The North Platte Canteen
Home-Front Hospitality in Nebraska

Eric Groce, Tina Heafner, Elizabeth Bellows, and Robin Groce

The platform outside the depot was buzzing with excitement. Family members, sweethearts, friends, and neighbors crowded together, trying to stay warm in the biting Nebraska winds that afternoon of December 17, 1941. They had gathered to say goodbye to young men who would soon arrive at the train station. On December 8, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had broken the news to the nation: America was at war. Many of the “boys” from North Platte and surrounding towns had joined Company D of the Nebraska National Guard, and it was rumored that their troop train would be passing through -- and pausing for a few minutes while the tender rail car was filled with water and the wheels of the steam locomotive were lubricated. This would be a fleeting moment when the crowd on the platform could give moral support and material comfort to their soldiers.

The news had spread by word of mouth throughout the day. The train, running a few hours late, finally arrived around 4:30 p.m. Anticipation quickly turned to disappointment as the crowd on the platform, which had grown to about 500 people, realized those aboard were not their local boys. Instead, a trainload of Kansas soldiers stared out the windows at the disheartened masses. After a few moments, someone yelled, “Well, what are we waiting for?” and began distributing the cakes, cookies, cigarettes, and magazines to soldiers through the open windows. One man, who brought $5 for his son, handed it up to a young soldier who he did not know. Every single gift was given away to perfect strangers.

A Letter to the Editor

After the train pulled away, Rae Wilson, who had hoped to see her brother, continued to think about the reception her town had given the soldiers in just a few short moments. Her musings spurred an idea: What if she and others from North Platte could give every train full of soldiers, sailors, and Marines the same warm welcome and home cooking? The very next day, December 18, The North Platte Daily Bulletin published her letter asking for help from the community. “We can do our part,” she urged her neighbors, adding that she “would be more than willing to give [her] time without charge and run this canteen” to help the soldiers “keep up their spirits.”

Up and Running

The canteen opened each day at five in the morning and continued until the last train for the day had departed, resulting in shifts that could last almost 20 hours. After North Platte’s citizens started the program, other communities soon pledged their help. A group from the neighboring town of Ogallala, about 50 miles west, was the first to volunteer. Soon thereafter, auxiliary groups, churches, ladies clubs, and other civic organizations from as far away as 200 miles devoted one day each month to provision the canteen and serve whoever arrived on the train.

Jobs at the canteen included making sandwiches,
refilling coffee urns, washing dishes, restocking magazines, cleaning, and organizing food tables in between trains. At the beginning of the war, troop movement was a well-kept secret, accessible to only essential military and transportation officials. In order to give canteen volunteers a few minutes head start in preparing for the next incoming train, Union Pacific operators would call the depot and instruct them in code: “Put the coffee pot on” signaled an approaching train. Platform girls stood between the depot and the tracks, inviting troops to debark, directing them inside with a smile and a promise of home cooking.

After entering the depot, the soldiers were often amazed at what they saw: a multitude of tables filled with plates of fried chicken, stacks of freshly prepared sandwiches, platters overflowing with doughnuts, cookies, and fruit. The menu changed daily, depending on which communities had volunteered and what food they had brought. Some food items, like meat, could be scarce during the war. After residents in Stapleton, Nebraska, participated in an annual pheasant hunt, they prepared and served pheasant sandwiches, and presented the soldiers with tail feathers to stick in their caps like Yankee Doodle. On the third Wednesday of every month, the ladies from Big Springs, Nebraska, baked pies: apple, cherry, raisin, sour cream, and more. Behind every table stood the day’s volunteers, often adorned in their Sunday dress (and an apron) offering a half pint of cold milk and asking, “Is your birthday today?” Any soldier who said “yes” was presented with a birthday cake to take with them on the ride.

**SIDEBAR: Platte—A River and a Town**
The Platte River, which measures about 310 miles in central Nebraska, is formed by the confluence of the North Platte and South Platte rivers. This broad, shallow, and muddy river flows eastward, finally spilling into the Missouri River at the Iowa border below Omaha. The name Platte (which rhymes with “hat”) is of Pawnee origin, and the old Oregon Trail followed much of the river’s length. The City of North Platte, located at that confluence, is home to one of the world’s largest rail yards. North Platte has a population of 24,733 according to the 2010 census.

