

# Special scrapbook offers unique points of view during war years

BY TRAVIS GULBRANDSON

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In Vermillion's Austin Whittemore House is an item that offers a variety of unique perspectives on World War II.

About 10 years ago, the museum acquired a scrapbook that was put together by deceased area resident Pearl Simonson, who clipped and saved hundreds of items relating to the war from the Vermillion Plain Talk and the Dakota Republican.

"Her husband had been killed in the First World War, and she had kept all of this material," said Austin Whittemore House manager Cleo Erickson. "They didn't have children or anything, so when they cleaned out her house, all this stuff was in there."

Most of the articles are dated, and many of them feature first-hand accounts of the war when the events were still fresh in the public's mind, published in the forms of interviews, diaries and letters home.

One diary told of a member of the medical corps who missed the attack on Pearl Harbor by exactly one week.

"Well, it looks like it has finally happened," wrote Capt. Harold Hanson on Dec. 7, 1941. "We heard the news this noon that the U.S. and Japan are at war. Everyone here is glad we have finally called their bluff. I only hope we are not underestimating their ability."

Hanson wrote that immediately after receiving news of the attack, the ship's crew began painting the ship a dark color.

"We are in somewhat of a spot – a dangerous one – as everyone aboard fully realizes," Hanson wrote.

Other service members tell of life during training maneuvers.

"We are battling across New Mexico, and what a place!" Lt. Jay Swisher wrote to his parents in October 1943. "I used to think that the prairie from Vivian to Pierre was but, here you can go for hundreds of miles and never see a farm house."

That same month, Lt. Hanley Heikes was interviewed by the Republican, where he told of serving 15 months doing engineering and supply work with the 98th bomb group in the Middle East.

"All we could see were rocks and sand," Heikes said. "The wind blew constantly and was filled with powdery red dust. We could have clean clothes on to start the morning and by 9:30 they'd be filthy."

Heikes added that he didn't "know what the soldiers would have done" without the efforts of the Red Cross.

"The Red Cross made it possible for men to keep going," he said. "In our outfit the men were given a week of medical detached service every three months. They had to have it because of the bad food, the heat on the desert and the nervous strain."

These feelings were echoed by Pvt. Sidney Engman and Pvt. Lester L. Russell, both of whom spent time in German POW camps.

"We didn't smoke at all over there, but we

saved the cigarettes from our Red Cross packages to trade to the guards for bread and potatoes to keep ourselves alive," Engman said in July 1945. "Incidentally, you can't say enough for the Red Cross aid to the prisoners. It kept us alive by giving us meat and other essentials."

"We saved out the cigarettes and tea for barter with the guards," he said. "A package of tea would bring several loaves of bread."

Engman added that a single American cigarette meant more than money in the camp – about 60 cents per smoke.

Russell said the British Red Cross box was "just like Christmas once a week."

In August 1943, Russell wrote his parents that he had "learned how to bake any or everything since I was captured," and asked them to send him some graham crackers.

"They would make a swell cake," he wrote.

The diet was the worst part of camp life, Engman said, reporting that his normal weight of 155 dipped down to 104 at one point during his internment.

The scrapbook offers accounts of the aftermath of battle, such as in Capt. Ralph Konegi's letters to his wife.

"I really saw the results of war," he wrote after seeing French territory that was formerly occupied by the Germans. "At one place I went through heavy timber-land which had been almost stripped of the trees. The artillery fire on it had been so severe that trees at least two feet through were cut right off. Almost reminded me of the results of a forest fire."

Konegi later passed through a French city

"which was bitterly fought over by the Americans and Germans."

"It was so completely shelled and bombed that the engineers had difficulty in finding the streets," he wrote. "Bulldozers were still being used to clear away the rubble. Usually as we have seen it nearly all the walls remain standing with just a portion blasted away. But in this city there were just small portions of the walls left standing."

In 1945, Lt. Don Burr wrote to his parents of his experiences seeing the concentration camp Dachau, which he describes as "one of the most horrible sights I ever expect to see."

"You'll see it in the movies; at least what they dare show," Burr wrote. "Every man, woman and child should see for themselves the crimes committed by these German SS troops. ..."

"When our division captured this camp we found the bodies of over 68,000 political prisoners that had been murdered just two or three days before our arrival," he wrote. "Of course, this mass murder had been going on for months."

Burr's letter does much to convey the shock he felt on coming upon the scene.

"How any group of men and women could figure out how to kill people by the thousands I don't know," he wrote.

After the war's end, Lt. James Brick reported on the day he spent viewing the Nuremberg trials. The day Brick attended, Hitler's deputy Rudolf Hess was being tried.

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