Troop Trains and Pheasant Sandwiches: The Aberdeen Canteen in World War II

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Editors’ Note: Americans did not know it then, but 1943 would mark the turning of Allied fortunes in World War II. In that year, British and American forces defeated the Germans in North Africa, invaded Italy, and opened the offensive against the Japanese in the Pacific. Here at home, civilians endured austerity measures like the rationing of meat, butter, sugar, coffee, canned goods, and gasoline in order to free up resources for the war effort. Through tin-can, waste-paper, and scrap-metal collections, clothing drives, and war-bond rallies, they not only contributed matériel to the war effort but boosted morale on the home front, too.

Among the most successful of these cooperative efforts was the canteen, which offered free, wholesome entertainment for service people away from home. The canteen in Aberdeen, South Dakota, which opened in 1943 and specialized in free pheasant sandwiches, put the town “on the map” in the hearts and minds of thousands of service men and women traveling across the continent on the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad. A joint effort of the United Services Organization (USO), the Red Cross, the Milwaukee Road, and local organizations from throughout the area, the Aberdeen canteen served several hundred thousand people before it closed in 1946. Open seven days a week, including holidays, the operation was staffed entirely by volunteers whose days began at eight o’clock in the morning and lasted until midnight or later.
Helen J. Bergh worked as a volunteer at the Aberdeen canteen every fourth Sunday from March 1945 through March 1946, when it closed. While most volunteers were housewives between the ages of twenty-five and forty, Bergh's group comprised businesswomen and teachers who worked outside the home during the week and volunteered at the canteen on Sundays. Bergh herself taught at the one-room Brookside School in rural Brown County. Presented here is her history of the canteen and her personal reminiscence of working there during World War II.

Early in 1943, Aberdeen's mayor, O. M. Tiffany, called a meeting of civic leaders and the heads of local organizations to discuss what the Aberdeen community could do on the home front to help the war effort. Someone suggested starting a canteen, of which there were several in the United States. The idea met with a great deal of enthusiasm. The first question was where to have it. The obvious place was the lobby of the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul depot, because the troop trains would be running on the Milwaukee rail lines.

A committee contacted Milwaukee officials, who not only consented to let us use a small four-by-thirty-foot area along the north wall of the lobby but also installed hot and cold running water. Someone else contributed two long, tall counters. I have since looked at that small space and wondered how fifteen people could crowd into it and work, but we were young and slender, and so we managed. About one hundred fifty feet from the depot was the Milwaukee freight office building, whose second floor housed large rooms where the Milwaukee Road Women's Club met. Here there were long tables and a kitchen with a sink and refrigerator. We could use this space for food preparation. Agreeing to sponsor the canteen were the Brown County Red Cross with Harvey Jewett as chairman, the Brown County USO with Frank Guhin as chairman, the Women's Auxiliary of the American Legion, and the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. The Red Cross and USO together contributed one thousand dollars to get the canteen started. After the first month, the operation became self-sustaining.

The canteen's publicity committee called for volunteers, of which about three hundred were needed each month. There was also a steering and planning committee, composed of Mrs. Robert Owens, whose husband was a Milwaukee Road representative; Mrs. Max Stokes, wife of an Aberdeen attorney; Mrs. Bessie Joyner, Brown County home extension agent; and Miss Clara Flemington, a home
Aberdeen Canteen 135

economics teacher at Aberdeen High School. Their job was to train fifteen or twenty women to act as supervisors. Miss Flemington taught them how to order and prepare food for large numbers of people. When all was ready, the canteen opened on 19 August 1943. By the end of that year, one hundred fifty thousand people had been fed at a cost of approximately five hundred sixty dollars per month.

The canteen had a good-sized grocery order every day. It included sixty quarts of milk, three quarts of cream, eight pounds of coffee, many pounds of minced ham, fifteen dozen eggs, fifty to seventy-five loaves of bread, one gallon of salad dressing, butter (which was severely rationed), and waxed paper for wrapping sandwiches. The Coca-Cola Company and other bottling companies donated soft
drinks. The local laundry washed dishtowels. Various quantities of cookies, doughnuts, and fruit were donated. People also cooked chickens, ground the meat, and brought it in.

Just before Christmas in 1943, some farmers delivered a number of pheasants, which the supervisor cooked, ground, and made into sandwiches. The pheasant sandwiches became so popular that people pooled their gasoline coupons and shotgun shells and organized drives to hunt the birds. All together, hunters donated several thousand pheasants. Because there were no home freezers and one small refrigerator could not accommodate the birds, the K. D. Locker Company processed, froze, and stored them for twenty cents apiece. Every day a supervisor would get ten or twelve, take them home, and prepare them for the next day. These pheasant sandwiches, served up with hospitality, made the Aberdeen canteen famous.1

The actual sandwich preparation was done in the meeting rooms of the Milwaukee Road Women's Club. Supervisors wore blue uniforms, while the other workers wore white uniforms with USO arm bands. We arrived by eight o'clock in the morning and were met by the supervisor, who had an inventory sheet of the food left from the previous day and a chart listing all the jobs and the people responsible. Vegetables had to be cleaned and ground—not with a modern food processor but with a small, hand-turned food chopper. Eggs had to be boiled, peeled, and ground, and the huge hams had to be skinned, cut up, and ground. In addition, the butter, for which someone had given up ration points, had to be “extended.” One worker, using a small electric mixer, beat the butter with white margarine (colored margarine was not yet legal) and condensed milk to make a spread for the sandwiches.2

1. Between 1914 and 1917, the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks stocked the state with seven thousand exotic Chinese ring-necked pheasants, which quickly became the mainstay of its sport-hunting industry. At their peak in the mid-1940s, the birds' numbers are estimated to have reached between thirty and fifty million. In 1943, the same year the state legislature declared the pheasant South Dakota's state bird, hunters harvested over three million roosters. South Dakota, Department of Game, Fish and Parks, Annual Report, 1958-1959 (1959), pp. 35-37, 59 and Pheasant Ups & Downs, by Robert B. Dahlgren and Raymond L. Linder (1967), p. 15.

