

Buffalo Tales

Nov./Dec. 2019



Buffalo County Historical Society

Part I: Central—Nebraska During WWII:

How Rural Communities In and Around Kearney and North Platte Contributed to the War Effort

By Broc Anderson

Not only did Nebraska people come together to support the war, but the military came to Nebraska as an important destination for its own needs. For example, The Kearney Army Air Field, KAAF, Kearney, Buffalo County, Nebraska undoubtedly had a significant role to support the war and trained hundreds of pilots eventually serving overseas. Constructed rather quickly in 1942, the large swath of Nebraska prairie provided many opportunities for a plethora of experimental military excursions as well as protected by a thousand plus miles of American territory to the north, south, or in any direction. Not only did KAAF find an important military base in the middle of Nebraska, but also benefited from the more rural and populous aspects of Central Nebraska compared to the rest of the state. More specifically to Kearney and North Platte, their shared space as part of Central-Nebraska are exceptional, when compared to other much larger cities to the east. With the support of nearby communities, towns, and villages in the region, the North Platte Canteen may not have been as successful or focusing solely on the KAAF excludes the other contributions of surrounding communities in Buffalo County. Undoubtedly, the smaller communities of Ravenna and Gibbon are intertwined with the Kearney community, however, the contributions of these smaller and surrounding towns in and around Kearney and North Platte greatly contributed to the home front efforts need further analysis.

Kearney and North Platte are “exceptional communities” when compared to much of the rest of the state. This “exceptional community” argument presented here needs further clarification, however, many of the communities in Nebraska have relatively low populations and unable to sustain large scale production, like many in the west. Further east, communities such as Lincoln, Omaha, Grand Island, or Hastings had a much more concentrated populations more able to produce large volumes of military equipment or goods. Another important aspect of these “exceptional communities” is their distinct geographic location regarding the various rail lines across the state. Between some of the most populated cities of North Platte, Kearney, Grand Island, Hastings, Lincoln, and Omaha make up roughly 25% of Nebraska’s population according to the 1940 census. Looking more closely at this population demographic, the other 75% of Nebraska is made up of even more rural communities spread throughout various the country side. For many of these communities, their smaller size in population, and sometimes disadvantageous geographic location, prevents rural towns and villages from executing large scale operations like the Canteen or sustain an air base similar to the one in Kearney. Instead, thousands of Americans living in small townships or on farms found themselves supporting the Canteen, KAAF, or taking on different responsibilities to support the war.

More specific in Central Nebraska, the rural communities surrounding Kearney and North Platte found that their crucial role for the war as a heavily relied upon source for their production of agricultural goods and supporting the war anyway possible. While the North Platte Canteen relied on surrounding communities for their support to volunteer at the depot cooking and greeting soldiers, however, these rural residents focused much of their support for the war through agriculture production. In Buffalo County, these rural communities of Ravenna and Gibbon had their own agricultural and patriotic role in supporting the war. Whether their efforts included donating their own rationed foods to the North Platte Canteen or boosting the morale of soldiers at Kearney Army Airfield, through various acts of kindness, these rural communities should not be overlooked. The war support brought out here in Buffalo County is not unique, but rather in line with much of the rest of the country trying to do their part.

Part I: Central—Nebraska During WWII

For this essay, I argue through a local historical lens as well continue the dialogue about how everyone, in some of the most rural communities, found ways to express their American patriotism at home and abroad through the larger Central-Nebraska Communities of Kearney or North Platte or outright in their own way.

The communities of Kearney and North Platte, are chosen for two reasons. The first because of this more evident intersection between military and community interests and, the second being their geographical and topographical similarities between the two communities. According to the 1940 Census, Kearney's and North Platte's population similarly reflected one another with only about a 3,000-population difference between the two. With the exception of Kearney, the population density in many of the larger eastern-Nebraska cities is greater than that of the central part of the state. While Kearney and North Platte are roughly between 9,000 and 12,000 residents, other central-Nebraska cities such as Grand Island and Hastings have populations over 15,000. Lincoln and Omaha are more profoundly different compared to Kearney and North Platte with a combined population of 300,000 between both cities.

