of Nebraska, 1942-1945." *Nebraska History* 83 (Summer 2002): 58-72.

Journey Stories

Plan on joining us June 1st– July 15th for *Journey Stories*, a Smithsonian Traveling Exhibit, that shows stories of Americans as they traveled West. This exhibit is brought to the Trails & Rails Museum by the Nebraska Humanities Council and Museums on Main Street.

Buffalo County Stampede

Get your running shoes ready! The Buffalo County Stampede 1/2 Marathon and 5K run is fast approaching! Check-in starts on June 10th at 6am and the first runners set off at 7am! Contact Todd at Trail & Rails to pre-register: phone- 308-234-3041 or register online at getmeregistered.com.

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Katherine Wielechowski, Editor

2012 Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

Individual.....	\$35.00
Family.....	\$40.00
Institutional Membership.....	\$50.00
Supporting Membership.....	\$75.00

We have replaced the word 'Basic' to 'Family'.

Directors

Term expiring June 1, 2012: Bernie Hascall, Janice Martin, Dan Speirs, Gary Straatmann

Term expiring June 1, 2013: Vicki Bissell, Chad Henning, Lynn Rauner, Jim Cudaback

Term expiring June 1, 2014: Mary Beth Lowe, Sharon Martin, Duane Muhlbach, Mike Peak

Officers (1 year term)

President.....	Dan Speirs
Vice-President.....	Sharon Martin
Secretary.....	Mary Beth Lowe
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2012 Calendar of Events

June 1 through July 15: 'Journey Stories'- a Smithsonian traveling exhibit brought to you by the Nebraska Humanities Council and Museums on Main Street-on display in the church building at the Trails & Rails Museum

Sunday, June 10: 5th Annual ½ Marathon: Buffalo County Stampede—
Reg. @ 6 am. Race begins @ 7

Saturday, June 23 from 10-2 pm: 27th Annual Wagons West Celebration
Includes fiddle contest

Tuesday, August 7th from 6-9:30pm: 6th Annual Trivia Contest & Dinner

Saturday, Oct. 27 (time TBD): 2nd Annual Old-fashioned Halloween Party

All of November: Christmas Decorating (during regular business hours)

Saturday, December 1st from 12-1pm: Members Only Preview of the 25th Annual Christmas Tree Walk

First two weekends in Dec. (1st/2nd & 8th/9th) from 1-5 pm: Open to the public: 25th Annual Christmas Tree Walk

Education notes:

Wild Science Thursdays Center will return in the summer!

Ghost Hunting classes with the Midwest Paranormal Investigators-check web site for more info.!

Fabulous Fridays will continue to be held on the 2nd Friday of each month. Check web for topics.

Kearney Public Schools have the museum reserved for two weeks in May 2012!!

Volunteers, chairpersons, and sponsors are still needed. Please contact the office for more information on supporting your Buffalo County Historical Society!

PO Box 523, 710 W. 11th St., Kearney, NE 68848

(308) 234-3041 www.bchs.us bchs.us@hotmail.com

We hope you enjoy these stories about Buffalo County. We would love to have a stock pile of Buffalo Tales ready so they can go out in a more timely manner. Please submit your memories and stories to us by e-mailing them to bchs.buffalotales@hotmail.com or sending them to the post office box: BCHS, PO Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848.

We appreciate your support!

Director's Report

-The 2012 Annual Meeting presentation was a scavenger hunt, of sorts, of downtown Kearney post cards. The meeting participants thoroughly enjoyed reviewing the post cards! If you would like this presentation at your next function, just let us know

Be sure to join the Buffalo County Historical Society group or the Buffalo County Historical Society/Trails & Rails Museum fan page on Facebook!



Trails & Rails Museum

**Buffalo County Historical Society
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