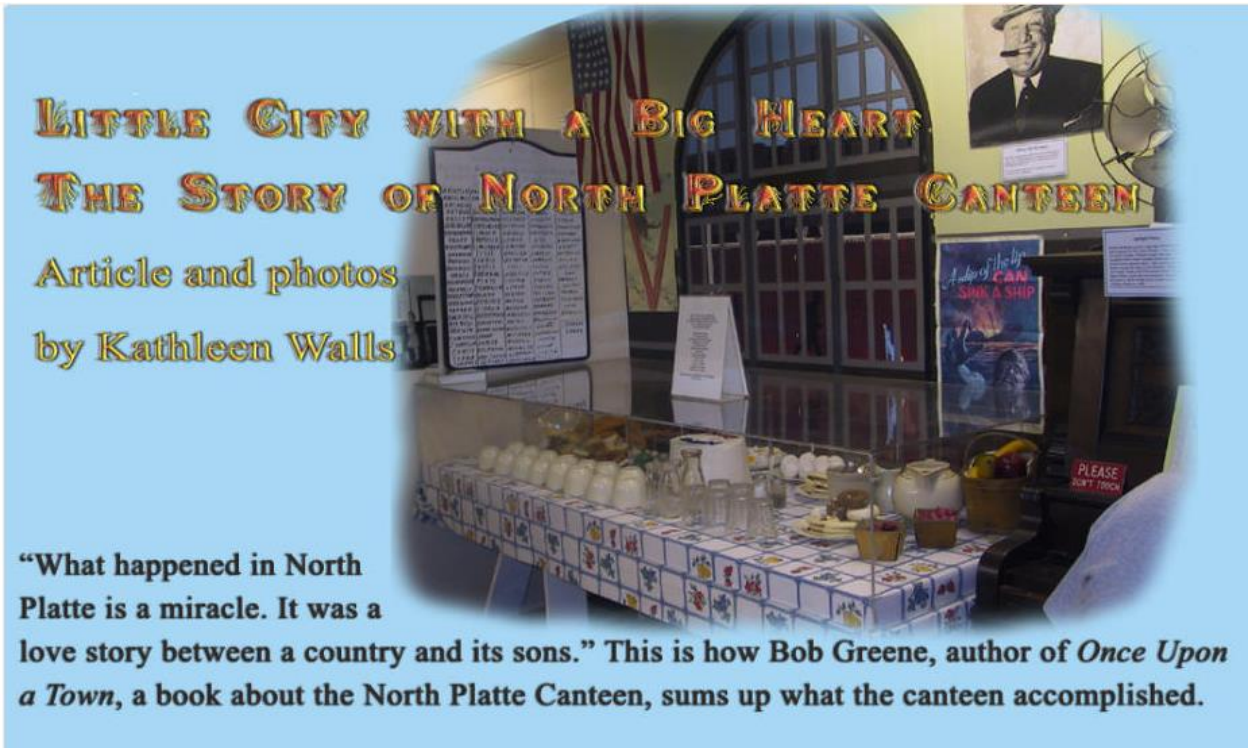
American Roads Online



The North Platte Canteen is one of America's little known World War II stories. I first heard of it on a recent visit to North Platte. You know you are going to have an authentic experience when you enter the museum through three doors that are preserved from the original North Platte Canteen. Inside, we were greeted by James Griffin, the museum curator.

James told us the story of the canteen and how it began. "The canteen began unofficially on Dec 17, 1941 because the people heard that their local Company D of Nebraska National Guard was coming and they wanted to give them their Christmas gifts . Instead it was the Kansas National Guard on that train. Someone stepped forward and said they wanted to give their gifts. Then they all stepped forward.



One of the original canteen signs

"From that was born the Canteen. The next day, Rae Wilson wrote a letter to the newspaper saying that we should have one here since there wasn't any war industry here they ought to make raising moral their war industry. So on Christmas Day 1941 the official canteen gave its first meal. From then on until April 1,, 1946, no troop train was missed. Now, that's not a small feet because at the height of the war a troop train was coming through ever hour on average. They were serving up to 5,000 a day at no cost to the soldiers. this was all done by volunteers. North Platte at that time was about 12,000 people. It became a western Nebraska project. 125 communities participated."

Bill Jeffers who was president of the railroad, offered free transport to volunteers coming to help at the canteen. The soldiers were thrilled to stop in North Platte. No matter their rank or color everyone was treated exactly the same at the canteen. It was the largest canteen in the United States.

