The World War II Clippings Project: Saving the Past, One Story at a Time

SHSI (IOWA CITY): PHOTO BY KAREN HEINSELMAN

Doris Thompson was a nurse in the South Pacific during World War II. Now she volunteers on a project in Iowa City that is preserving thousands of news clippings about the war, and making them available to the public on microfilm. For each of 30 categories, the first step (above) is sorting by date.

IF YOU WANT TO WITNESS THE reach of World War II into everyday life in Iowa, pull out any microfilm roll of the World War II Clippings Project and begin winding. You'll soon be immersed in thousands of individual stories of Iowans fighting the war, on the home front and overseas.

A half-century after World War II, a small group of Iowans is rescuing thousands of Iowa stories—800,000, in fact—from enemy Time. Twice a week for the last nine years, a handful of members of the Iowa City Genealogical Society and other local volunteers have gathered to prepare fragile newspaper clippings for microfilming.

During World War II and the Korean War, the State Historical Society of Iowa in Iowa City received a steady flow of newspaper articles referencing Iowa or Iowans, clipped from more than 90 Iowa papers by the Iowa Press Clippings Bureau. Sometimes as many as 10,000 arrived in a month, labeled with date and newspaper. The clippings filled more than 18 file cabinets. Over the years, the edges of the long clippings turned brittle, the newsprint yellowed, and the ink faded.

In 1995, Char Hixon and Joni Hindman, members of the Iowa City Genealogical Society, undertook a massive project to save these war-related stories with Iowa connections. Nancy Kraft, then a preservation librarian at the State Historical Society of Iowa, established proper procedures; now at the University of Iowa Libraries, Kraft continues to check in with the volunteers. But the clippings project is sustained by the dedication and stamina of the volunteers, who have become something of a family. That's what comes of individuals working together for over 5,000 hours.

One by one, the fragile clippings are carefully unfolded, sorted by date, pasted on sheets of paper, quality checked, and then sent off for microfilming. Do the volunteers actually read each article as they trim and paste?

"At first we read a lot but when we got to the casualties, it got too sad," Hixon said.

The volunteers do skim the articles, to make sure each is in the proper category. Sometimes a volunteer reads aloud a clipping that is especially heroic or heart-wrenching, funny or astonishing.

The stories are endless. A Clear Lake soldier received General Dwight D. Eisenhower's blood in a transfusion in France. A private from Villisca was saved by a monkey in North Africa. In a Seattle shipyard, a Marshalltown woman discovered her long-lost sister working right next to her. Leo Hendrickson witnessed Nile Kinnick's plane crash. Nurse Gertrude Morrow, from Algona, died at Anzio.

One clipping reports that possibly the first African American in the war to be assigned to military intelligence, in North Africa, was Guy W. Smith of Des Moines. Another relates that Algona's John Slagle was headed back home on a ship with 500 Australian war brides. Eight-year-old Harold "Corkey" Wells of Maquoketa sent 650 of his comic books to his uncle in the navy. Another article asks whether Iowa will help resettle Europe's displaced persons. And this story seems right out of the movies: When he was sent overseas, John F. Hassebrock of Buffalo Center lost touch with his wife, a WAC corporal. On a convoy in France, he went into a farmhouse to spend the night and discovered his wife—at the exact hour of their wedding, and on their first anniversary.

The volunteers regale each other with their own World War II stories as they sort and paste. Larry McConahay used his portion of rationed sugar as a bargaining tool with his brother. Char Hixon scouted the Iowa skies for enemy planes. Mary Robertson nearly lost her job as a telephone operator for sounding the local fire alarms at the war's end. Doris Thompson battled heat and disease as a nurse in the South Pacific.

Because each category is ordered chronologically, every time the volunteers begin a new cateory, they are viewing the war all over again, from start to finish, but from a different perspective. There are 30 categories in all. Seven are already microfilmed. Hindman and Hixon are indexing the POWs microfilm (nearly 11,000 clippings and 16,000 index entries). They hope to eventually index Marriages and Women's Military Activities, but that's probably all. They acknowledge that the entire collection of 800,000 clippings is just too enormous. The sorting, pasting, and microfilming, now in its ninth year, will probably take ten more years to complete.

The volunteers agree they have learned a lot about the war and wartime news coverage, which sometimes lagged far behind the actual events. "I think newspapers do bring out the human elements, how the people endured," McConahay commented.

Thompson agrees. "Everyone ought to know what went on then."

—Ginalie Swaim and Karen Heinselman, intern

At this time, microfilm of the following categories of the World War II Clippings Project is available for use at the State Historical Library in Iowa City (402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, IA 52240, 319-335-3916).

Casualties
Women's Military Activities
Prisoners of War
Business & Labor
Public Health
Education & Training
Farming, Food Production, & Rationing
Life & Activities (1942–1943) will be available soon.

We welcome your financial donations towards microfilming. Thank you!

Have You Used Our Military Records?

Family historians and other researchers will want to check out these military records in the State Archives, State Historical Society of Iowa (600 E. Locust, Des Moines, 50319, phone 515-284-7416):

- **World War II Bonus Case Files:** Applications submitted by World War II veterans or next of kin for a military service bonus from the State of Iowa. Files include limited information on the soldier's military service and the amount of the bonus paid and to whom, and sometimes supporting documentation. More than 300,000 Iowans received a World War II bonus from the state.
- **World War II Casualty Files:** Photos and compiled service records of men and women who enlisted from Iowa and died during the war.
- **Armed Forces Grave Registration Records:** Information on veterans of the U.S. military buried in Iowa. May include genealogical information (such as date and place of birth; names of parents, spouse, and other immediate family members) and data pertaining to military service and place of burial. The earliest graves registered are those of Revolutionary War veterans buried in Iowa. To date the series contains more than 270,000 grave registrations.

—Sharon Avery, archivist

Help Us Preserve World War II History

The story of Iowa and World War II has many facets, and we need your help in preserving and documenting all aspects. The State Historical Society of Iowa is seeking three-dimensional objects, written narratives, journals, correspondence, photographs, and other documents related to the war. We are particularly interested in material related to social and political aspects of the war, such as:

- Non-military objects, documents, and photos that show how people carried out their daily lives in the midst of war.
- Items made or modified to make Iowans' lives easier during the war.
- Iowa-made products or services that contributed to the war effort.
- Material descriptive of women's entry into and experiences in the wartime workforce.
- Papers of Iowans in political office during the war and that reflect public debate and opinions about the war.
- Papers of individuals involved in pro-peace or relief efforts and that describe the work.
- Papers of individuals involved on the home front and that describe those activities in detail.
- Well-documented photos with accompanying manuscript or personal commentary.
- GI helmet, Browning automatic rifle, M1 carbine, and Thompson submachine gun.

Please note: We do NOT need ration books or tokens; uniforms; enlistment papers or other certificates; individual portraits or group unit photos, unless there is an accompanying manuscript collection; photos of soldiers in training camps and European landscapes.

Before bringing in a donation, please consult with our staff:

Photographs and documents: Becki Plunkett in Des Moines (515-281-8976) or Kevin Knoot in Iowa City (319-335-3916).

Artifacts: Jack Lukfin or Bill Johnson (515-281-8295; 515-281-5627)

—Thank you for helping us preserve Iowa history for you and your descendants.