

Barton County Historical Society

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<http://bartoncountymuseum.org>

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The Village Crier

Barton County Historical Society

September 2012, Volume 20, Number 4

Museum Memos

Our historical society was suspended when life changed abruptly on Dec. 7, 1941. Many of our native sons left home, just as many other people began to arrive. The top secret Great Bend Army Air Field, operational in early 1943, doubled the city population as scores came to turn wheat fields into buildings and runways. The new Boeing B-29s, accompanied by their work crews to make final adjustments, arrived from Wichita. Young men, no older than 23, were turned into seasoned air crews headed for the far east. But some WASP ladies could only fly the planes towing practice targets in those days!

A few years ago our volunteers conducted oral history interviews about those remarkable years entitled "On The Home Front". While the important military mission was moving forward, everyone else found ways to help the war effort, it was our patriotic duty! Every available spare bedroom, basement, attic, any space at all was rented to accommodate the population explosion. Every car had a full load of friends or strangers. A designated corner in town served as pick up point for anyone who was headed for the airfield. The USO on the corner of Forest and Williams provided snacks and company for lonely young men. Families invited young airmen for Sunday dinner, and later some visitors became sons-in-law from Texas, New Jersey, or other places across the country. Women began working "outside the home" taking jobs that men had always done. Everyone used ration books, purchased war bonds and stamps, and grew victory gardens. Children gathered scrap metal and the Ladies of the GAR donated our two Civil War cannons for the cause. The remarkable thing is that nothing was remarkable. Young and old pitched in to win the war, everyone making the best effort possible.

The biennial air show is scheduled for the end of September at that former airfield, now the Great Bend Airport and Industrial Park. The runways and many of those buildings are there to remind us of our history. The B-29 Memorial Plaza, built in part with stubborn

persistence by some of those transplanted airmen, will welcome you to the event. And, some of our carefully preserved collections will be displayed.

Our summer has been busy, despite record breaking heat. The sign committee is moving forward, new displays are up or planned. Bus tours, weddings, and reunions have joined programs and meetings. Some new memorial money allows us to dream. Our faithful volunteers continue to provide hours and expertise. September schedule looks busy too! To say thank you to everyone is inadequate, but it will have to do.

Our wonderful contributors who help keep the doors open have continued their support. This period they include: Jerry and Theda Jo Wendell, Don Whelan, Dorothy Keenan, and Wallace Weber. We are so grateful for their confidence as well as their support.

Hope to see or hear from you soon and if your label says 2011, this is your last newsletter.

Beverly Komarek, Executive Director



*BARTON COURT
Housing for civilian employees east of Great Bend Army
Air Field, 1945*

Is it time to renew your membership?

Check the top line of your mailing label for a letter designation and date. If it is circled in red, your membership is now due.

S _____ \$15 Annual Individual Membership

F _____ \$25 Annual Family Membership

C _____ \$100-\$499 Contributor

X _____ \$500+ Benefactor

_____ Additional Donation

R is for Reciprocal and L is for Life members

Name _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

Calendar of Events

Sep 4 - **LABOR DAY** - Closed

Sep 10 - Board of Directors, 7:30pm

Sep 12 - Museum Committee, 1:15pm

Sep 21-23 - Great Bend Air Festival: World War II
Remembrance & POW/MIA Recognition Day

Sep 24 - Program Meeting, 7:30pm

Oct 10 - Museum Committee, 1:15pm

Oct 22 - Program Meeting, 7:30pm

Nov 7 - Museum Committee, 1:15pm

Nov 12 - Board of Directors, 7:30pm

Nov 22 - **THANKSGIVING** - Museum Closed

Nov 26 - Program Meeting, 7:30pm

Nov 28 - Museum Committee, 1:15pm (Tentative)

Dec 9 - **GHOSTS OF CHRISTMAS PAST, 1:00pm**

Dec 25 - **CHRISTMAS DAY** - Museum Closed

Dec 31 - **NEW YEAR'S EVE** - Museum Closed

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THE FIRST, BUT NOT THE LAST

Karen Neuforth, BCHS Research Coordinator

The words are simple and straightforward. The information conveyed is limited. Too much of the story is missing.