**Serving Heart and Mind**
Bookshelves contained comic books, sports books, Bibles, and popular magazines such as *Life, Reader’s Digest*, and *Time*. When soldiers asked, “How much do I owe ya?” they were amazed at the reply, “It’s all free!” In one corner of the depot sat a piano and an assortment of sheet music. The lyrics of “Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition,” “Don’t Sit Under the Apple Tree,” and other popular songs filled the grand room amid sounds of clinking coffee mugs and chatter about the war. Local church choirs often performed popular hymns of that era. In a few short minutes, the train was ready to depart and the conductor issued the call, “All aboard!” Soldiers scrambled to finish a piece of pie or sign a postcard and thank their hosts before dashing out the wooden double doors and back onto the train that would take them east across the Atlantic to North Africa or Europe, or west to islands in the middle of the Pacific. Canteen workers gathered on the platform to wave and shout encouragement as the train pulled away before running back inside to restock and prepare for the next wave of soldiers.

**A Sustained Effort**
This scene was recreated day after day, for every train, for more than four years, until the troops returned from battlefields across the globe.

The volunteers’ warm welcome, albeit delivered at a frantic pace, was such a respite because many soldiers were just out of high school and had never ventured more than a few hours from home. The trains were often hot, noisy, and overcrowded. There was no air conditioning, and the windows were usually closed to keep out soot from the coal-powered engine. Soldiers shared cramped quarters with traveling families, salesmen, and other civilians. Many trains were without sleeping bunks or dining facilities, leaving soldiers to nap in their seats or the aisle and eat army-issued field rations. When the train did have a dining car, the food was often expensive, especially for a soldier making as little as $21 a month.

**The Joy of Giving**
Many canteens operated in urban areas and received substantial media attention and funding, including the Hollywood Canteen; the Stage Door Canteen in New York City; and others in Denver, Atlanta, and Houston. Conversely, a multitude of community-based Canteens, relying solely on local donations of food and cash, fed and entertained troops for a few minutes in rural areas such as Connellsville, Pennsylvania; Dennison, Ohio; and North Platte.

Looking back on this era, we can see that canteens were an example of women assuming new positions of leadership and responsibility in response to the demands of war. For example, women certainly displayed leadership throughout the life of the North Platte Canteen. Rae Wilson’s letter to the editor inspired a “home front campaign” that was subsequently planned, operated, and sustained almost entirely by women.
Although other canteens garnered more notoriety in the press, the North Platte Canteen holds a special place in American history for several reasons. First, the entire operation was conducted using donations. Not one dollar was accepted from the city, county, state, or national treasuries, although President Roosevelt did personally contribute $5 after hearing about the program. All positions, including platform girls, kitchen help, bookkeepers, dishwashers, and board members worked strictly on a volunteer basis.

Second, many communities came together to make it happen. After initial donations were received from local grocers and vendors, supplies and cash began to dwindle in North Platte due to the overwhelming demand of the operation, placing the future of the canteen in jeopardy. But then donations began to arrive from across America, mostly a few dollars at a time. Volunteers representing more than 125 communities in Nebraska, Colorado, and Kansas traveled to North Platte on their dedicated day to serve the men and women riding the rails on their way to war.

Third, maybe the most impressive characteristic of the North Patte Canteen was the willingness of workers to serve all personnel without regard to race or military rank. In an era when African-Americans still faced a staunchly segregated nation with Jim Crow laws, the canteen operated without racial discrimination. In short, troops from all branches of the service, all ranks (enlisted soldiers and officers), and all ethnicities were welcomed. Soldiers from other Allied countries (English, French, Russian, Dutch, etc.) were also welcome at this genuine American heartland reception if they passed through this station.

Like other canteens across America, the North Platte Canteen required substantial labor and personal sacrifices by individuals, primarily women. The volunteers transformed a routine maintenance stop into an oasis for the troops. Yes, there were cookies and brief conversations, but there was something much deeper. The North Platte Canteen

**ONLINE RESOURCES**

“The Canteen Spirit” (PBS, 2006). This 60-minute video can be purchased at www.pbs.org; excerpts available at netnebraska.org/basic-page/television/canteen-spirit-0.


volunteers let the soldiers and sailors know that the folks back at the “home front” held them in their hearts.

The authors would like to acknowledge Jim Griffin, Curator, Lincoln County Historical Museum; Kaycee Anderson, North Platte Public Library; and Patricia LaBounty, Union Pacific Railroad Museum, Council Bluffs, Iowa

**FURTHER READING**


Lesson Plan: The North Platte Canteen, 1941

Grade Level: Grades 5–9

Time Required: Two 50-minute classes

Materials: Handouts that follow. Optional: viewing a free, online video.

Standards: A list of related Common Core Literacy; NCSS Social Studies; and C3 Framework standards is available from the first author.

Learning Objectives: Students will analyze and make inferences about historical documents. They will discuss and write about civic action, how and why it happens, and what sustains it.

