President’s Message
By John Nelson

The young men and women who answered the nation’s call over sixty years ago have seen their youth disappear, and we watch now as many of their stories pass into history. But Ken Burns and public broadcasting spent years gathering those stories and have woven them into a beautiful tribute to the efforts those young people made. The result? The PBS series “The War,” a preview of which came to our humble museum recently.

The viewing brought out many of Lake County’s veterans, including some WWII vets that shared their stories, and some that are shared in our pages.

Dale Nighbert gives us another great historical piece on what was once Madison’s top employer, and Cindy Bilka offers a fine tribute to a vet whose story has passed on for others to tell.

Read here about the Butterfly Woman and the Buffalo Wallow.

Plan on coming to the annual meeting on October 28, and please send us a line to know what you like about our newsletter. We take electronic mail and the kind you put stamps on. We’ll save some space next time for YOUR news.

LCHS President John Nelson

Note to Contributors

Remember that the LCHS and Museum receive no state or federal funds for Museum operation. All of our funding comes from city and county government and private sources. Send your membership dues, memorials, or donations to

Smith-Zimmermann Museum
221 NE 8th St.
Madison, SD 57042
Call us at 605-256-5308.
On Tuesday, September 11, the Smith-Zimmermann Heritage Museum was honored to be one of a limited number of sites chosen to show a preview screening of Ken Burns’ World War II documentary, “The War.”

Attended by almost seventy people, the half-hour preview was followed by a group discussion, both attesting to the human cost of war. As publicity from “The War” states, World War II “affected every house on every street in every town in America.” Discreet sniffles and dabbing the eyes as the lights came up for the discussion were common as many there got teary-eyed watching the short excerpt of the 16-hour mini-series. The war’s widespread effect was apparent as some veterans shared their experiences and others told stories of the home front and expressed thanks to those who served.

Four of Lake County’s World War II veterans—Tom Tabor, Delmer Dooley, Tony Schatz, and Joe Habeger—gave one-on-one interviews to South Dakota Public Broadcasting. These interviews, a part of SDPB’s “Operation: Homefront,” will be available at [http://dakotastories.org/homefront/](http://dakotastories.org/homefront/), along with audio recordings featuring other South Dakota veterans. At least four other Lake County citizens have agreed to be interviewed. South Dakota Public Broadcasting will continue to collect stories as long as there are people willing to be interviewed. To share your story, call 1-800-456-0766 or, by computer, go to [www.sdpb.org](http://www.sdpb.org) and click on “The War” photo or [The Homefront](http://www.sdpb.org) link.

The Lake County Historical Society thanks all those who attended and shared their experiences.

Photographs courtesy of Kelli Wollman.
As a sequel to the preview screening of “The War,” Stanley Cross, formerly from Howard, shared his memories of World War II and showed his memorabilia at the Museum on October 9. Cross, an artillery man, saw action in North Africa, in Italy (at places like Monte Cassino and Anzio), in France (including the Battle of the Bulge), and in Germany.

His memorabilia includes books, photographs, buttons, coins, an armband, a small flag, and a huge Riechsdienstflagge that measures six feet by ten feet. (A riechsdienstflagge was a flag flown over non-military facilities such as post offices.)

Cross’s presentation was able to communicate the humor as well as the horror and pathos in war. He helped put a human perspective on an overwhelming conflict.

Stanley Cross, here with Edith Pecks, appeared at the museum to give a presentation and show his WWII memorabilia. Below is part of the Museum's WWII collection, these from Elmer Jung.

- Out of Madison Central High School’s Class of 1943, all but one of the graduating boys served in World War II. Two of those who served were each blind in one eye.
- A letter from Sioux Falls sailor John Donald Hopper written in World War II is still timely: “The letters from ‘back there’ whether they are from his folks, kid brother, wife, sister, sweetheart, school teacher, pastor, or friends all do one main thing. They reassure the fellow that there still is a solid world some place. He sees bedlam and destruction going on and it frightens him because at times he enjoys the helping of it.”
By Dale Nighbert

Back in the early 1930s, two local brothers took a financial risk, sold their family-operated creamery, and built a small meat packing plant on the west side of Madison. During the next 38 years, this business endeavor grew, prospered, and changed names three times. Some old-timers may recall this business venture as the Rognes Brothers’ packing firm, or perhaps Roberts & Oake, but most Lake County residents remember it as the John Morrell plant.