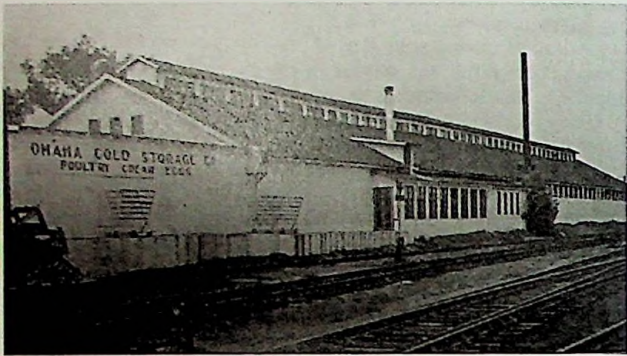
Another aspect to this "exceptional community" argument also includes the importance of the rail roads transporting soldiers and goods to the battle field. Since most of these towns and cities in Nebraska were established as a result of the rail road pushing out west, the transportation discussion is of equal importance. If it were not Stephen Douglass' vision of a transcontinental rail road through Nebraska in the nineteenth century, all the following events may not have been possible. As a major lifeline for Nebraska industry, and life for that matter, persuading the military that Nebraska is a mid-way point is an important asset for the beginning and continued operations for Kearney Army Airfield. As for the two major rail roads across Nebraska for this study, the following highly discussed the role of the Union Pacific, following the Platte river and going through Kearney and North Platte, and the Burlington going through the northern part of central-Nebraska. But because of historical circumstances, North Platte and Kearney are uniquely "set up" for future industrialization in the twentieth century.

Outside of Kearney, the second largest community in Buffalo County, had greatly contributed with a couple food processing plants for dairy and eggs. Starting in 1910, three plants called the "Creamery" manufactured nearly a million pounds of butter, fifty car loads of eggs, dressing 25,000 poultry, and making 20,000 pounds of ice cream by 1912. As a successful creamery in such a short period of time, by 1915 and 1916, the new business continued establishing itself along the Burlington rail line as an important producer for agricultural goods and further expanded to Gibbon and Kearney, specializing in New York dressed birds shipped off to markets further east along the Union Pacific. By 1922, the combined Ravenna Creamery, shipped and produced nearly 2 million pounds of butter and over 100,000 gallons of ice cream annually. Despite the economic success for "the creamery" in Ravenna, poor management and differing opinions about the future of the creamery exasperated by 1942. In the end, the 1942 Ord Plant was used for the scrap metal drive.

Luckily, the Omaha Cold Storage Company became an important industrial replacement for the city. Having a presence in central-Nebraska in Broken Bow, Callaway, Holdrege, Sargent, and Taylor, Ravenna was an important target for its strategic position along the Burlington and just north of Kearney. During World War II, a new idea in egg processing for the Army greatly influenced how the United States supported troops abroad. Having been done before in the Chicago plant in 1930, the frozen egg yolk used to produce egg yolk on a dairy plant sprayer maintaining low moisture and gas packed type dried eggs for the U.S. Army. Combined with a new open market, going back to previously mentioned example about Creamery" "The Creamery" closing in 1942, however, Ravenna was an established important part of the trading network with the continuation of the Omaha Cold Storage Company as an important middle ground, between the eastern and western part of the United States. By 1942, several of the local Ravenna citizens congregated together to scrap the local creamery for the sake of state scrap metal drive. Despite this scrap effort, the Omaha Cold Storage Company built a building 130-foot length and 50 feet wide, one story high, structure to continue supplying the cream and poultry demand. Under the direction of L.A. Sedlacek, decided against the construction of a similar plant in Broken Bow after thorough testing and location for eastern markets by 1935.

