

Thomas Dieterich

106th Infantry Division

Thomas Dieterich, a WWII veteran and Tigard resident, has spent the last year sporadically dropping by the Tualatin Heritage Center. He'd enter the historic building and ask the center volunteers the same question: "When will you perform 'The North Platte Canteen' again?"

Dieterich's persistence is of no surprise to Long.

"You see one person like (Thomas Dieterich), and you'll know how important (the North Platte Canteen) is," Long said.

From December 1941 to April 1946, volunteers from 125 communities near North Platte, Neb., worked around the clock to provide military personnel traveling by train with a taste of home.

Of the 11 million men and women who served in the military during World War II, more than six million shared at least one memory — a train ride and a stop in North Platte, Neb.

Long's play, based on the real events of North Platte, Neb., is a reflection of memories pieced together through interviews with volunteer Doris Dotson Hedricks and veterans who remember the little canteen. The small depot provided some 15 minutes of home for soldiers that were traveling by train to the coasts to ship out during World War II.

"It was a stuffy ole train," recalled Dieterich of his ride to the East Coast for Army basic training in October 1943. He remembered the food — Army rations — and the cramped space produced by 1,000 men vying for elbowroom. And despite a war raging half way around the world, Dieterich, a resident of the San Francisco Bay area, wasn't nervous.

After all, Dieterich wasn't headed to war; he was headed to school. He was enrolled in the Army Specialized Training Program. He expected to undergo 13 weeks of basic training and then to head to a four-year college or university. The Army wanted to make sure it had officers to fill its ranks should the war in Europe last longer than a few years.

But with 150,000 ASTP trainees enrolled in 1943 and World War II quickly turning to a ground effort in Europe with a shortage of foot soldiers, Army officials canceled the ASTP program in early 1944. After basic training, Dieterich was shipped to Europe with the **106th Infantry Division**.

Looking back at his long train ride across the United States, Dieterich didn't realize that one of the last tastes of civilian life he would have before war would be at a train stop in North Platte, Neb., on Oct. 10, 1943.

"There wasn't much to be excited about," Dieterich, then 18, noted of the train ride. "And then all of a sudden, North Platte."

Dieterich remembers women in aprons and tables full of food. He didn't know how they did it, but the volunteers at the North Platte Canteen had enough to feed all the men on his train.

"I gathered (the food) up on my plate and ran with it," Dieterich noted.

His experience at North Platte did not last any more than 30 minutes. But 63 years later, Dieterich, now 81, calls his time at North Platte "memorable."

"Nobody that did that would ever forget about it," he said.

But despite his fond words, Dieterich noted, that he never really gave much thought to the North Platte Canteen until he heard about Long's play.

"(People) are always aware of things their fathers or their grandfathers did," Long said. "But they don't know what it means."



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