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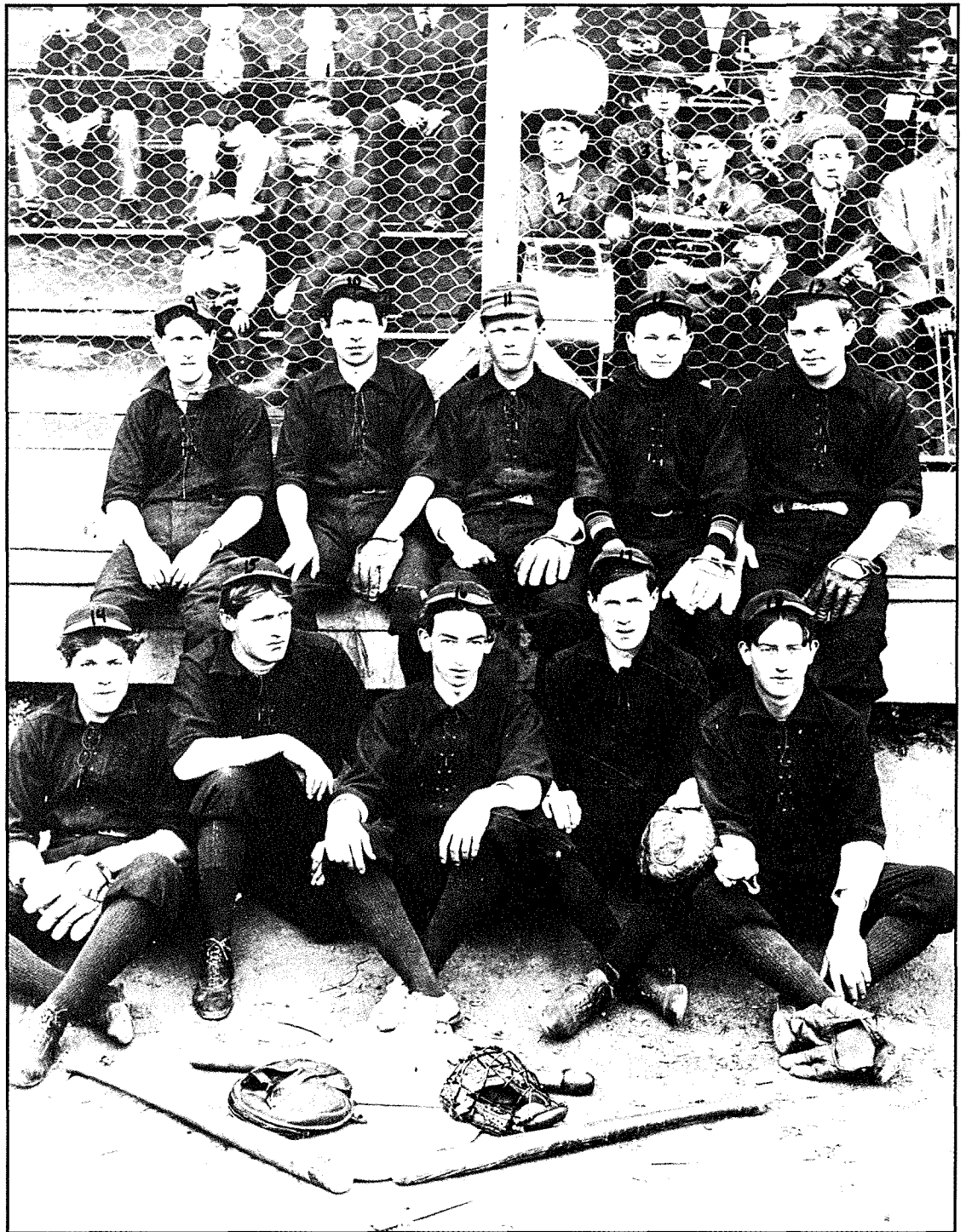
MARCH/APRIL
1991

NELSON
WAKE ISLAND POW

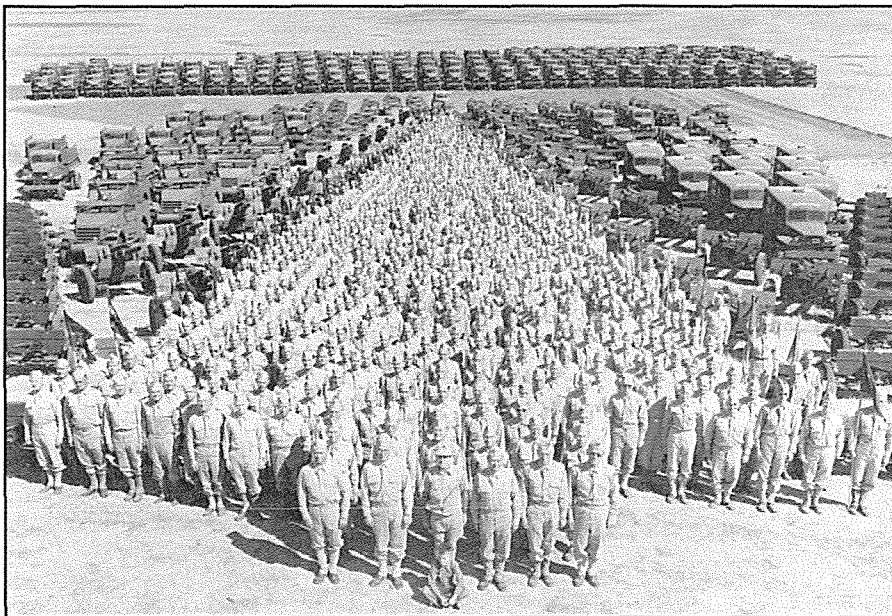
GRANTS
PASS
SLUGGER
KEN WILLIAMS

YELLOW RIBBONS
AND SERVICE
FLAGS:
PATRIOTIC
MENTOS

The
Magazine
of the
Southern
Oregon
Historical
Society



Forty-nine Years Ago



The training corps of the 91st Infantry Division arrived at Camp White and posed for a picture shortly before the division was reactivated in August 1942. The 91st later received commendation for breaching the enemy defenses at Bologna, where they "forced the surrender of the enemy's beaten, demoralized, and disorganized troops in the Alps." SOHS #13408

Anticipating involvement in the war in Europe, the War Department began a national search for sites for Army training centers in 1940. Southern Oregon developer Glen Jackson, Medford lawyer A. Evan Reames, and the Medford Chamber of Commerce successfully lobbied for a southern Oregon site. In January 1942, the War Department gave the go-ahead for building Camp White.