Once upon a time, as the story goes, America entered a period of history known as the Great Depression. It proved to be a difficult time for many Americans including Lake County residents. Banks closed, businesses suffered, unemployment was high, and jobs were scarce. To make matters worse, a drought also hit the Midwest which seriously affected the livelihood of farmers.

Favorable economic reports were rare, but one announce- ment in the fall of 1931 proved to be very exciting news for local residents: Gilbert and Chris Rognes were building a meat packing plant! The Madison Daily Leader de- scribed the news as “a source of inspiration – an omen of better times.” Not only would the plant provide additional employment for area residents, but it would give financially strapped farmers a local market to sell their hogs and cattle.

The Rognes brothers leased two acres of land south of the railroad tracks on Highland Avenue and built a one-story brick and concrete building – complete with killing quarters and a modern cold storage unit. They opened their operation on January 1, 1932. In the course of the next several years, this meat packing company would become Lake County’s largest employer and biggest economic booster.

The Rognes Brothers’ packing firm began as a modest small-scale business. At its on- set, both hogs and cattle that were raised in Lake County and the surrounding region were slaughtered and dressed – butchered, split, and chilled – before being shipped out of the area. The slaughtering of beef was discontinued a few years later, and the firm focused only on slaughtering of hogs.

During its early years, the plant operated under state inspection, and the dressed pork was shipped statewide by rail and refrigerated trucks. In 1936, the Rognes firm was approved for federal inspection which allowed the butchered products to be shipped outside the state. Swift and Company, a well-known plant headquar- tered in Chicago, bought the dressed pork and had it shipped directly from Madison to Illinois by refrigerated railcars.

As the Depression and drought came to a close in the late 1930s, a higher yield of corn led to an increase of hogs raised for mar- ket. It was reported that in January 1941, the plant hit a high peak of production when it killed and dressed out an average of 225 hogs per day, thus shipping 20 carloads, or approximately 700,000 pounds, of pork.

After 10 years of operation, the packing firm had grown into a successful enterprise. The facili- ties had nearly doubled in size and employed up to 40 workers. In April 1942, the Rognes broth- ers announced their retirement and the sale of their plant to one of the nation’s larger meat proces- sors – Roberts & Oake, Inc. Headquartered in the famed Chi- cago stockyards, this 50-year-old firm was known for their canned, cured, and smoked pork.

Prior to the purchase of the Madison plant, Roberts & Oake had eliminated the slaughtering part of their meat packing busi- ness at its Chicago headquarters. They had turned their attention to the processing end. Thus, to sup- plement its Chicago production,
The purchase of the Rognes Brothers’ plant by the Chicago firm also brought some new ideas into the small community – unionization was one. In late 1942, rumors began circulating that employees were considering the idea of joining a union.

At one organizational meeting, three local businessmen were invited to give their views on unionization. One businessman asked the plant’s employees not to do anything which might disturb the tranquility of the city. He felt that any difficulties which might arise between the employer and their workers could be satisfactorily ironed out without unionization. The other two businessmen agreed.

In January 1943, charges of anti-union discrimination were filed against Roberts & Oake by the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of America. They alleged that the Madison packing firm had discharged two employees for participating in union activity – a charge that the plant denied. Union organizers also felt that the company and the Madison Chamber of Commerce “formed, interfered with, and dominated an organization of the employees, and warned and discouraged employees.

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from membership in the AFL union.”

A hearing with the National Labor Relations board lasted one week and testimony was presented from all sides involved – plant management, employees, union organizers, and members of the Chamber. On April 12, Madison’s Chamber of Commerce and Roberts & Oake were both exonerated in the charges of interference with labor unions. The board examiner also upheld the plant management’s decision in the discharge of the two workers.

