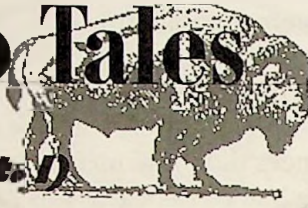


Buffalo Tales

March/April 2012

Lifelines (pt. 1)

By Nathan Piper



My darling wife, once again I will try writing you a few lines so you will know I'm okay. Now if I only knew how you and baby are . . . but I don't. I keep hoping you are both well, but still I worry a lot because I don't know what is going on back there. If there was only something I could do or say, but there isn't, and I don't seem to be any closer to leaving here now than I was the day I came in.

When there is no other way to say what one needs to say, human nature demands that words be written to replace what cannot be said in person. These words form letters which allow us to express sentiments necessary for sustaining the relationships we hold most dear. Such a premise is painfully evident in the opening of this letter written during World War II by Corporal Robert Sinkler of the 159th Infantry's Medical Detachment. Awaiting deployment orders in Leyte, Philippines, Sinkler was extending encouragement and support to his wife, Evelyn, who was anxiously awaiting his return to Nebraska. But even more, Sinkler was willing the written word to serve as an adequate substitute for what he most needed to say to his wife in person. Like so many servicemen during World War II, Robert Sinkler's correspondence became for him a lifeline. His letters home became for him a fundamentally imperative to remain connected to those he cared for most. And it is in letters such as Sinkler's that the collective voices of Nebraska soldiers serving in World War II are preserved. The very letters that sustained servicemen while away at war—these lifelines—now serve to connect modern audiences to the lives and experiences of Nebraska servicemen during World War II.

During World War II, young men like Robert Sinkler were taken away from their homes and their relationships off to face great danger and great uncertainty. As a result, families, marriages, and friendships were essentially fractured. Parents suffered through the absence of their sons. Children struggled with the void left by a father gone off to war. And husbands and their wives, as well as those couples just falling in love—as evidenced by Robert Sinkler and his wife during World War II—became entirely reliant on the written word to demonstrate and sustain their love and devotion. As Nebraskans joined other men from

throughout Midwestern communities to fight with their fellow Americans in the epic conflict that was World War II, they were, as a consequence, being asked to sustain themselves, and their most valued relationships, entirely through correspondence. Under what circumstances did these men from Nebraska commonly write home? What characteristically was said that allowed them and their loved ones comfort? What did servicemen need to say that would allow his most important relationships to survive? And what was required of a soldier—away from home and under threat of injury and death—to craft words that would become for him a critical lifeline to those he loved at home?

Robert Sinkler was twenty-three and working as a general farm hand near Twin Falls, Idaho, when he entered the Army three months before the United States entered World War II in 1941. Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, thousands of men like Sinkler from all across America immediately enlisted or were drafted into the U.S. armed forces. As a result, American servicemen disappeared from their homes and local communities. These men, many from small, agrarian areas like Nebraska, were hastily trained and then sent off toward either Nazi Germany or to the Pacific Theatre to confront the Imperial Japanese. Sinkler, too, was swept away with the swelling demand for servicemen.

Prior to his entering into the United States Army in September of 1941, Robert Sinkler worked vigorously to support his adoptive family. Sinkler, orphaned by the death of his mother to tuberculosis when he was seven years old, had been grudgingly adopted by his aunt and uncle living in Greeley, Nebraska. He eventually left school in 1931 after completing the eighth grade to earn an additional income for his adoptive family, which included seven younger cousins. Sinkler spent ten years traveling across the Midwest and Idaho offering a fierce Nebraska work ethic to anyone seeking to employ a farm hand. A portion of this time was spent working in CCC, or Civil Conservation Corps, camps, where he was introduced to a disciplined life much like that of the military. Every month during those years, Sinkler would send a brief letter home with money. It was a combination of patriotic duty and the pursuit of a more reliable income which delivered Sinkler to the United States Army at Fort Crook, Nebraska, in 1941.