Construction began on the sprawling 49,225-acre training camp in February 1942 and was completed in a record ten months. Named for Maj. Gen. George A. White, adjunct general of the Oregon National Guard, the camp was composed of warehouses, barracks, service centers, mess halls, motor pools, theaters, post office, bank and sewage treatment plant. Here would train 30,000 fighting men of the 91st Infantry Division and later the 96th Infantry Division. More than 9,000 civilians found employment at the base as well.

Capt. Mel Cotton, now a resident of Jacksonville, was one of the original 91st Division training cadre. Familiar with the Rogue Valley as a young man, he was prepared to be stationed in the hot Agate Desert. However, many of his fellow cadre officers were unsuspecting. Mel told his buddies, "Come to Oregon—it's God's country." Many never forgave him for the desolate land in which they found themselves. Mel still grins when the boys give him a bad time. "Hell, I knew it was a desert!" he says.



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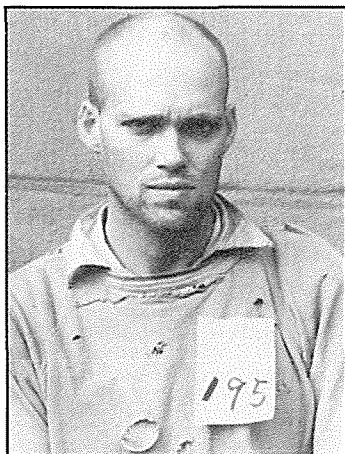
Susan Cox

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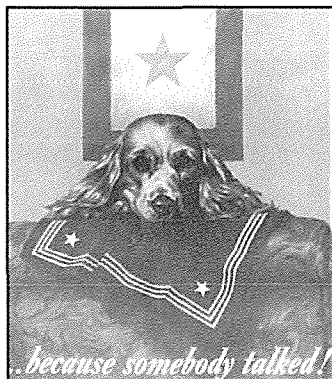
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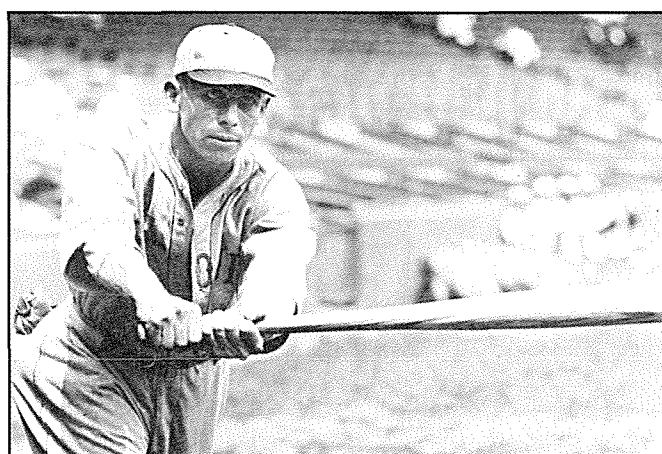
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Features

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In 1941, twenty-three-year-old Lloyd Nelson and dozens of fellow adventure-craving southern Oregonians departed for high-paying construction jobs on Wake Island. A few months later, the Japanese overran the Pacific atoll, killing or capturing American servicemen and civilians. Nelson's memories of four years in prisoner-of-war camps are moving testaments to the personal tragedy of war.

16 Stars, Bars and Ribbons *by Sue Waldron*

Today, families and friends frequently demonstrate support for loved ones serving in the military by displaying yellow ribbons or American flags. Exhibiting such mementoes is not new—earlier this century, a show of stars, bars or ribbons proclaimed a personal stake in the war effort.

18 Grants Pass Slugger: Ken Williams *by George Kramer*

Grants Pass ballplayer Ken Williams made some remarkable plays in the 'teens and 'twenties while slugging for the St. Louis Browns. However, quiet and unassuming Williams had the misfortune to compete in the press with the likes of much-accoladed Babe Ruth and George Sisler. As a result, Oregon's finest professional ballplayer is nearly unknown today.

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Back cover: Ralph Billings, far right, poses with fellow ROTC recruits at Oregon Agricultural College in Corvallis around 1900. Born in 1881 on the family homestead north of Ashland, Billings later served as Jackson County commissioner, vice-president of Jackson County Savings and Loan Assoc., and vice-president of the Southern Oregon Historical Society. SOHS #7476.

