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# Buffalo Tales



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## *“We Can Serve Behind the Lines”*

### *World War II and the Nebraska State Teachers College*

By Sarah Westesen

On December 7, 1941 the lives of Nebraska State Teachers College (NSTC) students and faculty were forever changed. Still in shock the day after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, students filled the auditorium and listened to President Roosevelt call December 7, “a day that will live in infamy.” College President Herbert Cushing outlined what he expected of the college, students, and faculty for the impending war. Cushing ordered that the college and its students would assist to bring about a “successful conclusion” to the war, keep the “normal program of civilian life on an even keel,” and assist in rehabilitation after the war ended. It added that students and faculty should make good use of their time, conserve whatever materials they could, and to watch for suspicious activities. Understanding that hardship would follow, President Cushing informed students and faculty that war “will be no Sunday School picnic for anyone.” The students, faculty, and staff answered Cushing’s call by pulling together to do everything they could to assist in the war effort and support the NSTC students who were called to serve their country.

Although the United State’s entrance into World War II caught many people off-guard, the war had been in the back of faculty and student minds long before the nation joined the fight in 1941. An editorial discussing who students thought would win the war in Europe appeared in *The Antelope* in 1940. Thirty-two students believed the Allies would win while ten thought the Axis powers would be victors. One student commented, “The Right will prevail, and Hitler is in the wrong.” Anticipating American participation in the war, the college offered credits in October of 1940 to any student who signed up for Selective Service conscription. Many young men signed up for “Deferred Service” programs, which allowed them to graduate before going into the service.

One hardship that every American felt, including NSTC students and faculty, was mandatory rationing. Many campus organizations, for example, cancelled out-of-town events, meetings, and performances due to the strict rationing of tires and gasoline. The Kearney Area Symphony Orchestra, including violinists from NSTC, cancelled its spring tour because of tire rations. The library’s supply of new books dwindled because of pa-

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### Director's Report

Another busy season is coming to a close. We had another great year, with attendance numbers already surpassing last year (2004: 1811 visitors; 2005: 3356; as of Labor Day, 2006: 3965). Our off-season hours (September thru May) are Monday-Friday 1-5 pm. The archive building will be open on Mondays from 1-4 pm. Researchers and volunteers are welcome to join us during these hours!

We have two UNK students working here through Christmas. Seth is a Travel and Tourism major and Kristina is an Early Education major. Please feel free to stop by and meet them!

The theme for the 19th Annual Trails and Rails Museum Christmas Tree Walk is a "White Christmas." Come visit us between December 2-10 (1-5 PM, daily). On Friday, December 8 hours will be extended from extended from 1-7 PM. Volunteers will be needed. If you have a specific day that you would like to help, please let me know. We appreciate your support!

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per limitations. A nutrition class hosted radio programs explaining how to cook using substitutions for rationed items. Freshmen donated scrap metal and cardboard as entrance tickets to sporting events on campus.

The single most visible change on campus was the decreasing student population. In 1942, enrollment was down by 25 percent due to the enlistment of hundreds of young college men. As a result, most of the students remaining on campus were women. Military leave was also granted to several faculty members. By November 3, 1942, The Antelope reported that 275 student were in the military. Fortunately, those students had a huge support system working for them back on the NSTC campus in Kearney.



*Professor Carrie Ludden wrote to NSTC students who were serving in the military.*

To help keep up the morale of its men in uniform, the college provided a subscription of The Antelope to every student serving in the military. Faculty member Carrie Ludden wrote letters to as many NSTC servicemen as she could, and The Antelope published the letters of those soldiers who wrote back. Donald Johnson, the first NSTC student killed during the war, wrote several letters that appeared in The Antelope. In April 1942 his last letter appeared in the student newspaper. It focused on many positive things, including memories of school and flight training in Arizona. More importantly, the letter reflected a hope that one day he would return to college and visit his former classmates and professors. By the spring of 1942, Ludden was writing to over sixty-eight soldiers and reportedly received new addresses everyday. The Antelope recognized the

importance of Ludden's efforts. "We can't plan war maneuver, and we can't build four-engine bombers on the Kearney Campus," reported the college paper. "We can't be the man at the front but we can serve behind the lines. A war was never won alone by the man in the front line trench." Members of the Zip Club helped fold and address the newspapers, and faculty and staff covered the cost of postage. Many students were grateful to receive the paper and keep up on news at home, as well as express their thanks for the things they learned at NSTC. Jerry Armatis, stationed at Camp Robinson, Arkansas, wrote, "I certainly enjoy The Antelope . . . [my] college work in physical education, biology, and chemistry have certainly helped me in my work here." The pictures of some of the school's "heroes" were featured in The Antelope each week. Directly underneath the photos was an article titled, "Our Fighting Forces," which notified the student body of address changes and promotions of their student-soldiers.

Before December 7, 1941, the college offered few classes that prepared students for military service. By 1942, however, NSTC offered classes in home-nursing, war math, communications, radio operations, map reading, and military courtesy. All male students were required to participate in physical education classes to ensure their top physical ability. To cover labor shortages, the State Board of Education allowed high school students to enroll in select college courses such as typing, shorthand, and book-keeping. New courses on physics and mathematics were offered in the summer so they would be available to more students.

The American Library Association, American Red Cross, and United Service Organization joined together with the college to sponsor a Victory Book Campaign. Students donated used books that were sent to men in the armed forces. Students in the A.O. Thomas elementary school even helped out. Fifth and sixth graders sold over \$1,000 in war stamps and bonds. The third and fourth graders made toys, dolls, and set up other projects to send to the hospitals. The Aspasian Debating Society, one of the oldest organizations at the college, sent cookies to students in the military, pooled their money to make donations to the Salvation Army, and purchased magazines to send to the soldiers. The yearbook staff dedicated the annual to the "Men of Kearney," using a military theme and a khaki cover. During harvest times, with the lack of manpower available, over 600 students, faculty, and college employees helped to harvest corn, beets, and potatoes on nearby farms.