A name entered on a list:

Name: Robert E. Clarke
Inducted from: Kansas
Rank: Seaman First Class
Combat Organization: United States Navy
Death Date: 7 Dec 1941
Monument: Honolulu, Hawaii, United States
Last Known Status: Missing
U.S. Awards: Purple Heart Medal

Another name appears:

Name: John G. Mitchell
Inducted from: Kansas
Rank: Corporal
Combat Organization: Headquarters Squadron,
15th Pursuit Group
Death Date: 7 Dec 1941
Monument: Honolulu, Hawaii, United States
Last Known Status: Buried
U.S. Awards: Purple Heart Medal

And, yet another:

Name: Thomas E. Triplett
Inducted from: California
Rank: Seaman First Class
Combat Organization: United States Navy
Death Date: 7 Dec 1941
Monument: Honolulu, Hawaii, United States
Last Known Status: Missing
U.S. Awards: Purple Heart Medal

Two US Navy sailors, one US Army Air Corps member, all three of whom lost their lives on the 7th of December 1941 -- "a day that will live in infamy". All three were

young men from Barton County who would never see Kansas again. These were the first Barton County casualties of World War II and they were not the last.

Who were these young men?

Robert Eugene Clarke was listed on the 1940 census in Great Bend with his parents, George H. and Mae Clarke, and sister, Virginia. Robert, aged 18 years, was listed as a clerk in a grocery store (Star Grocery) and his father was working as a meat cutter for Great Bend Packing. In January 1941, while a senior at Great Bend High School, he enlisted in the Navy and was assigned to an anti-aircraft unit.

Thomas Edgar Triplett was born 21 June 1921 to Thomas H. and Lucy Triplett and grew up in Hoisington. He was only 20 years old on 7 December 1941. In 1940, 18-year-old Thomas gave his occupation as "Aviator/Air Craft". His father worked as a locomotive fireman for the Missouri Pacific Railroad, while his mother managed their home and Thomas' younger sister, Jane, was attending school. Although there is a memorial bearing his name in the family plot in Hoisington Cemetery, he does not rest beneath it.



USS ARIZONA, PEARL HARBOR, DECEMBER 7, 1941

Seamen Clarke and Triplett were among the 1,177 crewmen who lost their lives aboard the USS Arizona, when it was hit by a 1,760 pound, armor-piercing bomb during the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. They both remain entombed with their shipmates, forever "lost at sea". This past Memorial Day marked the 50th anniversary of the dedication of the USS Arizona Memorial, built over the wreck of this great battleship, honoring those who stand eternal watch on her decks.

John Gordon Mitchell was somewhat older than Seamen Clarke and Triplett, having been born 9 February 1904 to John N. and Clara Mitchell. In 1930, according to census records for Hoisington, he was working as a plumber with his father, John Nance Mitchell. By 1940, he was living near Chicago, where he was doing accounting for a petroleum firm. A graduate of Hoisington High School, "Red" Mitchell enlisted in the Army Air Corps for the Hawaiian Department 28 Oct 1940 at Detroit, Michigan, his civilian occupation listed as "semiskilled mechanics and repairmen, motor vehicles".



*WHEELER ARMY AIR FIELD, HONOLULU, HAWAII,
DECEMBER 7, 1941*

Late on the evening of Monday, 8 December 1941, Corporal Mitchell's parents received a telegram from Kansas Governor Payne Ratner stating, "It is with a heavy heart that I learn of the death of your son, Gordon, during the Japanese raid on Honolulu. He is the first Kansan we know through official sources has died in the service of his country during this war." Corporal Mitchell was assigned to the Headquarters of the 15th Pursuit Group, which was stationed at Wheeler Army Air Field, a primary target and site of the first attack on December 7, 1941.



Prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor itself, the Japanese attacked Wheeler Field to prevent the large number of aircraft assigned there from becoming airborne. During the attack there, thirty-three were killed and seventy-five wounded. Corporal Mitchell is buried at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific at Honolulu.

These three men were the first, but not the last.

In preparation for this year's POW/MIA Recognition Day and the World War II Remembrance theme of the Great Bend Air Festival and Fly-In (September 21-23, 2012), we are compiling an honor roll of those from Barton County who gave their lives in defense of our country from the Spanish-American War to the present. Although the lists are fairly comprehensive, if you know of anyone whose name might be missing, please check with us at the museum or e-mail bchsresearch@gmail.com.