Lloyd O. Nelson

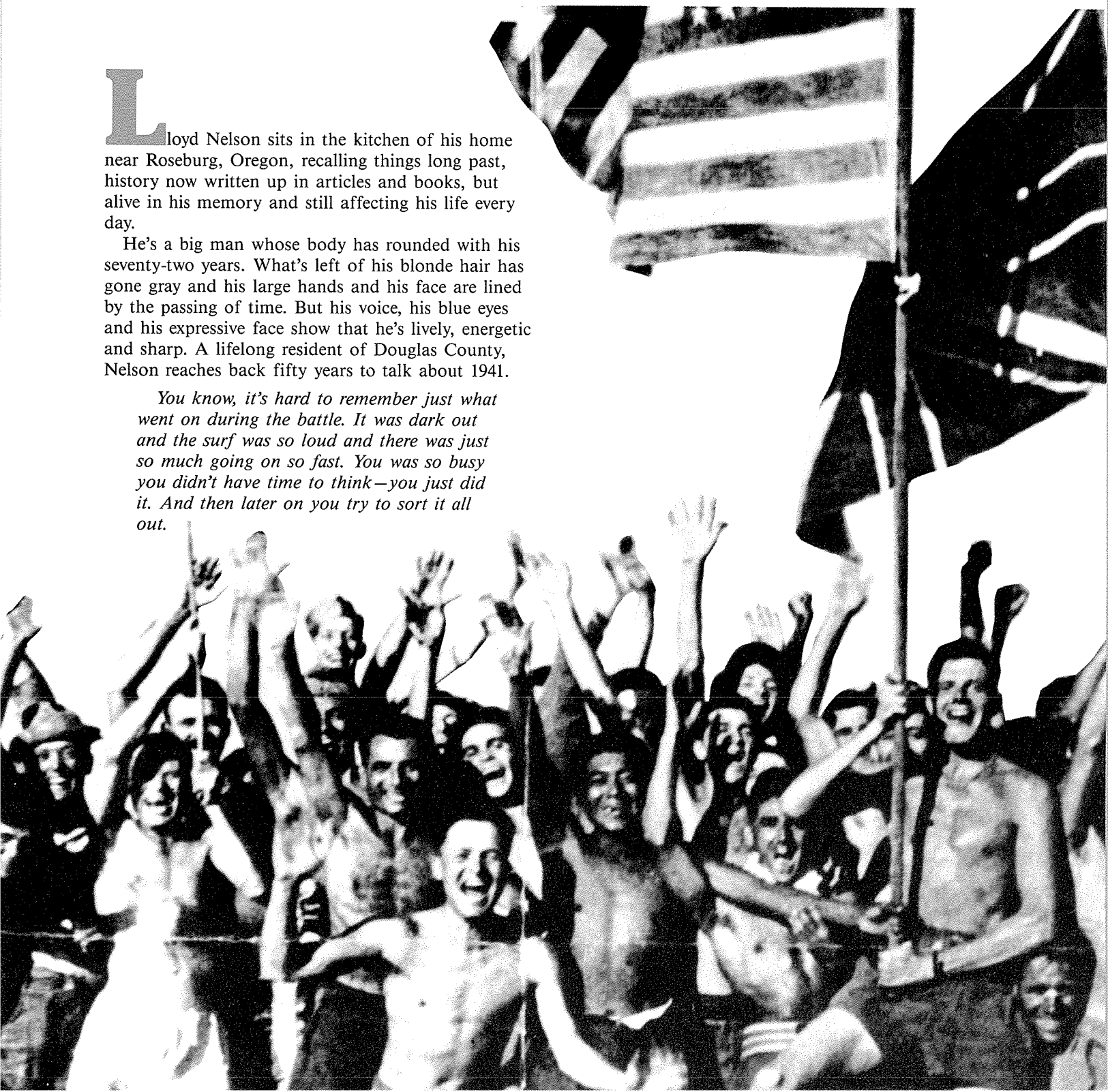
Wake Island POW

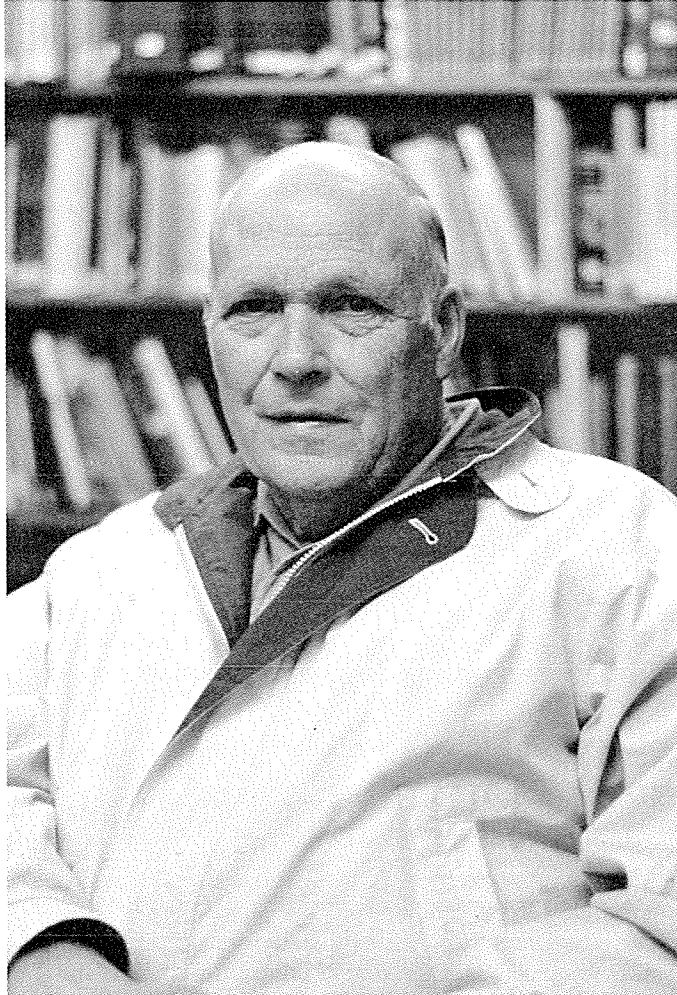
by Robert Heilman

Lloyd Nelson sits in the kitchen of his home near Roseburg, Oregon, recalling things long past, history now written up in articles and books, but alive in his memory and still affecting his life every day.

He's a big man whose body has rounded with his seventy-two years. What's left of his blonde hair has gone gray and his large hands and his face are lined by the passing of time. But his voice, his blue eyes and his expressive face show that he's lively, energetic and sharp. A lifelong resident of Douglas County, Nelson reaches back fifty years to talk about 1941.

You know, it's hard to remember just what went on during the battle. It was dark out and the surf was so loud and there was just so much going on so fast. You was so busy you didn't have time to think—you just did it. And then later on you try to sort it all out.





Lloyd Nelson (above) remembers the Japanese invasion of Wake Island and the horrors of POW life. Allied prisoners (below) jubilantly await rescue after the war.

Nelson photo by Robert Heilman, U. S. Navy photo courtesy Mel Davidson



The war in Europe dominated the news during the winter of 1940-41. There was growing speculation concerning a Pacific war with the Japanese as America reluctantly and belatedly prepared for the surging tide of conflict. But it all seemed a bit remote from everyday life in southern Oregon.

Morrison-Knudsen was responsible for building a naval base and airfield on Wake Island, a tiny coral atoll consisting of three low-lying islands, Peale, Wilkes and Wake, enclosing a lagoon. It was the easternmost of the five island bases, located just 1,700 miles from Japan and only 620 miles north of a major Japanese naval base on Kwajalein atoll.

