

Vermillion folks on the homefront during WWII faced sad, uncertain times

BY TRAVIS GULBRANDSON
travis.gulbrandson@plaintalk.net

While there are many accounts of what conditions were like overseas during World War II, there are significantly fewer from those who stayed at home.

A local resident who has vivid memories of the homefront is local historian Cleo Erickson, who helps manage the activities of the Clay County Historical Society housed at the Austin Whittemore House in Vermillion.

One of the things she remembers best is when the first group of local recruits left town shortly after the war began.

"I was a freshman in high school, and we had senior boys in the 147th," she said. "I can remember that day very well, that they had to quit school. They were called, and away they went. It was a sad day."

Most of the recruits would be sent to Fort Snelling in Minnesota or Nebraska's Fort Crook for their physicals, Erickson said.

"They'd put all these guys on the train," she said. "I can remember going down to the train station and seeing the guys off. It always seemed like they'd leave at 10:30 at night or something like that."

The absence of young men in the community – the strangeness of it – is one of the things Erickson remembers best.

"They were all gone," she said. "There just weren't many around unless they had a health problem or something, and couldn't pass the physical."

Erickson's fiancé and future husband Norris was among the departing draftees in 1945 – the late date being the result of a serious back injury he sustained on his family's farm.

"I know he talked about getting on the train with a local guy here, and no more had the guy gotten on the train than he pulled his bottle of whiskey out and started drinking," she said.

Norris Erickson was trained at Camp Carter in Joplin, MO, after which he was sent to New Jersey.

"He waited a few days for the ship, and he went to Germany," Cleo said. "He went over on the Antioch Victory. I can remember he wasn't

supposed to tell, but somehow he swore me to secrecy and I knew what ship he was on."

After he left, Erickson didn't hear from him for the next four or five weeks, she said.

"Then one night I was listening to the radio and I heard the name of that ship come up," Erickson said. "It had been taken down by Italy someplace and they were destroying it because it was such a poor ship."

"I thought, 'Oh my gosh.' But he made it," she said.

Rationing is another big memory. "It was interesting," Erickson said, laughing. "Somewhere in our stuff here (at the Austin Whittemore House) we have some of the rationing books. It was just like a little stamp, and you had so much sugar, tires and gasoline, and you could only buy so much, too."

"It was especially difficult for the people – a lot of the farmers at the time had big gardens, and they'd want to do all this canning ... and they just couldn't do it because they didn't have enough sugar," she said.

Although she does not know of any such place in Vermillion, Erickson said there were black market establishments in larger cities where people could buy sugar and other supplies.

"They would buy 100 pounds of sugar at a time, and then if they bought it, the story was ... that they'd have to hide it someplace, because if someone came along and found it they would get in trouble," she said. "So they would have barrels out in granaries."

"You read those stories, though, when people would be caught," she said.

Neither Erickson nor her parents ever resorted to this, however.

"We played by the rules," she said. "That's what most people did."

"Housewives would save on the sugar," Erickson said. "If they could save a cup here and cup there, why, they could have something to can with in the fall."

It was a difficult period, she said.

"I remember going down to the train station, seeing (recruits) off," Erickson said. "It was a sad time. It really was. Many people were split up, with little children and every-

thing.

"When they came home there was a lot of rejoicing ... but, boy, did they ever stay away a long time," she said.



■ SCRAPBOOK

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"After watching him for a while, about all one can say is 'Poor Hess,'" Brick wrote. "He looks like a whipped dog. For the first hour all he did was sleep, with his head down on his chest. The rest of the time he spent reading a book – and never once did he show any interest in what was going on."

"Whether he didn't know or didn't care I'll never know, but to all appearances it was a little of both," Brick wrote.

These are just a few of the stories the scrapbook contains.

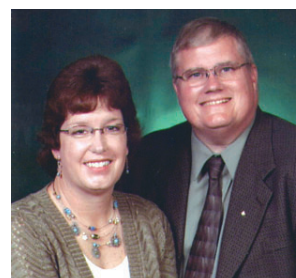
It's a real asset to the Austin Whittemore House, Erickson said.

"I thought it was a marvelous piece of information to have," she said.



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