A few months later, plant employees held an election to decide if a local union should be formed for “collective bargaining purposes.” The measure passed by a three to one margin – 48 votes for and 16 votes against.

Throughout the 1940s, the Madison meat packing plant continued to see a steady growth and an increase in its sales. In 1953, Elmer W. Kneip, Chicago, purchased a majority of the Roberts & Oake stock and took control of the company. Kneip made no change in policy affecting the Madison plant. By 1954, the number of workers had grown to about 100 persons with an annual payroll of $400,000.

In August 1954, Roberts & Oake announced the sale of the Madison plant to the John Morrell & Co. – one of America’s leading meat packing firms. Morrell’s history in the meat industry extended back to its first packing operations established in Ottumwa, Iowa, in 1877. In 1909, the firm bought a small plant in Sioux Falls and built it up to a size equal to the parent plant in Ottumwa. It was reported that “the Morrell Company had been termed a ‘good neighbor’ by the citizens of Sioux Falls and expressed the hope that Madison, too, will look upon the new owners as ‘good neighbors’ in a good community.”

In 1957, the John Morrell plant completed major renovations when a new addition was added. A new chill room was finished and new rails were hung and made ready for service. The kill floor also received a change-over and the rendering department was enlarged.

From 1954 to 1970, the John Morrell plant continued to slaughter, dress, and ship out a large quantity of pork. In the late 1960s, the plant was slaughtering around 900 to 1,100 hogs per day – more during the fall and winter months. The number of full-time employees had increased to 140 with up to 250 workers employed during seasonal activity.

On February 16, 1970, John Morrell employees and the Madison community received staggering news when it was announced that the hog slaughtering operation was closing. A shutdown of the plant would occur in six months! The Madison Daily Leader reported that the “John Morrell & Co. officials felt that the Madison operation could no longer be operated on an economical basis and after considerable study concluded that the consolidation of many operations with other plants was necessary.”

Some refer to that day as Madison’s “Black Monday.” The news not only hit the community hard, but the outlying small towns as well. The impact on the local economy and the effects on Main Street were uncertain.

For six months plant employees, local officials, and residents were faced with many questions as to what the consequences of the plant’s closing would do to the community. Local and state officials looked at different options in an attempt to reverse, modify, or salvage the hog operation, but to no avail. On August 15, 1970, the John Morrell plant closed – thus ending Lake County’s 38-year legacy in the meat packing business.

Plant employees who were eligible were given two options: transfer to another John Morrell plant or take a severance pay. Some employees sold their homes, moved to Sioux Falls, and began working at the plant there. Others stayed in Madison and commuted daily while a few transferred to Morrell plants out of the state. Some were more fortunate and found local employment where jobs were scarce, and others returned to full-time farming.

A buying station that gave local

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hog producers a market to sell their hogs remained open at the plant site for a number of years. Those hogs were loaded into semi trucks and shipped to the Sioux Falls plant for slaughter.

Meanwhile, local officials worked hard in the months following the plant’s closing to attract and develop new industries and businesses to the Madison area. As time went by, the “little city between the two great lakes” rebounded and moved forward with only memories remaining of Madison’s once biggest business – the local meat packing industry.

And so, the story goes.

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**Buffalo Wallow—Then and Now**

Winfred resident John Stiefvater wrote to tell about the buffalo wallow that is still visible just east of the Vermillion river near Winfred: “Go exactly 3.5 miles west of the Junius main street on Highway 34. It is located on the north side of the highway on a side hill 1/3 of the way up. It is a large boulder with ground depressed around it. Let me know your impression.”

Cindy Bilka turned up the old photo at the top, and John Nelson took the photo below on Sunday, October 14.

The buffalo may no longer wallow there, but if wallowing comes to pass again, the rock is still ready.

If you have other items of interest, old photos, or questions for our readers, please let us know.