Wake Island, that wasn't even on the map when you looked for it. They always said it was in the South Pacific. And if I'd known beforehand it was right next to all the military bases of the Japanese and what the world situation was—I'd have probably took another guess at it.

But once you're out there, if you go to work for a big construction company on a project and you turn around and go home, they won't think about hiring you again, you know.

When the first construction crew reached Wake on January 8, 1941, the only structures on the island were a hotel and support buildings belonging to Pan American Airways, which used the spot as a layover and refueling stop for the company's weekly China Clipper service between Hawaii and the Philippines.

Work began immediately at a fast pace. But the long hours, tropical weather, and isolation took their toll.

They had a heck of a time getting people on the islands doing defense work. There was more leaving the islands than coming on during the first part of the construction. So they went on a bonus and their food was terrific. They had to have something to keep the men, otherwise they'd just come out, take a look at it and come back home again.

The consortium began recruiting workers to replace those who'd left. In February 1941 a "help wanted" ad appeared in the *Grants Pass Courier* and word of it trickled north to Douglas County, where the twenty-two-year-old Nelson had been working for seven years as a salesman and delivery man for Umpqua Dairy in Roseburg.

I had a good friend of mine that knew about it and said it was good money and everything—plus adventure, so I went with a bunch of the guys. There were twelve of us from Douglas County that went out there.



Lloyd Nelson stands second from the left in the midst of genial Umpqua Dairy Products Co. employees in 1939. He left his secure position at the Roseburg dairy for an overseas adventure. Other employees include (left to right, front row): Sam Thompson, Becroft, Ira Knigge, Milton Keller, Ed Nelson, Shirley McLaughlin, (back row) Ormand Feldcamp, Nelson, Harvey Miller, Phil Wason, Herb Sullivan. Photo courtesy Douglas County Museum

A chartered bus picked the men up in Roseburg and took them down to Grants Pass, where they joined sixty others. On April 29, the bus left for San Francisco, where they boarded the Matson liner *Lurline* for a first-class voyage to Los Angeles, then to Honolulu, where they transferred to a cargo ship that stopped at Midway and carried them on to Wake Island.

That ticket was worth \$125. That's what it cost the contractors. You talk about living like kings!

I sailed under the Golden Gate Bridge on May 1, 1941, which was my birthday. I was twenty-three years old then. I come underneath that same bridge. I think it was October 8, 1945.

Nelson spent the seven months following his arrival working eight-to-twelve-hour days, seven days a week. Because of the frenzied pace of the construction he only had three days off.

I worked in a lumber yard for a while and in a warehouse, the machine shop, and finally got a job being a drag-line oiler, helping the operator. They had us working on a crane, putting up steel buildings, and when we had most of that done they put us out on Wilkes Island digging a deep channel through there so the submarines could come in to the lagoon and refuel. That's where I done all my fighting.

Wake was used as a refueling stop for B-17 bombers and PB-4Ys bound for the Philippines.

A kid I used to go to school with here, he stopped overnight on Wake. He was one of the Air Corps. Had quite a chat with him

and he was one of the first casualties in the Philippines when the war started.

The first detachment of U.S. Marines, 173 enlisted men and five officers, arrived on August 19. By Saturday, December 6, two days before the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor (Wake Island lies east of the international dateline), the atoll held 1,145 civilian construction workers and sixty Pan Am employees, as well as 569 marines, sixty-eight sailors, and six Army Air Corps radiomen under the command of Comdr. Winfield Scott Cunningham, USN.

The construction project was running ahead of schedule. An airstrip had been built but work was still underway on protective revetments, support buildings and fueling services for the twelve Grumman Wildcat F4F-3 fighter-bombers on the island. Six five-inch naval guns, taken from World War I battleships, twelve three-inch antiaircraft guns, eighteen .50-caliber machine guns and thirty .30-caliber machine guns were in place, but most of the artillery lacked essential range-finding and altitude-control equipment.

The marines, under command of Maj. James P. S. Devereux, USMC, were too few to man all the guns. But more were expected in the months ahead and with the guns finally in place they held a drill to test the communications system and the gun crews. The drill proved successful and the marines were rewarded with Saturday afternoon and Sunday off.

Word of the break spread to the construction crews, and Morrison-Knudsen's superintendent, Dan Teters, declared a holiday. The workers, marines, sailors, and soldiers spent that Sunday writing letters, swimming, fishing, and playing cards and softball. Shortwave radio sets played big band swing tunes. A Pan Am Clipper arrived in the afternoon bringing mail. The outdoor movie theater in the workers' camp was filled that night.

At 6:50 a.m. the next morning, December 8, an Army Air Corps radioman on Wake picked up a message from Hickham Field in Honolulu. Pearl Harbor was under attack.

There was a radar installation on Wake and the booming of surf on the coral reef surrounding the island prevented the use of listening devices to pick up the sound of approaching aircraft. The twelve-plane squadron of Wildcat fighter-bombers was divided into three patrols of four airplanes each. One patrol at a time was kept aloft patrolling while the remaining eight were serviced and readied.

Dan Teters met with Commander Cunningham and Major Devereux to put his construction crew to work helping man the gun batteries, moving supplies and ammunition, and preparing shelters and defensive works for the expected invasion of the island. There were not enough rifles, pistols and helmets to arm all of the military personnel should a Japanese force actually land on the island and with the U.S. Navy's Pacific Fleet lying shattered at Pearl Harbor, the likelihood of evacuation or the arrival of relief forces was slim.

We's stuck; we was up the creek. All we had to do was fight. There was nothing else for us, no guns to go around or nothing else. They was just helpless. I didn't have any gun either, except on the last day I had hand grenades. But you can't fight the military with hand grenades and rocks you know.

The sky was overcast that day, and at 11:58 a.m. a Japanese squadron of thirty-six bombers emerged from a rain squall a half-mile off shore. They were already overhead and dropping bombs before Wake Island's untried guns were fired for the first time.

We was going off shift and heading back to camp in a flatbed truck when the planes come in. We thought they was American planes but then they started dropping bombs. So we all hid as best we could until it was over.

There was a lot of guys hurt and so I started helping the corpsmen find them and move them over to the hospital. We loaded them up on flatbed trucks 'cause that's all we had. It was a bumpy ride for them, but we couldn't do nothing else.