2. The 1902 Grout Tax, passed at the urging of dairy farmers who feared a loss in their profits, placed high federal excise taxes on the butter-substitute oleomargarine. As margarine became more popular in the 1930s and 1940s (when the ration points saved by not buying butter could be used to purchase meat), pressure mounted to repeal the dairymen's law, which happened after World War II. For some time afterward, however, the coloring of commercial margarine to make it look like butter was not allowed. John T. Schiebecker, Whereby We Thrive: A History of American Farming, 1607-1972 (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1975), pp. 274-76.
and egg mixture—with the pheasant and minced ham kept separate—was then mixed with the salad dressing. Our group gave out minced-ham sandwiches unless the boys specifically asked for pheasant. After all, one kind tasted as good as the other, and a dozen pheasants would not feed a thousand men.

To make the sandwiches, we formed two assembly lines of several girls on both sides of a long table on which loaves of bread had been arranged down the center. Each loaf had twenty slices, so it would make ten full-sized sandwiches. We laid out the bread slices facing each other. One girl walked around the table, placing a pat of butter on each slice of bread. Another girl followed with a large bowl of sandwich spread, putting a big spoonful on the other slice. Spreading the mixtures quickly, we put the slices together and slid the sandwiches down to either end of the table, where other girls wrapped them in waxed paper and packed them in bushel baskets. We had no plastic “baggies” then.

Once the sandwiches were done, the sink had to be cleaned, the garbage collected, the dishes washed, and the floor swept. Then everything, including the doughnuts, cookies, and cakes people had donated, was carried down the stairs and out across the one hundred fifty feet of parking lot to the main depot and the canteen. Two workers had already visited the depot in mid-morning to make coffee in three large commercial urns. When the coffee was done, they turned the temperature down so that the boys would be able to drink it.

With just fifteen minutes of warning before any train came, we were all at our posts. One volunteer did nothing but fill sandwich trays. Another filled glasses with milk, and someone else poured coffee. Because there were no paper or styrofoam cups, one girl washed glasses and cups as fast as they were emptied, while another rinsed and dried them. We always sent two girls out to meet the train and escort the boys in. One girl was a cute little redhead, and the other a blonde. Within a minute they would come prancing back with a fellow on each arm and the whole trainload of boys following.

The boys had only a twelve- to fifteen-minute stop, so they ate and talked fast. They could not understand how we could give away all that food and accept no pay for it. Evidently, most of them came from areas where people are not as open-handed as they are in South Dakota. We told our guests that the home folks were simply trying to help. We always had a birthday cake prepared, complete with candles, and some happy fellow would hike back to the train carrying the cake with the candles lighted. At Easter time, we provided colored eggs. In addition to the food counter at the canteen, there was an information booth where the boys could pick up
books, stationery, playing cards, games, puzzles, and magazines—all manner of items that people brought in. At Christmas, there was a lighted Christmas tree with a small gift for each soldier.

As soon as the train left, we hurried to fill more trays. In the few minutes after the warning for the next train, we filled cups and glasses. There were usually from four to six trains a day, some of them arriving well into the night. After the final one had left, we cleaned the canteen, put all the washed milk bottles into their containers, washed the coffee urns, gathered up the soggy dishtowels, and carried everything across the parking lot and back up the stairs to the clubrooms. The supervisor took inventory of all that was left, if anything. The rest of us cleaned everything, including scrubbing

While approximately three hundred volunteers a month prepared and served the sandwiches that made the Aberdeen canteen famous, countless others donated enough food and supplies to make the operation self-sustaining.
the floor, and then went home. The latest I ever worked was two o’clock on Monday morning, but I am sure there were some who worked much later.

The canteen was not strictly an Aberdeen project but was supported by a large area. Approximately thirty-five to forty small towns and communities within a seventy-five mile radius of Aberdeen contributed food, workers, and money. Some towns sponsored the activities for a whole day by bringing in all the food and volunteers. They raised money by holding dances, skating parties, auctions, raffles, and anything else that might bring in a few dollars.

The canteen closed in March 1946, after operating for two and one-half years at a cost of slightly over thirty thousand dollars. During
The Aberdeen canteen was a morale-builder for service personnel and volunteers alike. As this advertisement shows, the Milwaukee Road used the opportunity to promote both the canteen and the rail line.
the last two years, volunteers fed between seventeen thousand and twenty thousand boys each month. The Aberdeen canteen was a great morale builder for the troops who came through because it showed service men and women that people cared and were concerned. It was also a great morale builder for the home folks, who felt they were doing what they could for the war effort. Canteen workers were on duty for long periods and were physically exhausted after twelve to eighteen hours of work, but it was a good tiredness, for they believed they were doing something highly worthwhile. After all, our civilization was at stake.
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