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On the Cover: Nebraska sent 139,754 men and women to war

Back Cover: Bette and Lois Rathburn of Lincoln

# nebraska HISTORY

WINTER 1991  
Vol. 72, No. 4

**WHAT DID YOU DO IN THE WAR?**





**DIRECTOR**  
James A. Hanson

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## ON THE COVER:

Nebraska sent 139,754 men and women to war;  
3,839 of them lost their lives. (NSHS-U59-2)

## BACK COVER:

Bette (l) and Lois Rathburn of Lincoln.  
(NSHS-R234-173)

***“You can tell a story, but that’s not like being there.”***

**John Heizer**

As you read this issue of *Nebraska History*, I hope you will keep in mind what John Heizer told me as he reflected on his experiences in a war that, for Americans, began fifty years ago. His recollection is one of many included in this oral history of Nebraskans and World War II.

In preparation for a major exhibition on Nebraska during World War II, the Nebraska State Historical Society’s Research Division initiated an oral history project. The goal was to supplement the Society’s sizeable holdings of traditional historical materials. Press releases announcing the project were sent to all Nebraska newspapers, and a brochure was distributed to all Society members, all Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion posts in the state, several senior citizens’ centers, and many individuals. People expressing an interest in being interviewed were asked to complete a preliminary questionnaire. I originally developed three questionnaires: military, civilian, and youth. Later I devised more specific questionnaires targeted to certain groups, including women in military service, Americans of Japanese descent, and farmers.

I evaluated each questionnaire and selected a limited number of people to interview. The decision as to who was to be interviewed was somewhat subjective. I attempted to gather a cross section of different wartime experiences and avoid redundancy. I considered how thoroughly each questionnaire had been completed to help predict how an individual would respond during the interview. Location was never a factor in the selection process. I traveled all over the state in order to record Nebraskans’ wartime experiences

from many different viewpoints. Over 300 persons completed questionnaires and approximately 100 were interviewed.

All of the quotes are excerpts from interviews conducted between October 1988 and February 1991 or from questionnaires received. Most of the interviews took place in the homes of the interviewees. People felt more comfortable in familiar surroundings, and sometimes they would run up to the attic to retrieve photographs and other memorabilia to show me. I'll never forget the four-leaf clover that Clarence Mitchell, Jr. carried on all of his bombing missions and still carries in his wallet today, or George Fritton's rosary, which had fallen to pieces from his having held it so tightly throughout the war years. Often other family members and even family pets gathered around the tape recorder to listen. (Future researchers who listen to Mitchell Kumagai's interview will find that it is full of my sneezing and wheezing, because one of his cats decided that my lap made the perfect place to observe the proceedings.)

What surprised me most during this project was my informants' admission that they were telling me things they had never revealed to anyone, not even to their spouses, in fifty years. When they returned home they preferred to put the war behind them and get on with finishing college or starting a career. Apparently no one ever took the time to sit down with them and ask what they did during those years and how the war affected their lives.

World War II has casually been called "the good war" for so many years that I was surprised by the number of people who told me they still have nightmares and other forms of post-traumatic stress related to their wartime experiences. These revelations were sometimes

painful, and more than one tear was shed while remembering. There were also tears of happiness and lots of laughter. Marialyse Hager Knobel's story about the prostitute and the nearby air base is one which comes to mind, along with the hilarity resulting from one of my "dumber" questions, when I asked Robert Osborn what he and his wife did when he returned home. (I meant where did they live, etc. Really.)

I will never be able to express my thanks adequately for the warmth shown me by the people I interviewed, and for all the wonderful meals I was fed along the way. I have kept in touch with many of these men and women, who have continued to encourage me and keep me posted on their own adventures.

Conducting the interviews was just the beginning. Each interview was then transcribed according to guidelines developed in the Research Division. A draft of the transcript was sent to each interviewee for review. A final draft was mailed to each person. All of the interviews and transcripts are available for use in the Historical Society's archives.

The brief glimpses offered here are vignettes from each person's experiences. Each interview lasted approximately an hour. Some were much longer — up to three hours. As John Heizer pointed out, the stories cannot take the place of actual experiences, nor can they replace a traditional historical analysis of the war's effects. Taken together, however, they capture a feeling of those tumultuous years of change for Nebraska and her citizens.

I have divided this issue into sections based on the subjects discussed in the interviews. Sections which cover several topics, such as the home front, are accompanied by sidebars which offer more background. Each person quoted is iden-

tified by name, hometown or place of residence at the beginning of the war, occupation, branch of service, and the theater in which he or she served. Additional information appears in the Index of Interviewees.

Not everyone who was interviewed is represented in this volume. Nevertheless, each of them contributed significantly to my understanding of this period of our history and I am grateful for their generosity and cooperation.



Lori Cox  
Research Historian

*Courtesy of Lincoln Journal-Star  
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