The raid lasted twelve minutes and left about fifty men dead and fifty more wounded. Seven of the eight Wildcats on the ground were destroyed and the eighth heavily damaged. A 25,000-gallon aviation fuel tank exploded. The airstrip support buildings were destroyed but precision bombing had left the landing strip itself almost untouched. Both the military and civilian camps were hit, as well as Pan Am's hotel on Peale Island.

The bombers returned the following day, December 9, concentrating on the airfield and the workers' camp. Though construction workers had painted a



large red cross with a white background on the hospital's roof, the building, filled with wounded personnel, was bombed.

That red cross was just a target for them. Helped them aim better was all it did.

It was noticed that Japanese reconnaissance planes accompanied each bomber squadron, circling overhead to take photographs for the next raid. A decision was made to move the island's gun batteries every night and put up mock guns in their former places. Hundred-man construction crews worked all night under blackout conditions moving the eight-ton guns, filling sandbags and digging new emplacements, then caught an hour or two of sleep in the morning before the daily bombings.

We used to take four-by-fours, six-by-sixes and line them up, try to put a little brush on them. Hell, all they'd be was lumber you know. They'd see that then YERROMMM!

Ol' Charlie Mallor and I, we built a dugout under a tree but they come and bomb us and strafe us pretty close you know. He says,

"Well, by gosh, maybe they took a picture of that too. We better move." We moved our dugout someplace else and it got hit that next day. But we was just doing one jump ahead. There's where laziness don't pay.

Nelson was assigned to Battery "F" on Wilkes Island, four three-inch anti-aircraft guns and a searchlight under command of Gunner Clarence B. McKinstry. Nelson operated the searchlight and helped the gunners.

On Wednesday the tenth a bomb fell on a storage building on Wilkes containing 125 tons of TNT. Nelson remembers the explosion following a direct hit on the storage building.

There was a lot of dynamite and that whole island just shook. We was in a dugout which was probably only a foot below the level ground you know. You couldn't dig in very easy—not like sand or anything.

Well, it just cleaned all the brush off the island. It looked like no-man's land. All the leaves and everything else was just all torn off—just the heavy limbs and stuff left.

Fortunately, only one man was killed and four wounded in the explosion.

At 3:00 a.m. the following morning, a Japanese fleet was sighted off the coast of Wake. Imperial Destroyer Squadron 6, three cruisers, eight destroyers, two troop transports and two submarines under the command of Rear Adm. Sadamichi Kajioki had arrived with an invasion force of 450 soldiers. Orders were sent out to all the gun positions on the atoll to hold their fire in the hopes of luring the ships within range of the five-inch guns.

That night, night of the tenth and the morning of the eleventh, they shelled the islands and then we didn't return fire. So when they circled the island, shelled it—then they thought they had us whipped, see? So then they started to come in real close. A big destroyer came through and then they had us open fire. They was one or two shells and the thing went SHUSST! They was under water; hit it just a perfect spot.

Then they took off and hauled ass back to their military bases, 'cause we hit quite a few other ships, too. When we hit that big destroyer they thought we had big ten-inch guns on the island. So when they did capture us they was raising hell, "Where's the ten-inch guns?" you know. It was only five-inch guns.

When the destroyer *Hayate* broke in two off the coast of Wilkes Island, it was the first sinking of a Japanese warship by an American force in the war. In all, two destroyers were sunk and seven other ships damaged.

Commander Cunningham sent word of the failed invasion back to Hawaii by radio. Standard code procedure at the time required the padding of mes-



sages with nonsense phrases. One of the day's dispatches read in part:

"SEND US STOP NOW IS THE TIME FOR ALL GOOD MEN TO COME TO THE AID OF THEIR PARTY STOP COMMANDER CUNNINGHAM MORE JAPS . . ."

With the war less than a week old and new reports of American defeats throughout the Pacific coming in almost hourly, the good news from Wake Island assumed the proportions of an instant legend. Someone seized on the words "SEND US" and "MORE JAPS" from the message and soon American newspapers and radios were carrying the story of Wake's "Devil Dog" defenders, who, when asked if they needed anything, replied, "Yes, send us more Japs!" The story reached the men on Wake over shortwave radio.

Yeah, we heard about it. That was the last thing we needed—more Japs.

While the Japanese fleet returned to Kwajalein, the men on Wake endured a daily cycle of bombing and strafing followed by working all night to keep shifting the guns. Fatigue, injuries and an outbreak of diarrhea took their toll. Casualties kept mounting, supplies dwindled, some of the big guns were damaged beyond repair and the handful of warplanes fell one by one until December 22, when the last two Wildcats were lost.

On December 15, a relief force of 200 marines and a squadron of Grumman Wildcats sailed from Pearl Harbor. News of the approaching task force reached Wake on December 20, when a Navy PBY landed in the lagoon bringing some hope to the men. Plans were made to evacuate the sick and wounded and all but 350 of the construction workers. The relief force was due to arrive on Christmas Eve.

On the night of December 22, the Japanese invasion fleet returned with 1,000 amphibious assault troops. The fleet had been built up with the addition of two aircraft carriers, six cruisers and six destroyers.

It was a moonless, rainy night, and the invasion fleet wasn't sighted until 10:00 p.m. At 2:30 in the morning of the twenty-third a landing barge appeared on the beach in front of Battery "F," Nelson's position on Wilkes Island. The marines and civilians fought back with machine guns and hand grenades, but by 4:00 p.m. the battery was in enemy hands and the gun crew had retreated into the brush.

The gun crew and others on that part of the island re-grouped and staged a counter-attack on the Japanese who had set up a defensive position in the gun pits. Unknown to them, a second American group had formed on the other side of the battery. The two groups, totaling about 50 marines and civilian combatants, attacked the battery at first light and recaptured the position. By daylight Wilkes Island was back in American hands. The Japanese had lost ninety-eight men. Nine marines and two civilians had died.



Lloyd Nelson stands in front of a building on Wake Island during the summer of 1941, before the Japanese invasion.

Photo courtesy Douglas County Museum

Things didn't go so well on Peale and Wake though. Parts of the islands held out, but other parts were overrun. Communications among the scattered forces were cut off and a message arrived informing them that the relief fleet, still 450 miles away, had been recalled. At 7:00 a.m. Commander Cunningham met with Maj. Devereux and ordered the surrender of the atoll.

