

Once Upon a Town: The Miracle of the North Platte Canteen

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In search of "the best America there ever was," bestselling author and syndicated columnist Bob Greene finds it in a small Nebraska town few people pass through today -- a town where Greene discovers the echoes of the most touching love story imaginable: a love story between a country and its sons.

North Platte, Nebraska, is as isolated as a small town can be, a solitary outpost in the vast midwestern plains, hours from the state's urban centers of Omaha and Lincoln. But from Christmas Day 1941 to the end of World War II, a miracle happened there.

During the war, American soldiers from every city and walk of life rolled through North Platte on troop trains, en route to their ultimate destinations in Europe and the Pacific. The tiny town, wanting to offer the servicemen warmth and support, transformed its modest railroad depot into the North Platte Canteen -- a place where soldiers could enjoy coffee, music, home-cooked food, magazines, and convivial, friendly conversation during a stopover that lasted only a few minutes. It was a haven for a never-ending stream of weary, homesick military personnel that provided them with the encouragement they needed to help them through the difficult times ahead.

Every day of the year, every day of the war, the Canteen -- staffed and funded entirely by local volunteers -- was open from 5 A.M. until the last troop train of the day pulled away after midnight. Astonishingly, this remote plains community of only twelve thousand people provided welcoming words, friendship, and baskets of food and treats to more than six million GIs by the time the war ended.

In this poignant and heartwarming eyewitness history, based on interviews with North Platte residents and the GIs who once passed through, Bob Greene unearths and reveals a classic, lost-in-the-mists-of-time American story of a grateful country honoring its brave and dedicated sons.

Millions of American soldiers, many of whom had never left their hometowns before, crossed the nation by rail during the years of World War II on their way to training camps and distant theaters of battle. In a little town in Nebraska, countless thousands of them met with extraordinary hospitality--the "miracle" of veteran journalist Bob Greene's title. "The best America there ever was. Or at least, whatever might be left of it." So Greene writes of North Platte, now a quiet town along the interstate, its main street all but dead. It was a quiet town then, too, at the outbreak of the war, but still a hive of activity as its citizens gathered to provide, at their own expense, coffee, sandwiches, books, playing cards, and time to the scared young men who rolled through by the trainload, "telling them that their country cared about them." Greene's pages are full of the voices of those who were there, soldiers and townspeople alike, who took part in what amounted to small acts of heroism, given the shortages and rationing of the time. Greene, generous in his praise if rather disheartened by the modern world, against which he contrasts the past, turns in a remarkable account of the home front. It deserves the widest audience. ---Gregory McNamee

Award-winning journalist Bob Greene is the author of six New York Times bestsellers and a

frequent contributor to the New York Times Op-Ed page.

Other Books

America. Covers the beginning of U.S. history to the present, with each chapter providing practice in analyzing primary sources, identifying cause and effect, and recognizing points of view. This text was prepared in association with the history magazine American Heritage, which provides prose and illustrations to enhance the text. Secondary level.

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