North Platte Canteen Encyclopedia Article

North Platte Canteen

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North Platte Canteen

From December 25, 1941, until April 1, 1946, seven months after the end of World War II, the train station on Front Street in North Platte, Nebraska, was much more than a place to catch trains. The station was transformed into the North Platte Canteen. North Platte was a farming community of twelve thousand, located on the Midwestern plains and hours from the nearest urban centers. The tracks that ran through the town were a main east-west line of Union Pacific Railroad. The trains carried thousands of soldiers to ports on the East and West coasts where they would embark for war zones in Europe or the Pacific. On a freezing Christmas Day in 1941, a handful of North Platte citizens decided to offer the soldiers moving through the station a home-cooked meal and treats. The news about the food and treats spread rapidly, and more and more volunteers came forth. Soon the station was a warm, welcoming canteen where soldiers could enjoy food, magazines, and even live piano music. Canteen staff members also offered smiles, words of encouragement, and thanks to the young soldiers.

North Platte Canteen volunteers met every train that came through the station, beginning at 5 A.M. and staying until the last train passed through around midnight—and they did this every single day, from that first Christmas until a few months after the war ended (at that point, they were serving soldiers who were headed home). Groups from 125 communities in Nebraska and Colorado participated regularly in an organized schedule to staff the canteen. Farming communities donated thousands of eggs and vast quantities of milk and vegetables. Homemade cakes and cookies arrived daily. Meanwhile troop trains were constantly coming in and out of the station. Early in the war between 3,000 and 5,000 soldiers moved through North Platte on the busiest days. Toward the end of the war as many as 8,000 a day passed through on peak days. Although stops lasted only ten to fifteen minutes, the soldiers poured off the train into the canteen. Eventually 600,000 soldiers received the kindness of the North Platte Canteen.