Well, we surrendered. Maj. Devereux and the Japs with a white flag came over and told us to surrender. We could look around the island and that whole damn thing was surrounded by the steel. Boats was circling the island. It's like throwing rocks at a cannon. Our supplies and everything else were getting pretty well depleted, you know, destroyed.

Forty-four American military personnel and eighty-four civilian workers died in the defense of the atoll.

Though Wake's defenders had lost, the victory had been costly for the Japanese. In all, the Japanese lost more than 750 men, two destroyers, a submarine and

several warplanes. More importantly, the sixteen-day siege of Wake bogged down the Japanese war plan, which called for the early capture of Wake and then Midway for use as an airbase within range of the Hawaiian Islands.

We was captured December 23, marched out to the airport. There was a ditch they marched us past just before you got to the airport and they had put a guy who'd died in there. They'd cut his throat after he'd died and left him there just to show us that they meant business.

We was all crowded in the open, 1,200-1,400 of us, all at once, machine guns all around, you know. We didn't know what our fate was from minute to minute.

When the war started we took up guns to fight the enemy, which is actually classed as guerrilla warfare. And guerrilla warfare against an enemy—that's the firing squad. If you were military you were a little different.

And also, while we were out there fighting it, there was scuttlebutt going around that the Japs don't take prisoners you know. So that puts another chill up your back.

They were held for two days out in the open without food or water. Many of the prisoners had lost or been stripped of their clothing and suffered from severe sunburn during the day and wet, chilly weather at night.

Christmas Day they finally said, "Well, we have orders to take all prisoners to Japan." And then they marched us, so many at a time, to our little barracks. We had to clean those up and had a place to sleep. Then they fed us a little bit.

Between that time and the time we went they had us working out, putting up barbed wire entanglements and stuff like that.

On January 12, 1942, Lloyd Nelson was part of the first shipment of prisoners to leave Wake. The men were brought on board the *Nitta Maru* and forced to run a gauntlet between rows of shouting sailors who struck them with fists and clubs, then were sent down into the ship's holds.

We figured they was going to take us to Japan. They went to Yokohama. We was there, I think, a day or two and they took some guys out to show the Japs that they'd captured some Americans. It was a publicity deal and maybe they were refueling and then they took us from right there down to Shanghai. We got to Shanghai about the twenty-third, about eleven days from Wake Island to Shanghai.



Regulations for Prisoners

1. The prisoners disobeying the following orders will be punished with immediate death.
 - a. Those disobeying orders and instructions.
 - b. Those showing a motion of antagonism and raising a sign of opposition.
 - c. Those disordering the regulations by individualism, egoism, thinking only about yourself, rushing for your own goods.
 - d. Those talking without permission and raising loud voices.
 - e. Those walking and moving without order.
 - f. Those carrying unnecessary baggage in embarking.
 - g. Those resisting mutually.
 - h. Those touching the boat's materials, wires, electric lights, tools, switches, etc.
 - i. Those climbing ladder without order.
 - j. Those showing action of running away from room or boat.
 - k. Those trying to take more meal than given to them.
 - l. Those using more than two blankets.
2. Since the boat is not well equipped and inside being narrow, food being scarce and poor you'll feel uncomfortable during the short time on the boat. Those losing patience and disordering the regulation will be heavily punished for the reason of not being able to escort.
3. Be sure to finish your "nature's call," evacuate the bowels and urine before embarking.
4. Meal will be given twice a day. One plate only to one prisoner. The prisoners called by the guard will give out the meal quick as possible and honestly. The remaining prisoners will stay in their places quietly and wait for your plate. Those moving from their places reaching for your plate without order will be heavily punished. Same orders will be applied in handling plates after meal.
5. Toilet will be fixed at the four corners of the room. The buckets and cans will be placed. When filled up a guard will appoint a prisoner. The prisoner called will take the buckets to the center of the room. The buckets will be pulled up by the derrick and be thrown away. Toilet papers will be given. Everyone must cooperate to make the room sanitary. Those being careless will be punished.
6. Navy of the Great Japanese Empire will not try to punish you all with death. Those obeying all the rules and regulations, and believing the action and purpose of the Japanese Navy, cooperating with Japan in constructing the "New order of the Great Asia" which lead to the world's peace will be well treated.

During the voyage from Yokohama to Shanghai, three American sailors and two marines were blindfolded and brought up on deck. They were beheaded with samurai swords and their bodies were then mutilated and dumped overboard.

In Shanghai, the prisoners were sent to Woosung Prison Camp. For the next four years they were fed scanty rations, about 1,200-1,500 calories per day, of low quality food and forced to perform extremely strenuous manual labor ten hours a day. Medical supplies and Red Cross packages were often sold on the black market by prison camp supervisors or kept for the camp staff's use.

We had one guy, when he was captured, he went to Shanghai, see. He refused to eat the food the Japanese gave you and . . . well, he just quit eating and he lasted about a month and he finally just died. He got blind,

couldn't hear. He couldn't talk and just faded away. His name was Mark Stanton. I knew him. He worked in the canteen.

Even with the crap they give us, we tried to eat all we could to keep going. One time they had cracked corn and we ate that for two or three days straight. They'd take that and put it in big barrels and let it ferment and then they'd cook it. That's what we ate—just like hog feed.

And then once we had whale blubber and that was so damn rancid that every time you'd belch it'd just burn your throat. It'd stick with you for about three, four days you know. It's a wonder it didn't kill a lot of us guys.

Later on, when I was in Kawasaki, Japan, we tried to dicker with the Japs in their steel mill we was working at. One guy got some

fish and he ate it and roll call the next morning they called his name. He didn't answer—he was dead. Died from fish poisoning. His was the top bunk right straight across from me. The covers never moved when they called his name.

After a few months at Woosung they were transferred to Kiang Wang, another prison camp in the area. They were put to work building a rifle range for Japanese troops and digging a shipping canal. Nelson's feet froze in the cold winter weather and he suffered from chilblains, a swelling of the hands and feet due to damp cold.

We was digging that canal. We'd walk down through the ditch and bring the dirt up and our feet'd be wet—cold and ice. You never could get warm you know.

