

*The following selected quotations are taken from **Belpre, Kansas: The Story of a Small Town** by David M. Kearney. They are presented here by permission of the author to describe how World War II affected a small community in Western Kansas. Kearney skillfully gleaned these events from newspapers and other records.*

Belpre, Kansas: The Story of a Small Town **By David M. Kearney**

Chapter Nine **The 1940's: A Struggle for Survival**

--1941--

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The decade of the 1940's was to be a difficult one for Belpre and its appearance would be dramatically different at the end of this 10 year period. This would be a time when many of Belpre's old landmarks and many fine houses would be razed or moved away, just as if a mysterious force was trying to rob Belpre, day by day, of its heritage and resources.

The 'mysterious force' was the shortage of lumber during World War II and the housing shortage that developed in larger communities after the war. Houses were to be moved from small towns to cities in large numbers and good buildings were to be torn down and lumber to be taken away to Wichita and other cities for construction purposes. Belpre was to be one of the victims of that time.

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Another selective service registration was conducted in July for all youths reaching the age of 21 years.

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The nation was preparing for war and Belpre cooperated by gathering aluminum for defense purposes during July."

page 241 December 7, 1941: Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor....

Signs of war appeared virtually overnight. Rationing began for tires and shortages started to develop for gasoline and some food items. Mayor James Busenbark issued a request to Belpre citizens to stop burning waste paper since this could be recycled. The selective service began sending draft notices to young men and citizens were being urged to support the war effort by purchasing war bonds and defense stamps at a war bond drive.

The Woman's Club decided not to have a Christmas gift exchange this year but instead gave money to the Red Cross. They also sent carpet rags and stamped Christmas cards to a veteran's home.

--1942--

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With tire rationing in effect and gasoline shortages being reported, many found transportation a problem. A bus arrived at the Santa Fe Trailways depot at Graf Brothers one Sunday and it was crowded so badly that there was not even standing room left. Besides the overcrowded bus, the bus company had hired five passenger cars to follow the bus and carry the extra passengers."

Trains were also filled during this period and telephones were put into greater use. Vehicles that were on the road were asked to slow down to conserve gasoline.

A defense council was organized in Belpre in January and J.W. Busenbark was chairman. An alarm was installed in the school for air raid drills.

There was registration in March for sugar rationing and each person was limited to about a pound every two weeks. Children in grade school were buying defense stamps and Hazel Hager was collecting books for servicemen in the victory book campaign.

The county welfare department decided to grow victory gardens for the hot lunch program at the schools. According to the plan, the Belpre lunchroom would receive 2,000 quarts of fruits and vegetables.

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Mrs. J. W. Busenbark was collecting for the Red Cross war relief fund and was receiving sizable donations. The young women of the Methodist Church contributed money for food for the starving Chinese and the Belpre Farm Bureau unit sent garden seeds to Great Britain project.

The Kansas Highway Department announced that no school bus could be used for any activities except to transport students to and from school.”

In April, the opening time for school was advanced to 9:00 a.m. war time.... The Edwards County Farm Bureau began collecting junk iron for defense....

Fire broke out in a garage in back of the telephone office and it was damaged extensively. The heat melted the cable running into the switchboard so there were only a few lines which could be used. Lewis Chaney, owner, went to the War Production Board and was given a priority number for materials.

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Victory gardens were being planted in Belpre and the WPA program was being discontinued.

Quite a number of persons were issued certificates for tire tubes and retreaded tires and persons were advocating the use of wooden and steel tires because of the rubber shortage. H. N. Graf and Roy Mead were named tire inspectors for Belpre.

...many men not going into the military were being employed at defense plants...

Scrap iron was collected in a county-wide drive in November, in cooperation with the county war board. High school boys took part in the drive and helped dismantle the scrap, which totaled about 45 tons.

Gasoline rationing began with registration November 12-13. Most motorists were given coupons to purchase gas for driving only 2,880 miles a year. People became very conservative, driving slower, walking more and guarding the coupons like cash.

1943

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In January, ration coupons were needed for the purchase of coffee, typewriters, shoes, sugar and fuel oil, as well as gasoline and tires. The speed limit was reduced to 35 miles per hour and steel and silver replaced copper and nickel in the pennies and five cent pieces since the latter metals were needed for military purposes.

The grade school used money it raised in scrap iron drives to purchase defense stamps and buy library books. The school boards were told by the government that buses would have to take the most economical routes possible because of gasoline rationing.