Big Ideas/Ideas for Inquiry
How does civic action begin? Why does war sometimes bring out the best (not just the worst) in human beings? What issues or problems bring people together to take action? How are civic actions sustained “over a long haul?” How, and for whom, did rights and responsibilities change during World War II?

Procedures
1. Invite students to make guesses about what’s happening in the photo of food being served, on Handout A. What evidence in the photo supports their inferences? Students discuss their observations and write down their inferences. (Day 1–10 minutes)

2. Read aloud (or have students read) the previous article and/or students can view a short video about the North Platte, Nebraska, Canteen. (See videos listed in Online Resources, page 5) How close were students’ guesses in Step 1 above to the facts? (15 minutes)

3. Students individually read Rae Wilson’s letter to the editor and complete Handout B. Remark on how a community project began with one woman’s letter. (15 minutes)

4. Students gather into small groups to examine the photo with the piano, and complete work on Handout C. (Day 2–15 minutes) How is morale sustained in trying times?

5. Student groups examine the list of provisions on Handout D and analyze this hand-written document using Handout E. What can we learn from a list of food items? (20 minutes)

6. On Handout F, students can discover the ledger entry for President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s $5.00 donation to the Canteen, and then gather insights from the other meticulous entries on that page.

7. Closing whole-class discussion. How does this historical example touch upon the big ideas, above? Have students witnessed or joined a volunteer effort? (15 minutes)

Assessment
Students’ written work on the handouts, and their participation in class and group discussions, can be used as measures of student learning. See also “Essay,” below.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Essay: Students can use the RAFT writing strategy (Role, Audience, Format, and Topic) to draft a letter to the women and volunteers of North Platte Canteen, thanking them for their service at the depot. Or they could write to one of the troops shown in a photo as if it was that very day, thanking him or her for military service and sending well wishes as this young person (in the photo) goes off to war.

Oral History Project: The last item on Handout A asks students to think of a question that they would like to ask someone in the photo, if that were possible. At this moment in 2014, in some communities, it is still possible for students to find and interview men and women who served in the military or on the home front during Word War II. Those people would now be in their nineties or older. Or perhaps interviewees who are now in their seventies could share memories of childhood as it was in 1941. Search on “oral history lesson” for how-to guidelines at www.oralestory.org or www.pbs.org/independentlens or www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/lessons/using-history/procedure.html.
ANALYZING A PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENT

A Photograph: Food Being Served

Observations
Circle four details in the photograph that might be clues about when and where it was taken, and what might be happening. Explain your choices. Why did you draw circles in these places?

Inferences
Make a guess about what is happening, and write it down. Justify your guess. What can you infer from the details that you circled? You may describe other bits of evidence as you explain your inference.

Questions/Inquiry
Your teacher will describe what is happening in the photo. Afterwards, think of a question about the situation that you would like to ask. Write down your question. Imagine that you could travel back in time. To whom, in the photo, would you like to pose your question? Draw a square frame around that person’s face.

This handout is based on a National Archives resource at www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets. Photo courtesy of Lincoln County Historical Museum
ANALYZING A PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENT

A Letter to the Editor

Published in The North Platte Daily Bulletin on December 18, 1941.

Use the back of this sheet of paper to write your answers.

1. What had President FDR announced ten days before this letter was published?
2. Where is North Platte?
3. Who was the author of this letter?
4. What was the author’s role or connection to the topic?
5. Who was the intended audience?
6. Why do you think this document was written?
7. What evidence in the document helps you know why it was written? Quote from the document.
8. List two things the document tells you about life in the United States at that time.
Observations
Circle three details in the photograph that might be clues about what is happening at this moment in the Canteen. Explain your choices. Why did you draw circles in these places?

Inferences
Make some guesses about what people in the photo are talking about and how they are feeling. Write down your guesses.

Questions/Inquiry
Write about one of these questions. Share what you have written with your study group.

a. Why were music and conversation part of the Canteen? Why not just provide snacks, clean rest rooms—and that’s all?

b. Can you think of two situations in which your community comes together (or could come together) to provide services for those in need? Write down your thoughts. Describe what happens, or what you think could happen, when volunteers in your community host an event or provide a service.
A List of Canteen Provisions