Oh, it was cold there, just colder than heck, and that wind coming out of Siberia. You get out in the wind and boy, it'd just cut right through you. Besides, you lost so much weight, you know, there's no fat on your bones to keep you warm.

The prisoners were given particularly brutal treatment at Kiang Wang, with beatings from the Japanese guards. The chief medical officer there, an interpreter named Ishihara, supervised torture sessions.

Ishihara? Yes, he was the uh . . . He was . . . He was the, the damn mean guy—Ishihara.

And then we had a guy we called "Mortimer Snerd." Nicknamed him. He found out what we called him and some of the guys told him, "Well, that's a famous movie actor." And he thought he was pretty proud then. Then later on down the line he figured that's not right and he was madder than hell.

Lloyd contracted beriberi, and with his illness and malnutrition his body weight fell from 195 pounds to 110. In August 1943, he was sent with a group of prisoners to Kawasaki, Japan, where they worked in steel mills, mines and grain warehouses.

It was "Hurry, hurry, hurry," and damn, you just . . . You didn't have the energy.

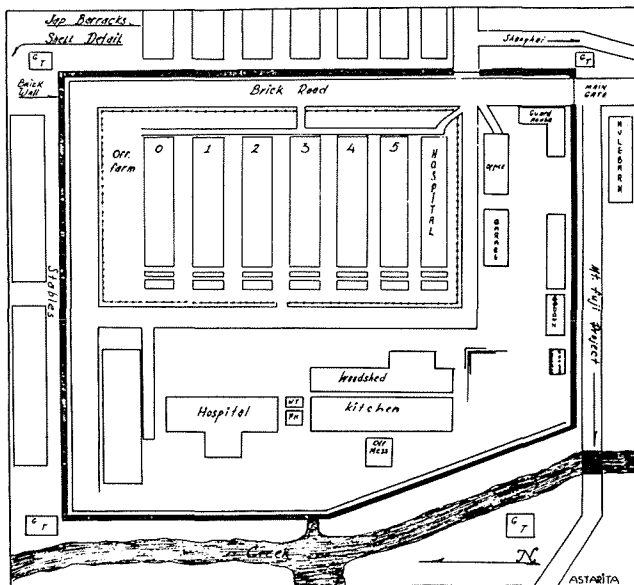
We was loading stuff in a warehouse and I'd just had the flu before that. They was making us stack [sacks like] stair steps, one, two, three, like that you know. Well, I was so damn weak I couldn't do it without falling down with those grain sacks on me.

Them Japs, they'd just kick the s . . . out of you trying to get you back on it. Then finally, each work party had prisoners there, more or less a boss you know. He told the Japanese, "Hell, that guy's so damn sick," he says, "He can't do it." So then I just loaded the sacks on the guys' shoulders then.

Mel Davidson, of Grants Pass, is another Morrison-Knudsen worker who shipped over to Wake Island at the same time as Nelson. The two men spent the war years together until 1945, when they were sent to different prison camps.

Davidson recalls the winter of 1944-45. "That last winter, I didn't think he was gonna make it. He was really in bad shape. It sounds kind of funny, but we used to bet on who was gonna make it through the winter and who wouldn't. He was one of three or four guys that everybody figured was gonna die. I





was really surprised when I got back home and found out ol' Lloyd had survived. It's amazing, here it is fifty years later and he's still going strong."

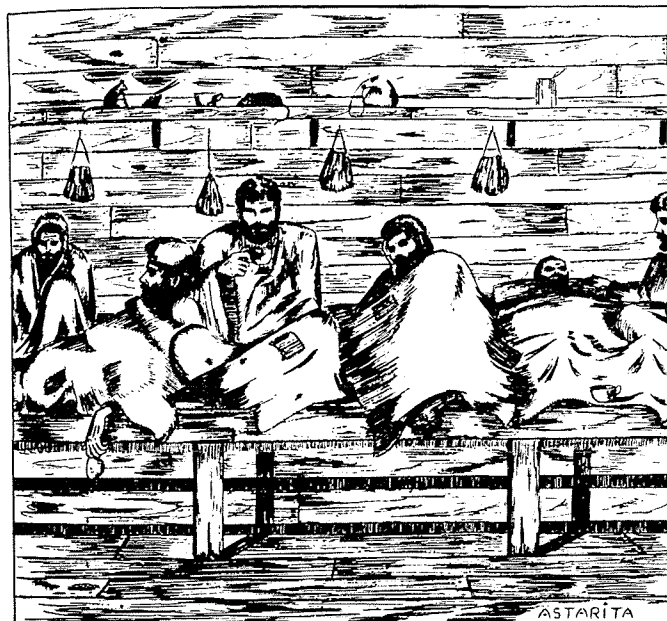
"He's a tough one, ol' Lloyd. I mean—not, go in a bar and start a fight kind of tough, because that's the last thing he'd do—but he's strong in his body and in his mind. Those old Swedes are a tough bunch. I got to hand it to him: he made it through where a lot of guys didn't."

In all, 117 of Wake's construction workers died in the prison camps. Ninety-eight others who were kept on the island were executed on October 7, 1943. Eight hundred forty-seven made it back to the United States.

American bombers destroyed the steel mills, mining facilities and warehouses in Kawasaki in early 1945. Davidson was sent to Osaka and Nelson to Omori Prison Camp in Tokyo Bay.

That's where the headquarters for prison camps was. There was a lot of B-29 pilots there you know—just skin and bones. They just starved them to death. A lot of them were litter patients when the war was over. They had to take them out on stretchers.

In Omori, I had a fir post next to my bed and that thing was cracked, you know. Like when they dry. You looked in there at night and seen all the damn bed bugs, just crowded, like mites in a chicken coop. At night they'd come out and chew away on you. You kill one and that makes the other



After returning to the United States, fellow prisoner of war Joseph J. Astarita published sketches of his internment experiences. Included in the 1947 book, *Sketches of POW Life*, are a map of Kiang Wan Prison Camp (left), a scene of prisoner housing conditions (above), and a portrait of head interpreter Ishihara (below). Ishihara was known among the prisoners as the "Screaming Skull," and was among the most brutal of the Japanese authorities. The tiny bags hanging on the wall in the center sketch contain each man's allotted chopsticks, bowl and tea cup. *Sketches of POW Life* courtesy of Mel Davidson



ones mad and ten more get you. Two nights of that and then the third night you're so exhausted you pass out. They just keep chewing away. Bed bugs, fleas, crabs—anything you could think of, they had it.

