

Ostergards part of heartland effort to win World War II

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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They carted cast-iron stoves from basements.

Dismantled windmills.

Pitched tricycles, bicycles and anything else made of metal onto mountainous piles by the railroad tracks.

All in an effort to win World War II.

Mary was 12 and Jack Ostergard, 13, when—for a three-week period in August of 1942—they joined other Nebraskans, scouring their towns and countrysides for scrap metal.

Metal was needed to jump-start the nation's steel mills for the production of planes, tanks, ships and munitions.

The Ostergards and several other Nebraskans and historians are featured in a documentary film *Scrap: How the Heartland Won World War II*.

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The recently released documentary was produced by Seton Hall University and Catfish Studios in cooperation with the Douglas County Historical Society.

“I’ve never seen a time when this country pulled together every single person,” Jack said.

The national collection effort happened after Nebraskans launched their three-week drive.

Spearheaded by Omaha World-Herald publisher Henry Doorly, the campaign was turned into a contest between the state’s 93 counties to see who could collect the most metal.



Doorly’s idea, complete with war bonds as prizes, was a reaction to low morale on the home front.

Six months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, war bond sales were down, a third of Americans didn’t know what the country was fighting for and steel foundries lacked metal to build war equipment.

Doorly decided the winners would be on a per capita basis so rural counties could compete with heavily populated ones.

Not only did Doorly offer prizes, he also insured the World-Herald covered the contest. Stories about the drive appeared each day along with county collection counts.

Newspapers and radio stations across the state also publicized the event.

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Union Pacific Railroad joined the cause and offered cars for loading metal that townspeople heaped along its tracks. Burlington Northern soon followed.

The paper also published advertisements linking patriotism to metal collection and cartoons showing how the effort would destroy the Axis powers.

Mary kept a diary and scrapbooks about the metal drive and other things that happened during her growing-up years in Gothenburg.

Some of those items were used for the documentary.

For example, an advertisement shows that Gothenburg schools were “on the back of the drive.”

A photograph shows youngsters posed in front of the local Sun Theatre with a mound of scrap items.

The movie house, and others throughout the state, offered free matinees to children who donated scrap metal.

Jack remembers a pile by Gothenburg’s tracks that was as long as a football field and “very high” that he and other agriculture students sorted before it was loaded.

During the drive, competition was fierce between counties.

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Stories abounded of people stealing metal from other counties to be counted in their county.

The documentary includes a remark that the “rivalry between Gothenburg, Cozad and Lexington was strong.”

Also included is a mimeographed note Mary produced that announces the dismissal of school for a day so students could collect scrap metal.

She is also filmed talking about the time she and friend Betty (Fraiser) Miller hoisted a cast-iron stove from a neighbor’s house on 10th Street.

“We carried it out of the basement and onto the sidewalk where we moved it an inch at time over to Highway 30 and the railroad tracks,” she said.

Mary also remembers her brother and a friend carting an obsolete clothes-tagging machine from JC Penney to the pile in a coaster wagon.

Businessmen helped load the cars, she said, noting that they also closed their stores to help farmers in the fields who were short on manpower with relatives and friends fighting the war.

People also raised what they called “victory gardens” to help the war effort, Mary said, since “everything was rationed” and commercial refrigeration was not yet used on a wide scale.

The Ostergards were selected to be interviewed in the documentary after learning from a newspaper that Seton Hall University professors were soliciting stories about the scrap drive.

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They were interviewed one afternoon and continued to send the professors more information about the drive.

“They did thousands of interviews for the film,” Mary said.

Asked if such communities could come together for a similar cause today, Mary said she didn’t know.

“During the war, we saved everything—from bacon grease to shoes—but now we’re a throwaway society,” she explained. “Maybe it could happen if we all pitched in and had a common goal.”

Jack said he noticed some semblance to the patriotism the country felt during WWII after terrorists brought about 9/11.

“I’d like to think we could pull together but it’s a different time now,” he said. “Back then, I remember walking home from football practice when people were burning leaves and were out on their porches talking. We don’t make the time to do that anymore.”

Still, Mary said she sees Gothenburg’s community spirit during times like blizzards when the town opens itself to stranded travelers.

Working toward a common goal was easier during WWII, Jack said, because everyone had relatives fighting in the conflict.

“The patriotism was unbelievable,” he said.

And, Mary noted, very few people at the time had American flags.

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Interestingly, Grant County won the scrap metal contest as its residents collected 846,000 thousand pounds or 637 pounds per person.

Because the Nebraska plan worked so well, organizers were asked to share it with the nation.

Soon, a national three-week scrap drive—netting 5.3 million tons of metal—was kicked off that was eventually won by Kansas.

Nebraska finished sixth.

Jack cries foul about the national contest.

“They didn’t count what we raised during our state contest,” he said.

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