The deep feelings of these volunteers is summed up in a statement made by one canteen volunteer who had recently lost her own son. "I can't help my son, but I can help someone else's son."



Canteen kitchen

The museum is in the front section of the building and the canteen in the back. From far back in what had been the kitchen area, a man was playing a piano. I couldn't recognize the tune but felt it was one I had heard my own grandmother play as a tiny child perhaps as far back as the war years. It gave me a hint of what a lonely serviceman must have felt when he first entered this building. My fellow journalists and myself wandered back and viewed the many artifacts from the days of the canteen, a huge coffee urn, a table set as it was from 1942 to 1945, a lot of letters, pictures and stories about the canteen. Among the weapons displayed there are a captured Nazi flag and a battle worn American flag.

They tell and interesting story about popcorn balls that really piqued my interest. It was the most unusual romance I had ever heard about. The story began with a simple popcorn ball. It was the habit of many of the young ladies at the canteen to place their names and addresses inside the popcorn balls they passed out to the soldiers. Sometimes the soldiers wrore and they became pen pals. In some cases it blossomed into something more.

In 1942, Virgil Butolph was a 25 year old serviceman passing through the canteen. Ethel Winters, a 19 year old girl from nearby Tryon, was helping at the canteen that day. Some of the Tryon women stuffed the names and addresses of some of the local high school girls into the popcorn balls that day. One name that went into the balls was Ethel's younger sister, Vera. Virgil got the ball with Vera's name in it but wasn't interested in writing anyone. He passed it on to a buddy who did write Vera.



Coffee urn used at the canteen

When Virgil saw the correspondence that resulted, he asked the buddy if Vera had a sister. Thus Virgil and Ethel began corresponding. Gradually the letters took on a more serious tone. Virgil asked for her photograph and sent her one of his. He began sending pressed wildflowers he picked from the Aleutian Islands where he was then stationed.

Virgil asked his sister to buy Ethel first a cedar hope chest. Ethel began saving her own earnings to fill it with household items a new home might need. Then in July 1943, Virgil asked his sister to buy Ethel a diamond ring for him. Ethel agreed to wear it on the condition they were not really engaged until they met in person and got to know each other.



Virgil and Ethel's wedding clothes

Finally in the summer of 1944, Virgil got his long awaited furlough. He sent Ethel a telegram as soon as he reached the States but it only arrived at her home about half an hour before Virgil himself. Needless to say, it was love at first sight.

Virgil spent some of his furlough in Ringgold with Ethel and then took her to nearby Kearney to meet his parents. Returning from Kearney on Sept. 14, 1944, Virgil said, "Let's get married."

They drove to a nearby Methodist Church in North Platte were married that same night. They used the church restroom to change clothes, Virgil into his uniform and Ethel into a dress she had in the car. Virgil and Ethel had met in person just two weeks before the ceremony.

The marriage lasted until March 21, 1976, when Virgil had a heart attack and died on a trip to Hershey to see the Sandhill cranes, one of their annual traditions. The couple had five children.

Ethel donated Virgil's Army uniform and her wedding dress to the Lincoln County Historical Museum where it hangs with the photos they exchanged, some letters and this story.



Restored farmhouse in the village

As fascinating as the Canteen part of the museum is, it's only a small part of the exhibits. After I browsed the canteen and front section of the museum, someone suggested we go see the Pioneer village out back. What a treasure we found!

Sixteen original building that transport you to Lincoln county's past. We visited former Union Pacific President Bill Jeffers' North Platte boyhood home. James Griffin told us, "Jeffers was kicked out of school in sixth grade for hitting a teacher. He went to work for Union Pacific as a janitor. Worked his way to call boy and eventually became president of the railroad."

The other home preserved in the village is the Ericsson Home. E. E. Ericsson was the first homesteader in Lincoln County. The two story log home is beautiful in its simplicity.

Then there was Trinity Lutheran Church. Which is still used for weddings, and Birdwood School, typical of a Plains area one-room schoolhouse. The tiny jail cell on display is enough to make even the most harden criminal decide to walk the straight and narrow here. It is just a barred iron cage with none of the modern comforts.



Part of the village

Being a railroad town, naturally there is a depot and caboose. Dick's Barber shop probably offered passengers on layovers a much cheaper haircut and shave then you will get in any airport shop today.

What a place to walk through the best of American history.

For more info:

http://www.lincolncountymuseum.org/