Stackville

15 lbs. Roast Beef  27 Scrap Books
800 Bottles milk  130 Candy Bars
12 Sheet Cakes    145 Sacks Pop Corn
3 Crates Oranges  1 Pie
5 Bushels Apples  1 Huggle
200 Loaves Bread  75 Men & Women
3 5 lbs. Coffee   84 Cases
   8 qts. Salad Dressing
27 Dog Cookies    
72 Dog Camp Cakes
37 Birthday Cakes
30 dog boughnuts
13 qts. Pickles
10 qts Cream
88 dog Hard Bailed Eggs
78 Packages Cigarettes
10 decks Playing Cards
6 lbs. Butter
30 Tea Towels
35 @ mogul
23 Blocks
ANALYZING A PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENT

One Day’s Canteen Provisions

The document is hand-written list of provisions needed for one day at the canteen.¹

1. What does the word “Stockville” mean at the top of the page? How can you verify your answer?

2. Try to read the list aloud with your study group. Take turns reading items down the list. Draw a circle around any item that you cannot decipher (figure out), and ask your teacher to explain it later during this period. For example, “350 mag” is short for “350 magazines.”

3. Families might have donated food that was grown on their own farm. Some items, however, like coffee beans, which are a tropical crop, had to be purchased. Underline items that might have been home grown on a Nebraska farm. It’s okay to guess.

4. What do you think “$151.00” might mean?

5. Why did the volunteers give away things to entertain soldiers’ minds? Place a capital letter R after any recreational item. (For example, magazines.)

6. One item on the list reads, “73 Packages Cigarettes.”² Some cigarette companies gave away free cigarettes to soldiers, knowing that many young men would “get hooked on smoking.” In 1941, scientists had yet to discover all the dangers of smoking tobacco.* Ask your parents whether they had any toy, or played any game, that is banned today because it caused problems once people started using it.

Notes
1. The item “73 Packages Cigarettes” on this list could spark a useful discussion. See the article “Is This Candy an Advertisement for Cigarettes? A Media Literacy Activity,” Middle Level Learning 38 (May/June 2010). www.socialstudies.org/publications/archives.
2. Document courtesy of Lincoln County Historical Museum.
Can you find President Franklin Delano Roosevelt personal donation on this ledger of 1941? The line reads, “President Roosevelt’s secretary] $5.00.” Look in the first column.

The volunteer managers of the North Platte Canteen made a record of every donation and every expense. Now look closely at the other entries. One by one, they tell a story about the Canteen, the North Platte community, and our nation at that time.

For example, right above the president’s entry is an entry “Pd $1.00,” which was the weekly salary paid to the janitor. And above that is an entry for $10.00 paid to the “Gantry Market.” Citizens, churches, civic groups, and businesses made cash donations to the Canteen, which were used to buy food or supplies not already donated. The Rosedale Club, for example, donated $15 on August 20.

It’s fun to make guesses about last entry in the first column, “Sold sugar to Ardina Frazier” for 20 cents. Maybe she was baking a pie and desperately needed that cup of sugar, right then!

Who made the largest donation on these ledger? Who made the smallest? Did one person make all of these entries? (Hint: Is the handwriting all the same?)
The Green Book
Finding Safe Passage in Jim Crow America

By Steven S. Lapham and Calvin Alexander Ramsey

[After The Civil Rights Act of 1964] we began to shed the sense that we were traveling in enemy territory. My family started to feel that we, too, had a right to enjoy the freeway. —Randall Kennedy, Harvard University Professor of Law

In 1932, Victor H. Green published the first edition of a traveler’s guide “for Negro motorists.” It recommended places in New York City where African American travelers could eat, sleep, and buy gas without concern that they would be turned away due to the color of their skin. From this modest beginning, The Green Book (as it was commonly referred to) grew into a traveler’s guide that covered the United States, Canada, Mexico, and Bermuda.

A Mail Carrier’s Vision
Read a short, insightful article, “The Green Book: The Forgotten Story of One Carrier’s Legacy Helping Others Navigate Jim Crow’s Highways,” in The Postal Record, which is the journal of the National Association of Letter Carriers. The article, which is free at www.nalc.org, explains how Green’s project grew to become a successful enterprise, and how it changed over the years, 1932 to 1964. For example, Mr. Green used his contacts through a labor union for black postal workers to get information about cities and towns all over the United States. The gradual progress of racial tolerance in America is reflected in the increasing listings of friendly places noted in The Green Book through the decades.

A Teacher’s Resource
Today, The Green Book is more than just a curiosity. It can be a door that your students swing open to the 20th century as seen through the eyes of African Americans. Students can read and discuss a picture book, Ruth and the Green Book, about a black family’s trip from Chicago to Alabama to “visit Grandma.” Then they may download a free copy of the 1949 edition of The Green Book at the website “Automotive in American Life and Society,” www.autolife.umd.umich.edu. Students can turn the pages to find what hotels, restaurants, and gas stations were listed as places friendly to Negro travelers in their state (HANDOUT A).