We’re your newsletter!
By Cindy Bilka

October 5, 1943 was Wentworth native Ted Thode’s twenty-second birthday. Instead of looking forward to a special supper and birthday cake, Thode was a gunner on a B-24 Liberator bomber over Europe. He had already been on a number of successful missions. This didn’t turn out to be one of them. As Thode later said, the law of averages caught up with him.

**The Call to War**

Like millions of other young Americans, twenty-year-old Ted Thode answered his country’s call and volunteered for service on April 6, 1942. This Dakota farm boy, accustomed to hunting, proved his marksmanship and became an aerial gunner. After about fifteen months of training in Texas and Idaho, Thode joined the crew of a B-24 named “Eight Ball” in Kansas before being sent to North Africa. In Bengasi, Africa, the “Eight Ball” became part of the 376th bomb group of the 9th Air Force. Almost six weeks later came the birthday Thode and his family would never forget.

**No Way to Celebrate a Birthday**

On October 5, 1943, in the skies over Athens, Thode’s bomber was attacked by thirty-five German planes. Two crew members died instantly; Thode was injured in the legs, arms, chest, and head. When the plane caught fire and began to plummet, remaining crew members, thinking Thode dead, bailed out. Through sheer determination and strength of will, Thode pulled himself free of the flaming, plummeting bomber, parachuted to the ground, and was eventually captured by German soldiers. Thode told his cousin Wilbur Gehrels that he had been rescued by a Lebanese couple who tried to nurse him back to health but the Germans had found the plane and then found Thode. German doctors performed three operations and four transfusions, saving Thode’s life, but that is not the end of the story.

**A Family’s Roller-Coaster Ride of Emotions**

Thode’s family included his wife, the former Vernnette Stratton of Wentworth, who was serving as an Army nurse, his father, Carl Thode of Rutland, two brothers, and six sisters. First notified Thode was missing in action, his family was then told that he had been killed. Later they received word from the Red Cross that he was in a German prison hospital. A month after that, he was reported dead again. It was weeks before he got a letter home.

Ted Thode could have quoted Mark Twain, saying, “News of my death is greatly exaggerated.” He did come close to death two times, though. His own words describe it best. “Got my main artery in my leg shot in two and almost bled to death then after they operated on it once and got it together again and I was getting along well, it clogged up and busted again and I almost bled to death again and then when they did get the blood stopped, was afraid they would have to cut my leg off but I had a very good doctor and he fixed me up.”

On March 15, 1944, over five months after Thode was shot, down his father received a telegram. It said that an intercepted German broadcast

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stated, “Sergeant Theodore Thode has small splinter wounds all over the Body Bullet fracture of right wrist Superficial and flesh wounds All wounds healing cleanly except one wound on left hand and one wound on Left Lower Leg.”

Life in the Luft Stalag

After six months in a prison hospital, Thode was moved to a luft stalag (a prisoner of war camp for airmen) in eastern Prussia where he quickly adapted to the harshness of POW life. Red Cross packages were received but the Germans punched holes in canned meats, butter, and jams so contents would spoil if not eaten quickly. (This was reportedly done so the canned goods couldn’t be stockpiled for attempted escapes.)

Prisoners in the luft stalag Thode was in were forced to participate in a mock “military funeral” for a prisoner shot by the Germans. The prisoners were then made to write home and include photos as an example of the fine treatment and respect given to them. What was not easily apparent in the photographs were the armed guards scattered throughout the crowd. The guards’ job was to ensure the prisoners gave the ‘performance’ the German propagandists wanted.

Thode was also part of an escape attempt, he told his cousin Wilbur Gehrels. A tunnel had been dug but when they got to the opening during the attempt, the Germans were there with guns pointed at the attempted escapees. They could have been killed but were not.

Freed At Last

Thode spent five months in the luft stalag before becoming part of a prisoner exchange. On September 18, 1944, he boarded the Swedish liner, “Gripsholm,” a ship used for prisoner exchanges in both the European and Pacific theaters of war. Eight days later, he was back on American soil and sent to Fort George Wright in Washington for treatment. On July 9, 1945, Ted Thode, now a technical sergeant, the highest noncommissioned rank in the U.S. Army, received his discharge. His honors included the Purple Heart, the European-African-Middle Eastern Service Ribbon with one Bronze Star, the Air Medal, two Overseas Bars, and a Good Conduct Service Ribbon.