New rules on food production and rationing were explained at a meeting February 8 and women were told later how to prepare nutritional meals despite rationing.

A total of 476 persons in Belpre Township registered for ration books and the county issued 5,380 books. Edwards County exceeded its Red Cross quota of \$2,300....
...social organizations were having patriotic programs...

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The Baptist women were busy in April with charitable causes.... (they) made sewing kits for the White Cross boxes. The Woman's Club purchased a war bond instead of having a guest day and spent time making 40 Red Cross kits.

Belpre workers were out soliciting for the April war bond drive and helped Edwards County sell \$175,000 in bonds, \$15,000 over the quota. Both the high school and grade school were awarded a medal for buying enough bonds and stamps to supply two jeeps.

The rationing office announced that vacation driving could not be permitted this summer.

A one-half inch rain came in mid-May to save part of the wheat and victory gardens.

The children sent \$10.00 to Madame Chiang Kai-shek for the orphans of China.

Weather for the wheat harvest was ideal and cutting went quickly, even though there was a shortage of workers. Some of the men working in factories took vacations so they could come and work in the fields.

Motorists were being warned by the government about obtaining gasoline illegally without ration coupons.

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The Belpre schools had difficulty finding teachers and some of the faculty had to teach several subjects.

The school lunchroom opened again in the Christian Church basement with Loretta Kearney and Elaine Johnson as cooks. It was said that the cooks did a good job of juggling ration points and turned out "miracle meals" with the meager supplies they had. They also spent considerable time canning tomatoes and apples for the lunches.

Edwards County surpassed its quota of \$300,000 by over \$18,000 in the third war bond drive and Belpre city and township did its part by buying \$24,174 in bonds....In the United War Fund drive, Belpre exceeded its quota of \$500.

Belpre Woman's Club members decided to do Red Cross sewing at all their meetings and the Methodists WSCS started sending books to men in the military.

The Belpre community sponsored a turkey supper November 16 and proceeds were used to furnish a pilot lobby at the Great Bend Air Base. Over 200 were served and over \$340 taken in. The program consisted of a talk and instrumental solos by soldiers.

Various clubs in Belpre donated several pieces of used furniture to both the Great Bend and Pratt Air Bases and baked 108 dozen cookies for the men at the bases.

A total of 454 war ration books were issued to persons at Belpre October 21-22. One of the school buses broke down and the district was having difficulty getting parts. The children were crowded into the two remaining buses until the inoperable one was repaired.

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(In November) War saving stamps were being given out as prizes at the Afternoon Bridge Club and the Woman's Club sent a relief box to Russia.

Basketball was being played in the school but there were not enough young men around to form a town team.

(At Christmas) Many of the social clubs did not have gift exchanges this year but instead donated funds to the war effort.

--1944--

Through the efforts of the Belpre community, the lobby of the Pratt Air Base was completely furnished. Some old furniture was donated and other items were purchased with monetary contributions.

Young people were also getting into action with projects. The junior high girls were painting vases to send to persons at air base hospitals. The eighth grade civics class gathered clothing, soap and money to send to the destitute people in Greece.

The fourth war loan drive got underway in January with Mrs. James Fisher as local chairman. The county quota was \$242,200 and Belpre's quota was \$20,400.

Members of the Boy Scouts gathered two tons of waste paper which was taken to Hutchinson.

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(In March) Ration tokens were put into use for certain food items.

(In May) the Fellsburg school closed....the grade school was closed because of the difficulty getting teachers.

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Because of the departure of many men in the area, women were encouraged to attend a tractor and truck driving school in Kinsley.

The fifth war loan drive began June 12 and the quota for Belpre city and township was \$31,700. Drive chairmen asked all citizens to "back the attack". A popular slogan of the bond drives was "Every dollar makes the Axis holler".

That summer, shorts became very popular with the women, perhaps because of the shortage of dress materials. Gas rationing remained tight....

An honor roll of servicemen from the area was placed in the post office and there were 73 names on it. The Selective Service was checking into deferments by men with "a fine-tooth comb". The draft boards were becoming "less choosy" as they were required to fill a quota for men and many registrants were getting I-A status.

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Ora Rankin had planned to retire last spring after serving 35 years as primary teacher, but was persuaded by the school board to continue another year because of the teacher shortage.

Lt. William Wood was killed in the war in Italy. His parents were Mr. and Mrs. J.S. Wood of Larned but they had lived in Belpre until 1942. A memorial service was held for him at the Methodist Church in October.