There’s yet more fertile ground in the opening pages 1–7 of the guide (HANDOUT B). How does Mr. Green explain the purpose of his booklet, and what does he say (on page 1) about its eventual fate? What words does he, and the other writers, use to describe the problems that his handbook aims to ameliorate? Which corporations bought ad space? Use this material for class discussion and reflective writing.

An American Timeline
Last, invite students to correlate the evolution of The Green Book with major events in U.S. history in the 20th century. For example, the book has its beginning in the mind of Mr. Green as a young man living in the excitement of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance, and it ends with the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which drew the curtain on Jim Crow—and the need for a travel guide like this one. Those are the two endpoints of a timeline, parts of which could indicate the “great migration” of blacks from the South to northern industrial centers; World War II, which brings new opportunities for blacks in the military; the beginning of the interstate highway system under President Eisenhower; and major events in the civil rights movement.

With the free online copy of the 1949 Green Book in hand, you can begin a fascinating journey. Take your students along.

Notes
When Vacation Pleasures Beckon

Send for
The Green Book Vacation Guide
FOR REST—RELAXATION—RECREATION

 Tells you where hundreds of summer resorts are located—Information—Pictures

To help you decide which resort in their locality offers you the recreation you are looking for

Write today for a FREE COPY
Send 10c to cover cost of handling and mailing

VICTOR H. GREEN & CO., Publishers
200 WEST 135TH ST. ROOM 215-A
NEW YORK, N. Y.

With the introduction of this travel guide in 1936, it has been our idea to give the Negro traveler information that will keep him from running into difficulties, embarrassments and to make his trips more enjoyable.

The Jewish press has long published information about places that are restricted and there are numerous publications that give the gentle whites all kinds of information. But during these long years of discrimination, before 1936 other guides have been published for the Negro, some are still published, but the majority have gone out of business for various reasons.

In 1936 the Green Book was only a local publication for Metropolitan New York, the response for copies was so great it was turned into a national issue in 1937 to cover the United States. This guide while lacking in many respects was accepted by thousands of travelers. Through the courtesy of the United States Travel Bureau of which Mr. Chas. A. E. McDowell was the collaborator on Negro Affairs, more valuable information was secured. With the two working together, this guide contained the best ideas for the Negro traveler. Year after year it grew until 1941 “PM” one of New York’s great white newspapers found out about it. Wrote an article about the guide and praised it highly. At the present time the guide contains 80 pages and lists numerous business places, including whites which cater to the Negro trade.

There are thousands of first class business places that we don’t know about and can’t list, which would be glad to serve the traveler, but it is hard to secure listings of these places since we can’t secure enough agents to send us the information. Each year before we go to press the new information is included in the new edition.

When you are traveling please mention the Green Book, in order that they might know how you found their place of business, as they can see that you are strangers. If they haven’t heard about this guide, ask them to get in touch with us so that we might list their place.

If this guide has proved useful to you on your trips, let us know. If not, tell us also as we appreciate your criticisms and ideas in the improvement of this guide from which you benefit.

There will be a day sometime in the near future when this guide will not have to be published. That is when we as a race will have equal opportunities and privileges in the United States. It will be a great day for us to suspend this publication for then we can go wherever we please, and without embarrassment. But until that time comes we shall continue to publish this information for your convenience each year.

From the Collections of The Henry Ford

The Green Book, 1949 edition
The Green Book was established before World War II. This introduction is from the 1949 edition, a year when Americans were experiencing the social changes prodced by that global conflict. (The heading on this page reads, “Established 1936,” but Mr. Green published smaller travel guides beginning in 1932.)

African Americans feared for their safety in Jim Crow America. The focus of a travel guide is to encourage and enable travel, so the author of this introduction (Mr. Green) speaks euphemistically about the dangers. His readers know very well what he’s talking about. For example, there were six known lynchings in the United States in 1946. (law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/trials/shipp/lynchingyear.html)

The defeat of a Nazi government in Europe, and the discrediting of its racist ideology, would weaken the cause of white supremacy in the United States in the decades following the war.

The federal government helped to boost the business of domestic tourism in 1949.

Mr. Green is optimistic about the future. He has already witnessed great changes afoot in America. For example, Jackie Robinson first played for the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. Mr. Green imagines—and hopes for—the day when his guide will no longer be needed. Sometimes the success of a good cause leads to the natural end of an enterprise.

The editor is open to criticism and correction, and asks for readers to participate in his mission.

More and more white-owned businesses accept black customers.