Life After the War

After his discharge, Thode, like many World War II veterans, picked up his life and didn’t talk of his experiences, but his military service made him who he was, family members say. The horrible experiences gave Thode, who had been considered a joker in school, a rare appreciation for life and the determination to live life to the fullest. Two nieces remember his boisterous, infectious laugh and his appreciation of even the small moments of life.

Ted Thode died in 1975 but his memory lives on in his loving family and now, hopefully, in the memories of those reading his story.
Not many people have the chance to see all the stages in the life of a monarch butterfly but on July 28, the Museum hosted just such an opportunity. Margaret Straley, from Sioux Falls, a master gardener, presented a program on one of her favorite subjects, monarch butterflies.

Monarch butterflies, delicate and beautiful creatures, are masterpieces of engineering, stronger in many ways than they look, but at risk at the same time because of the presence of man.

Straley brought monarch eggs, caterpillars, and chrysalises. Even better, in things that could not be timed, the audience was even able to watch as caterpillars changed into chrysalises (the cocoon stage), and chrysalises hatched.

Did you know monarch caterpillars are eating machines that can strip a milkweed plant down to bare stems in almost no time? Or that male monarch butterflies have black dots on their hind wings? It takes about two hours in sunlight for their wings to dry and for their inborn “global positioning systems” to totally activate and allow them to fly off. Most monarch butterflies live only four to five weeks but as autumn approaches, a “Methuselah generation” is born that lives seven to eight months. (In human years, this would be like someone with an average life span of 75 years having children who lived to be 525 years old!)

This longer-lived generation is the one that makes the yearly migration south. Insecticides, pesticides, and expansion of people into the monarchs’ wintering grounds is making it more and more difficult for these small creatures that weigh less than a half an ounce. Besides showing the monarchs’ stages of life, Straley discussed the importance of tagging and tracking them.

Margaret Straley’s presentation was informational and awe-inspiring. Whether a person was 2 years old or in his 80s, this subject brought wonder to each face.

Expert photography by Kelli Wollman.
The following names indicate those who have paid their 2007 memberships, new or renewed, or those from whom we have received donations since our July 2007 newsletter. * denotes new members.

Marcella Alverson  Darlene and John Basler  Thalia and Delmer Dooley  Nancy and David Gienapp  Marilou and Dave Gilbert  Jean Gladstone  Eunice and Glen Griffin  Mary and Selmer Hagen  Nancy and Richard Lerdal  Nancy and Harold Phelps  Esther and Donald Procknow  Iola and Carl Robson  Ruth Spencer  Phyllis and Gale Thayer  Doris T. & Robert A. Walker  Andy Wood

2008 membership dues have been received from:
Sharon L. Brown  Lenora Christensen  Dr. Benjamin Noid
Thank You!

If you have not sent us your membership dues for 2008, or if you have a change of address, please complete the following form and mail it to the Lake County Historical Society, Smith Zimmermann Heritage Museum, 221 NE 8th St., Madison, SD 57042. Thank you!

Name: ____________________________________ Phone: _______________

Address: __________________________________

__________________________________________

Family Membership: $10.00
Additional Contribution: ________.
The Heritage Herald is published quarterly by members of the Lake County Historical Society. The purpose of this society is to collect, document, preserve, and interpret artifacts and documents that reflect the present cultural and developmental history of the Lake County area from the mid 1800s to the present and to encourage an understanding and appreciation for the history and progress of Lake County and the contributions of the county’s residents.

If you have questions or comments, please contact our Museum’s curator, Cindy Bilka. The LCHS’s Board of Directors meets the first Tuesday of each month at the Smith-Zimmermann Heritage Museum located on the campus of Dakota State University.

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Lake County Historical Society

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Museum Hours
Tuesday-Friday 1:00-4:30