Mrs. James Busenbark was collecting for the National War Fund and the Boy Scouts were having a paper drive.

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Frank Breitenbach was local chairman for the sixth war loan drive. Belpre's quota was \$24,800 and the county's quota was \$211,700.

The girls glee club of Belpre High School journeyed to Pratt one day and entertained the convalescents at the Pratt Air Base with a musical program. The Junior Red Cross made 25 Christmas carol books and sent 100 Christmas cards to a veteran's hospital.

As Christmas neared, the War Production Board asked all residents not to put up any outdoor Christmas lights this year to conserve electricity.

--1945--

By February, items requiring ration coupons included meats, fats, processed foods, sugar, gasoline, fuel oil and tires. The school was having difficulty with its buses, since parts were hard to come by. One morning, town of Belpre's three buses were not working.

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...Mrs. M.M. Sweangen was chairman of the community war relief drive to help the destitute people in liberated Europe.

Peace was on everyone's mind in May as the European conflict drew to a close. A V-E (Victory in Europe) service was held at the Methodist Church and Rev. B.F. Young urged everyone to pray for an early end of the war with Japan.

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A seventh war loan drive was conducted in May with a \$250,000 quota for the county and a \$29,000 goal for Belpre. Some high school girls entertained the servicemen's club at the Pratt Air Base one day with a program.

That summer brought more tragedy to the Belpre community as residents learned that Staff Sgt. Robin Finlay, 28, was killed in Europe in the line of duty.

Some of the used 1942 automobiles were removed from rationing and this was considered a good sign that peace was coming.

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Citizens were joyous over the news that Japan had surrendered but there was no celebration held as there was at the end of World War I. There was, however, a community service held at the Methodist Church when the peace papers were signed.

It was reported in October that Captain Allen Mayhew of Belpre had died in 1942 at a Japanese prison. Community workers prepared Red Cross packages to be sent to military hospitals and Land's Grocery was the distribution place.

The board of education finally located a coach and industrial arts teacher, Paul Bridges, a veteran, and he began his duties October 1. Quite a number of servicemen were returning home from their tours of duty, many of them being away for more than three years.

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(During October) The Victory Loan drive began late in the month with a goal of \$29,000 for Belpre Township and \$209,000 for the county.

As October ended, the county rationing board was abolished.

--1946--

...Mrs. Harry Massey was instrumental in collecting 900 pieces of clothing for the destitute people in Europe.

A new dance hall opened at Belpre in the old bank building and it was the scene of some excitement on Saturday night. The jaw of the city marshal was broken in three places when he attempted to break up a fight between an ex-Marine and another man.

The school purchased a stove and some chairs from the Pratt Air Base, work was continuing on the remodeling of the new lunchroom....

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For the first time since before the war, St. Bernard's Church sponsored a picnic at the city park August 27.

Dear David,

I am sorry to hear of your health problems. I knew you had given up the SWKLS position but had no idea it was because of your health. I am sure that the Henry Laird Library and the community are missing you greatly. I always appreciated your involvement with the system. I hope you are now doing well or at least better. You are in my prayers.

I had the pleasure of reading Chapter 9 of your book today. I was looking for the name of the honky tonk that was there in the 1940's. We interviewed Marcile King for our KHC Grant, *Patchwork of Dependency: The Effects of World War II on Edwards County*. She mentioned that a high school band played there and a VanArsdale. She did not remember what it was called other than the honky tonk. I didn't find the answer in your book (although it might be the dance hall you mentioned in 1946, see attached pages). I wonder if you know what the name of it was or anything about it.

Then I thought what an asset your bits of information would be to understanding the effects of the war on the county. I sat down tonight and extracted the sentences dealing with the war. They are on the following pages. I was hoping you would allow me to post them on our website for other people to read. They would appear as typed unless you have changes.

If you have access to the Internet, I am sure you will enjoy our *Patchwork* site which is linked on our homepage: www.kinsleylibrary.info. We are about ½ done with getting the 21 transcripts back, proofread, and on the site. Some you will be particularly interested in are not there yet, but will be within a few days I hope. (Those include Ed Scheufler, Paul Scheufler, Thelma Scheufler Negley, and Marcile King). Already we have on the web short video clips and both old and current photos of all 21 interviews. It has been very interesting, if not a labor-intensive project.

Well again, I do hope you are doing better. I apologize again for not knowing sooner that you were having problems.

God Bless,