With the arrival of the Kearney Army Air Base, female students found a fun way to help support the soldiers. On many occasions the college or the Air Base sponsored dances and other get-togethers for the young college women and the soldiers. However, not just any girl could attend the activities. First they had to apply to be a hostess. Requirements demanded that a hostess be single, at least eighteen years old or a high school graduate, have parental permission, be of good moral character, and be available



for duty when called upon. Girls had to carry their hostess cards with them at all times and were escorted to and from the activities by captains. Many girls complained that the dance floor was too small, and that their 10:00 p.m. curfew was too early and "felt that the boys needed more time to become acquainted with them." Hostess Jean Lynch commented that "hostesses were not supposed to leave the club with a soldier, were not to make dates while serving as a hostess, were to dress simply but tastefully, avoid overuse of makeup, and were to be friendly to all of the soldiers." Being a hostess was a privilege, and if any girl failed to answer her call of duty three times, she had to turn in her hostess card. Although dates and serious relationships with soldiers were restricted, the meetings led to marriage for several young couples.

In late spring of 1945, students again gathered in the auditorium to listen to a president, but for a much more cheerful announcement. President Harry Truman announced V-E Day, or Victory in Europe Day. By this time, the campus was really feeling the effects of war. Green Terrace Hall had temporarily closed its doors due to low enrollment. Kampus Kave, the popular student hangout in Men's Hall, had closed the second semester of 1944 due to lack of help and supplies. Enrollment hit a low of 111 students in 1943.

Obviously, the most noticeable absence on campus was that of the students who never returned. Their photographs, thirty-one total, were displayed on the opening pages of the 1946 yearbook, next to the cause and date of death. The first NSTC student killed in the war was Lieutenant Donald W. Johnson, who died in a plane crash in April 1942. Victor Deeb, who was described as "an all around pal of everyone," was killed in a plane crash on March 30, 1945 near the Marianas Islands after volunteering for a mission. Ralph Shinn, a former track star, was killed in action on Okinawa in the waning days of the war. One lucky student, Harwood Ryan, parachuted from his plane after the engine quit only one mile from Japanese territory. He was rescued from the water two hours later by a Navy plane. The Antelope reported that "the flyer suffered no ill-effects other than a good drenching." Ryan was one of the fortunate ones.



*Donald W. Johnson  
was the first NSTC  
student killed  
during WWII*

The Buck-A-Month Club was established in 1945 to raise money for a proposed Student Union Memorial building in honor of those who lost their lives. Membership began with the first dollar paid, and a promise to contribute a dollar each month for the next eighteen months, for a total of nineteen dollars. When students reached their \$19 pledge, they were given the name of "Honorary Bond Member" and got their name on the cornerstone for the new building. A booth was built in the Administration

Building to act as a headquarters for the club, with the inscription "They Gave Their Lives" over it. On December 21, 1945 students showed their patriotism and support for the union by participating in a parade that stretched six blocks. Students waved signs and flags, some riding in buses or decorated cars. Radio entertainment was broadcast by the Armory featuring students singing and playing the piano. Hams, cakes, and furniture items were auctioned to raise money. A party at the newly re-opened Kampus Kave followed, with dancing and snacks of apples and popcorn. The Buck-A-Month Club booth was taken down in 1948, having raised nearly \$40,000 but not enough to cover costs for a memorial student union. However, two buildings that had been used at the air base were moved to



*The Buck-A-Month Club headquarters was located in the Administration Building*

campus and used as a temporary student union.

During the war, enrollment had hit an all-time low in the winter of 1942-1943, with only 111 students enrolled. In January 1946, however, enrollment jumped to over 300 students when veterans began returning to campus with help from the G.I. Bill. With enrollment on the rise, President Cushing had to ask the Federal Public Housing Association to increase living quarters on campus for the returning veterans. By September, registration equaled its prewar totals. Veterans who returned to campus got together to form the NSTC Veterans Club.

After the war, the lounges on the second and third floors in Men's Hall were converted into rooms in order to fit more students. In January 1947, registration was overwhelming, with a constant increase in veteran students. Registration for the previous semester showed a ratio of two men to every woman on campus. Twenty-two veterans enrolled for the first semester of the 1945-1946 school year, 135 for the second semester of the same year, and 284 were registered for the 1946-1947 school year. By early 1948, registration stood at 707, with 440 being men. By the fall of 1948, registration had reached over 800.

To accommodate the growing student population, the school board secured twenty buildings donated by air bases in Fairmont and Scribner and moved them to campus where Randall, Stout, and Mantor halls now stand. In March 1946, the FPHA responded to President Cushing's request for more housing by moving some housing units from Geneva, Nebraska to the area just west of Men's Hall on campus. This area became known as "Veterans Village." Furnished units cost \$30 a month and included heating, lighting, and water. One, two, and three bedrooms were available.

The students, faculty, and staff at NSTC played an important role in World War II. Several hundred male students served in the military and

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thirty-one gave their lives during the war. The hard work and determination of those on the home front supported the soldiers overseas, giving them the loyalty and love they needed to win the war. This loyalty can be clearly seen in the fundraisers, voluntarism, and service projects performed by the student body of Nebraska State Teachers College. The college went through a major transformation as the student body was forced to grow up very quickly and face the world as they never had before.

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