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Summer 2003

## Review of *Once Upon a Town: The Miracle of the North Platte Canteen* By Bob Greene

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Peek, Charles A., "Review of *Once Upon a Town: The Miracle of the North Platte Canteen* By Bob Greene" (2003). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2409.

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*Once Upon a Town: The Miracle of the North Platte Canteen.* By Bob Greene. New York: William Morrow, 2002. 264 pp. \$24.95.

Bob Greene interweaves narratives of sojourns in North Platte, local history, and stories of the Canteen culled from interviews (often tearful, one calling him to go on record the day before surgery) with those who served there and those who were served, a distinction that in the end blurs.

The story of the Canteen itself captures folks from a hundred and twenty-five communities in Nebraska and eastern Colorado, "Some . . . you can't even find on a map, sixty years later," meeting up to 8,000 troops a day, carried on up to thirty-two trains a day, each stopping "as long as it took to put water in the steam engines," six million in all, hosted at the North Platte Canteen. It was "not something orchestrated by the government . . . not paid for with public money." More, "All the efforts . . . to feed every soldier who passed through on the trains . . . [were] done against the backdrop of national rationing," yet volunteers "never missed a day, never missed a train." Greene rightly calls it a "miracle."

Searching about North Platte, Greene writes from the point of view of a newer America that leaves us feeling bereft of "a country that many of us seem always to be searching for." He had set out to find "The best America there ever was. Or at least whatever might be left of it." Accomplishing his quest for "what it is that we want the country to become" leads to him thinking that "maybe the answer is one we already had, but somehow threw away."

His current North Platte is the mall, Wal-Mart, "the downtown of our parents' parents," a soft ball game (at which a ticket taker turns out to be the same fellow who appears playing the piano in one of the pictures of the Canteen scene), heat and distance, a Chamber of Commerce party with a nautical theme ("Nowhere in the United States farther removed . . . from either ocean . . ."), and a bikini contest at a local bar for which, despite the

offer of \$1,500, "No one came forward. There were no entrants."

In an air age that passes over North Platte, Greene had arrived on I-80, Ike's highway, to search out the story of those who had arrived by train, passing across the old Pony Express route, on their way to the Pacific or to Europe, where Ike was waiting for them. When he first arrived, the news was full of local brutalities that made "Nebraska . . . sound deflatingly like the rest of the continental United States." It sounded much like the old North Platte: "Very rough and wide open," with its brothels, "bodies . . . in the corn-fields," a town in which, "The people who ran the town appreciated their freedom—the freedom to be corrupt." The Canteen, then, was a moment in the life of this small area of the Great Plains that distinguished it from its neighbors and the country at large.

The heart of Greene's story is the sacrifice of operating the Canteen and the impact it made.

Many there had little themselves; one describes volunteering there when "we had no Christmas tree—we really had nothing . . . I slept on a couch in the living room of [a] rooming house." Some had sons in the military; working there "was like a healing thing for them." Another received word there that her son had been killed in the war. Greene describes typical contributions, such as "Morefield . . . 25 birthday cakes, 39 1/2 dozen cup cakes, 149 dozen cookies, 87 fried chickens, 70 dozen eggs," etc. Families used honey for sweetener so the sugar could go for the Canteen. They supplemented their supply with turkey eggs.

Because the women of Tryon would "put the name and address of a girl who attended Tryon high school" into each popcorn ball made for the soldiers, soldiers often ended up with someone to write to. Some correspondents eventually married. A soldier would say to a girl collecting service patches, "You don't have the best patch," and soon one would arrive in the mail.

The Canteen became known the world over. In the Pacific or in Europe, troops would ask one another, "Have you ever been in North

Platte?" or would overhear someone saying, "I wish we had some of those sandwiches like they gave us in North Platte" (quite often pheasant sandwiches). Years later, a ham radio operator would report that at the mention of North Platte there would come a reply, "I once stepped in the Canteen." And the world became known through the Canteen: for a Shelton girl in the discovery that "There's a big world out there. It's not just Main Street"; for a soldier, that "the country was hell of a lot bigger than Manhattan island."

Who can say who gained the most: those who served or those who were served?

When Greene arrived only to find the Canteen, the railway depot, and passenger service all gone, he realized "This was going to be like looking for a ghost." Many interviews later, he found his ghost; it takes shape in *Once Upon a Town*. We believe him: "There was love there," love and "pure, simple generosity." We can imagine with him a "West-central Nebraska . . . spiritually often just a blink away from the place the pioneers first crossed."

Still, with ghosts, the moment is fleeting. It passes like the moment of Jack Manion, standing on the platform between cars, able only "to reach my hand out and shake [the] hand" of his father, standing beside the Kearney track with tears in his eyes. As Greene was taking his last look at the photos of the Canteen, he heard a jukebox playing "All we are is dust in the wind."

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