By the height of World War II, the Ravenna plant, owned and operated by the Omaha Cold Storage Company, established itself as a company that met rigid requirements to quality and quantity in 1945. Part of the success for the new Ravenna plant found success in a new egg processing development "of breaking the eggs and sending

them, via tank trucks, to egg drying plants for the Army. Beginning with about 231 cases a day, only about a year later did the Ravenna plant conduct over one million dollars in business alone. Having realized a new food processing strategy, the Ravenna plant continued to expand and included several other aspects to the egg plant including new facilities and more equipment for poultry processing. In 1944, the Ravenna plant produced "100,000 cases of processed shell eggs, processed 1,300,000 pounds of dressed poultry, processed 300,000 of dressed turkeys, processed 60,000 pounds of feathers for the army



The Omaha Cold Storage in 1926
courtesy of the Ravenna Historical Society

This important milestone became so much so that recognizing the Ravenna plant of its important servitude by the WPA gave the plant an "A," or the equivalent of an "E" for a munitions plant, as high production facility. The Kearney Daily Hub described a military recognition ceremony for the high production. Maj. J. B. Christensen, from the field headquarters of the quarter master general, presented Ravenna Plant manager J. T. McCutchson and local employee Mrs. Clara Moog with the award as well as a flag with the letter "A" in the middle. With help of the local American Legion, the Ravenna Plant proudly displayed the "A" flag directly below the American flag until the end of the war in 1945."

With such promising production, the Ravenna plant struggled in the post-war years under new management and less demand. From the Omaha Cold Storage Company to the Henningsen Foods throughout the 1950s, the Ravenna Plant changed management four times prior to 1960. In the latter half of the 1940s, Ocoma Foods Company took over the Ravenna plant and shifted production even more so on poultry until 1957. By 1957, a merger between Ocoma Foods Company and another Chicago based company decided to sell the Ravenna plant to the Maplecrest Company of Denver. After further inspections by the Maplecrest Company, another decision was made in 1958 to abandon the building shortly after purchasing it because of the necessary upgrades to the structure to accommodate the new equipment. The Ravenna Civic Development Corporation purchased the building and then sold to Henningsen Foods under a lease-purchase agreement.



Under Henningsen Foods, the once industrious Ravenna Plant regained some of its previous glory, however, new technologies and contributions from other international factories clouded the accomplishments in Ravenna. Henningsen's first egg drying plant in Shanghai was eventually sold in 1947 to further competing markets establishing themselves as one of the main proprietors in agricultural industry. Under experienced egg drying entrepreneur, Victor W. Henningsen, grew the Ravenna industrial economy in a short few years. Alongside "the Creamery" in the 1930s, the Omaha Cold Storage Company handled more than 1.5 million pounds of chicken and 14,000 cases of eggs. Henningsen, former son of Frederick Henningsen and involved with the dairy and poultry business Denmark, received an education at the University of Nebraska studying dairy. In 1915, his investments in an egg processing plant in Shanghai, China produced frozen and dried egg products eventually finding its way to the United States. Alongside several other international sales positions in Shanghai, New York, Van Couver, Chicago, and Boston, Henningsen Brothers Inc. quickly found itself as a frontrunner agricultural processing plant in Texas and expanding to Ravenna. Among the several other international plants, Ravenna continued its operations more quietly and far less than it produced during the war.

To be continued in the January/February edition...

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Director's Report—Jennifer Murrish

As 2019 is slowly coming to an end, we are reflecting back with happy hearts on all of the generosity that we have been shown. We are so blessed with folks that have stepped up to help us when the Depot flooded, when businesses reached out to donate extra fixtures, filing cabinets and mannequins, and with every single volunteer that has chosen to spend their time and energy at our facility helping your society move forward with our mission. We've come a long way towards our potential but only because we have so many key players that have decided that Buffalo County history is worth saving. On behalf of the Buffalo County Historical Society Board of Directors, we want to thank each and every one of you from the bottom of our hearts for the contributions you provided, whether it was monetary or in-kind.

We would also like to take a moment to encourage you to 'like' our Facebook page, 'BuffaloCountyHistoricalSociety'. If you like what you see, please share the posts and interact with us via the comments. This is a free and easy way to spread the stories of Buffalo County to your friends, family, and to other history-lovers.

Merry Christmas and we look forward to seeing you in 2020.
Sincerely, Jennifer

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BUFFALO TALES is the official publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society, a non-profit organization, whose address is P.O. Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848-0523.

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Broc Anderson, Editor

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