Sinkler, however, was but one of many men from the Great Plains who would leave their homes for distant destinations during the war. In fact, the role of Sinkler's state of Nebraska, and to a larger degree, the Great Plains, has only recently revealed to scholars the region's critical, if still underappreciated, place in the history of World War II. The historiography of the Great Plains region during World War II—and the state of Nebraska specifically—has steadily yielded for historians an increasing number of informative topics which demonstrate integral contributions and

sacrifices made by the Central Plains states during the war.

Conventional examinations of World War II have predominantly approached the subject through the tradition of political historical scholarship. But in more recent decades, scholars—guided by the events and principles of the American Civil Rights Movement—have reinterpreted the history of World War II and America in a variety of new and enlightening ways. Whether by emphasizing the role of African-Americans, Native-Americans, women, or particular regions, these more contemporary World War II historical studies have unearthed important and enlightening stories. Robert Sinkler's letters, and the letters of others like Sinkler, reveal an important insight into the life and experiences of soldiers from Nebraska during World War II. The studies and investigations that have been conducted of specific regions like Nebraska during World War II have, consequently, led to more accurate recognition of the contributions made by all of America during the war.

It is into this field of study that historians of Nebraska and the Great Plains are placing new efforts. They intend these candid studies to add to the collective understanding of the war. They allow the contributions and sacrifices of men like Robert Sinkler, and to a larger degree, all the men from states like Nebraska, to be better understood and appreciated. These studies, therefore, better represent places like the state of Nebraska which have not traditionally maintained a prominent position in the history of World War II. It is directly into the study of Nebraska during World War II that the narrative of Corporal Robert Sinkler, his correspondences, and his experiences during the period definitively reflect war experiences encountered by many Nebraskans. These more intimate studies of the everyday lives of individuals pulled from their small communities into a larger, more dangerous world become the stories which allow readers of American history a more complete understanding of the impact of World War II on men from places like Nebraska and the Great Plains.

Robert Sinkler's story, documented in his surviving letters to his wife, gives a very human voice to the soldiers of Nebraska that served during World War II. These Nebraska soldiers and their stories, aside from a few attempts at scholarly study—many conducted by those living within its borders—are categorically under investigated. The largest and most thorough attempt thus far in admirably representing Nebraska and other states in the Great Plains region during World War II is to be found in R. Douglas Hurt's 2008 book *The Great Plains during World War II*. In this book, Hurt, head of Purdue's Department of History, presents readers with a comprehensive, predominantly academic work examining how the Great Plains adapted to and were affected by the onset and course of the war.

Sources

Banner, James M., Jr. *A Century of American Historiography*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010.

Hurt, R. Douglas. *The Great Plains during World War II*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008.

---. Separation Qualification Record. Army of the United States. July 1, 1945.

Sinkler, Robert J. Christmas card to Evelyn Burson, December, 1943.

Join us at the Trails & Rails Museum during the Crane Season. We will be open March 23rd-April 1st, 1-5 pm daily with special historic crane displays to enjoy!

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 online at getmeregistered.com.

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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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
Treasurer.....	Lynn Rauner

2012 Calendar of Events

March 23rd-April 1 from 1-5 pm daily: Crane Watch Festival with a special historic crane display

Sunday, April 15th from 1-3 pm: BCHS Annual Meeting

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 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

-Jerry Marlatt is donating funds for a new blacksmith shop to be built on the Trails & Rails Museum grounds. Construction will start at the end of this month. Jim Miller's existing blacksmith shop display will move into this building and Matt O'Callaghan, who is overseeing the construction, will also be a major participant/demonstrator.

-The Buffalo County Historical Society appreciates the immediate response from the Kearney Police Department to the Trails & Rails Museum on February 18 when it was found that the Museum had been broken into. The Museum was closed for a few days to assist with the investigation.

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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