

# Home Front Experience

Elta Woodard

Madison, SD

## World War II

If I had been born a male child and would have planned to graduate from Elkton High School in 1943, I'm sure I would have found myself in the service of my country instead. In 1941, when our country was hit at Pearl Harbor, my class was in our sophomore year and by the time our class graduated there were only two boys left in our class. The others had enlisted and gone to war. Our last two male graduates left soon afterward in the draft. In May of 1943, just after graduation, I took the Chicago Northwestern passenger train, that stopped daily in Elkton, and rode to Rapid City, S. D. to attend business college there. I had never been in Rapid City before and had no idea just exactly what to do after I got there. I stayed at the YWCA until I could get a room to rent and I ate meals at a boarding house and attended class at the new National School of Business. I guess I was most surprised at the busy downtown where the streets and stores were crowded with hundreds of GIs, my age, in uniforms of the Air Force. In those days, though, it was called Air Corps. I never enjoyed so much male company in my life! Our secretarial school was an all girl school in that time of war, with mostly older female teachers, as well. The School of Mines had some deferred male students but, except for a few men attending college, there were just airmen of all ranks walking the streets. There were very few cars and only buses running to and from the air base there.

After a couple weeks, the Masonic Lodge put out notices asking for girls to volunteer as hostesses at their dances in their lodge building, to dance with the soldiers who came for their free hospitality nights. Of course, that meant me, who could dance all night, every night, if I had the chance. There came the best dancers I had ever dreamed about and the music was great. Rapid City also had regular Friday night dances, just like what I was used to in Elkton; until the last year when, as the song went in 1943, "They're either too young or too old".

So, besides business college classes in the daytime, there was also dancing a couple nights a week. Yes, there was dating, too, but the same guys weren't very long in Rapid City before they were sent off in their planes to other places. Twice during my time in Rapid City I was awakened with bomber crashes. Once I was awakened and looked out to a sky lighted up with red flashes but no noise!. The next day's newspaper never told of another crash at the air port radius. Crashes were never mentioned in the newspapers there. The planes in May 1943 at the air base in Rapid were B14s and then later that year the big B17s came. The B24s came later to the South Dakota air base. I never learned the luck or the fate of any of the airmen I knew for it was hello and goodbye. They were such nice young men and I know they were just like my former classmates from Elkton. *Most of the guys I met in Rapid City were from the South or the East, acclimating the guys to our hard South Dakota winters.* I judged by the dancers I met. The best dancers were from the East, New Jersey and New York, with all the latest steps. Our music ranged from slow, sad songs like I'll Be Seeing You and I'll Be Home For Christmas, to the gay songs of Don't Sit Under The Apple Tree With Anyone Else But Me". Then the popular song of that year was the Ink Spots' Paper Doll, an old song revised. Other songs were Kiss Me Once and Kiss Me Twice, I'll Walk Alone, Praise The Lord and Pass the Ammunition, I Left My Heart at a Stage Door Canteen., and American Patrol.

There were songs about England, for most of our Air Force fighting in Europe, was based in the British Isles. A couple songs about England, that I remember, were My Sister and I, and White Cliffs of Dover. Everyone was loudly singing Beer Barrel Polka and Deep in the Heart of Texas. Later that year came the Marsedoats song and The Three Little Fishes.

I was only in Rapid City for a six months secretarial course so I left Rapid before Christmas. In January the following year I worked in Minneapolis for a few months for the Firestone Company. Rather interesting, since tires were all rationed at that time and what were available were very dear. Then I moved on to Omaha where I worked in the personal office of the Kellogg plant there for a couple years.

When the war ended in 1945. The servicemen from Omaha were coming home and some were applying for work at the Kellogg Plant. Some of them had worked there before being called into service, so their jobs at the plant were waiting for them as promised. Others came into our personnel office looking for jobs. Most had left for service as young boys and came back veterans, and many of them were maimed, or burned, and unsure when their malaria was going to crop up again. Kellogg hired most returning veterans for their plant was in need of men. Before the war ended the plant was working with many older men and many women. Many of those women were resigning as their husbands came home to stay. In 1946 I spent my vacation in Elkton at my home and met again a returned veteran I knew in my high school days. He had started college in Brookings at SDSU on his GI bill. I returned to Omaha for a couple months and then gave up my job there and came back to South Dakota and married in December.

That GI bill my husband had "earned", put him through school and through the first years of our marriage. When our daughter was born, she, too, lived on his GI bill for well over a year before he graduated. To have GIs in college must have been a shock to the instructors. Most of them still wore clothes of their service days, smoked in class, and, I understand, just didn't take some orders very well. On the other hand, they took their college very seriously and knew it was their future at stake. So many men, and women, are to this day thankful for that learning that made the world of that time such an educated society.