
Kansas At War

Part 3

At Ease



The European war and America's own military preparedness program, initiated months before the United States formally entered World War II, affected Kansas in a variety of ways. In addition to increased demand for agricultural products and the economic stimulus wrought by federal contracts for the production of war materials, the U.S. government spent millions of dollars expanding its existing military installations at Forts Riley and Leavenworth. By war's end, many other Kansas communities found themselves hosting thousands of servicemen and women stationed at seventeen additional training facilities located from Liberal and Garden City in the southwest to Kansas City and Olathe in the northeast.

To meet some of the needs of these trainees and to provide something of "a home away from home," various service groups, the most famous of which is the United Service Organizations (USO), opened canteens, clubs, recreation and reception centers, lounges, and other similar facilities throughout the state, nation, and eventually the world. Wichita's first USO club opened in September of 1941 "especially for the use of young defense workers, many of them without families, who have moved here recently, probably are not acquainted with many people, and who need some place to spend their leisure time." By January 1944, according to the *Kansas City Times*, forty-three USO facilities were in Kansas, "serving approximately 375,000 uniformed men and women each month."



- ★ *As one Topeka soldier gratefully expressed, "it just does a fellow a lot of good to drop in at the U.S.O. club, have a cookie, a game of ping-pong, and an hour of reading." Junction City Soldiers' Center.*



Special entertainment on "opening night" at the Soldiers' Recreation Center in Leavenworth. May 1941.

Actually, however, it was the Work Projects Administration (WPA) that initiated this type of war related activity, long before Americans were directly engaged in the hostilities. This New Deal agency launched a major War Services Project in Kansas which included adult education, recreation, war information, war production, and clerical assistance. Their recreation centers were staffed by WPA professionals and community volunteers, and "provided entertainment and a homelike atmosphere for military personnel and industrial workers." By January 1943, the agency was operating ten large recreation programs in communities throughout the state: Junction City, Leavenworth, Manhattan, Kansas City, Olathe, Lawrence, Salina, Marysville, Wichita, Parsons, and Columbus.



★ With the help of a finger-snapping, toe-tapping leader (right), young recruits try their hand at entertainment. WPA Recreation Center, Fort Leavenworth.



★ Responding to the increase of troops at Fort Riley, Junction City opened the first soldiers' center in Kansas on April 12, 1941.

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*The past
makes a wonderful
present!*

In Junction City, where planning for a recreational center began early in 1941 in response to expansion then underway at Fort Riley, a large scale war service program started eight months before Pearl Harbor. The "Soldiers' Recreation Center" opened on Easter weekend, April 12-13, 1941, soon after the first contingent of selectees arrived for basic training. Located in the basement of the municipal building, which was itself a PWA project, the Junction City center served as a model for the rest of the state.

These centers were a great success, serving the personal and recreational needs of many thousands of armed forces personnel and war industry workers. Thus, when the WPA was officially terminated in June 1943, many communities, sometimes through the local USO, continued the programs the agency had started.



★ Junction City Soldiers' Center.



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Heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis (at microphone) enjoys hosting a dance that was held for his squadron stationed at Fort Riley. Colored Recreation Center, Junction City.



★ Military posts and local communities established what purported to be comparable recreational facilities for black soldiers. Service Men's and Defense Workers Center (Colored), Kansas City, Kansas.

Despite the injustice inflicted by racial segregation in the military, a situation that was not remedied until after the war, black soldiers served their country in many different capacities, and many received their training at Kansas installations. Whether on the base or in nearby communities, separate facilities were provided for both WPA and USO centers and clubs. In Junction City, the presence of "Negro" troopers ("Buffalo Soldiers") of the Ninth and Tenth U.S. Cavalry regiments and large numbers of black trainees stationed at the Cavalry Replacement Training Center at Fort Riley "necessitated the establishment of additional facilities . . . and a splendid idly-equipped recreation building was erected." In nearby Manhattan, the "Douglas Soldier Community Center for colored soldiers" opened in September 1941 and moved into a newly constructed building on January 10, 1942. It offered a well-furnished, "commodious lounge" with fireplace and snack bar, library, social hall, various "game and writing tables," club rooms, and showers.

At white and black centers alike, one understandably popular attraction was the promise of female companionship, often provided by members of the USO's Girls Service Organization. Young women with "reliable references" were encouraged to volunteer for service as "junior hostesses" at Saturday dances, a popular event at the local center. Always well chaperoned by older female volunteers, these girls of the highest character from communities throughout the state also worked at local clubs and, on occasion, traveled to military bases for dances and other special events.



★ Luckier (and happier) than his fellow servicemen (in background), this young soldier shares a drink and a smile with an attractive young woman. Junction City Soldiers' Center.



★ Young servicemen enjoy female companionship during "opening night" at the Soldiers' Recreation Center in Leavenworth.



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Girls of "the highest character" were sometimes bussed in from surrounding communities to participate in special occasions at the soldiers' recreation centers. Colored Recreation Center, Junction City.



Kansas City's WPA provided bands, "swing" orchestras, and other entertainers for the weekly dances at Fort Leavenworth and Kansas City. Kansas City Recreation Center.

Volunteers also could be found operating USO canteens or reception centers at major railroad depots throughout the state, serving troop trains and individual servicemen and women on furlough. Topeka's Santa Fe and Union Pacific station lounges served as many as 8,000 per month; and, during their four years of operation, gave out more than 1,250,000 cookies. Whether at home, where it had several thousand centers, or abroad, where it operated about two hundred facilities in addition to the very popular "USO Camp Shows," USO efforts were universally praised.



For the duration of the war, the USO centers and their countless workers and volunteers offered "the nearest thing to home that a soldier has." Soldiers' Recreation Center, Leavenworth.

A young Topeka private stationed in Texas early in the war seems to have captured the pervasive attitude regarding the service provided by the USO and other such community-based organizations:

"The U.S.O. is the nearest thing to home that a soldier has. It furnishes recreation, entertainment and relaxation, something which is most acceptable after a fourteen-hour day and a six-day week! It isn't so much the amount or the facilities involved, as it is to know that the folks at home are behind us. It just does a fellow a lot of good to drop in at the U.S.O. Club, have a cookie, a game of ping-pong, and an hour of reading. As one of the millions in the Army, I offer thanks for the efforts of the U.S.O." [KH]