We was working on the docks there in Tokyo Bay, carrying more weight than we weighed. I got down to 110-115 pounds. The smallest sack of grain was sixty kilos, which is 132 pounds.

There'd be two guys loading onto your back and then you walked across a parking area and up a plank and dump it on a barge. If you didn't get the right spring in your legs, when the plank would come up you'd lose your balance. You had to get the right rhythm.

The barges were hauling supplies inland to safer storage places as American bombers raided Tokyo with increasing frequency. By putting together bits and pieces of information, the prisoners could tell that Japan was losing the war rapidly.

On August 14, eight days after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, the prisoners in Omori Camp were relieved from further work and they waited for the arrival of American forces.

There was not a lot of whoopin' and hollerin'. After four years behind bars, we didn't believe it was over.

The fourteenth of August there was a typhoon, hell of a storm, and they couldn't go into Tokyo Bay until that was over. So, finally, they come, had their hospital ship and gun boats. It was the twenty-eighth of August that they finally got in to our island and started taking guys off.

They come in there about two or three o'clock in the afternoon. It was just one launch. Like a torpedo boat and they said, "Well, we're supposed to take all the stretcher patients first and then go from there on to the healthiest ones the last." I left about one or two o'clock in the morning.

It didn't take them long, maybe about an hour from after they picked us up 'til we was out to the hospital ship and they run us through all the doctors. They's checking for disease, skin troubles and your disposition and stuff like that and asked if you's good enough to go on another boat. He says, "If you don't think you can and you're real bad, then we'll keep you here on the hospital ship. But we have a lot of patients here that if we don't tend to them right quick then they may pass on before they get back home."



The faces of Lloyd Nelson (above) and Mel Davidson (opposite) record the hardships endured while prisoners of the Japanese military. Photos courtesy Douglas County Museum, Mel Davidson

Then they sent us down to the galley for our first American meal, ham and eggs and vanilla ice cream with chocolate topping. We sat there just looking at it. We couldn't believe our eyes.

So then they put us on a couple of boats and I was out in Tokyo Bay there when the official signing was, all the aircraft above and quite a celebration. I saw all that.

Nelson was flown from Tokyo to Okinawa and then to Manila, where he visited Corregidor before sailing on a new troop transport ship back to San Francisco. After a brief medical exam he boarded a train for Roseburg.

They give us check-ups and stuff and . . . Just like they say, "Did you report this and report that?" I says, "Hell no. All we wanted to do was get home." Sick or broken back or something, we just . . . four years of prison camp, we wanted to get home.

I was telling my wife the other day that I remember when I was coming home on the train. Ashland was a place where trains going



south and trains coming north met, and you had about an hour-and-a-half wait there. It was in the afternoon and right close by was a restaurant. So I went up to the restaurant, had something to eat you know.

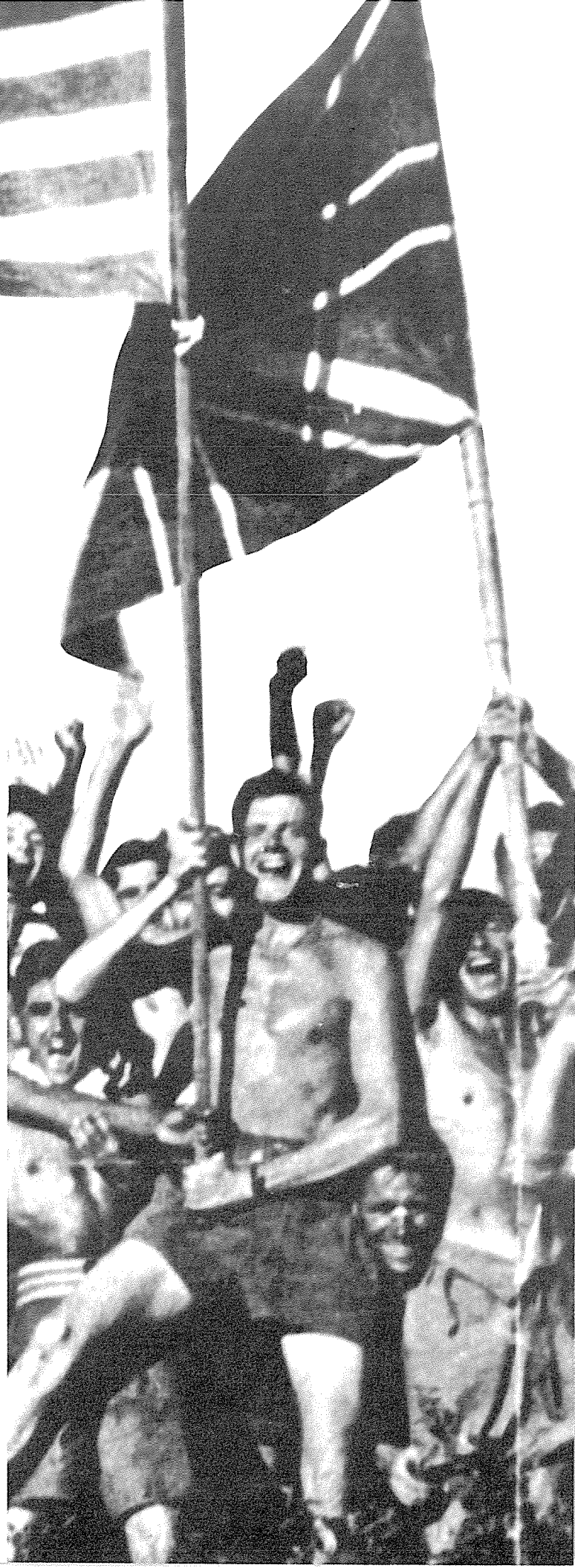
All of a sudden the siren blew and I thought it was an air raid. I jumped out of my stool and the gal says, "What's the matter?" "That a air raid?" "No, that's the five o'clock whistle." I thought I was still back in air raid range you know. Everything was just on the jittery side all the time.

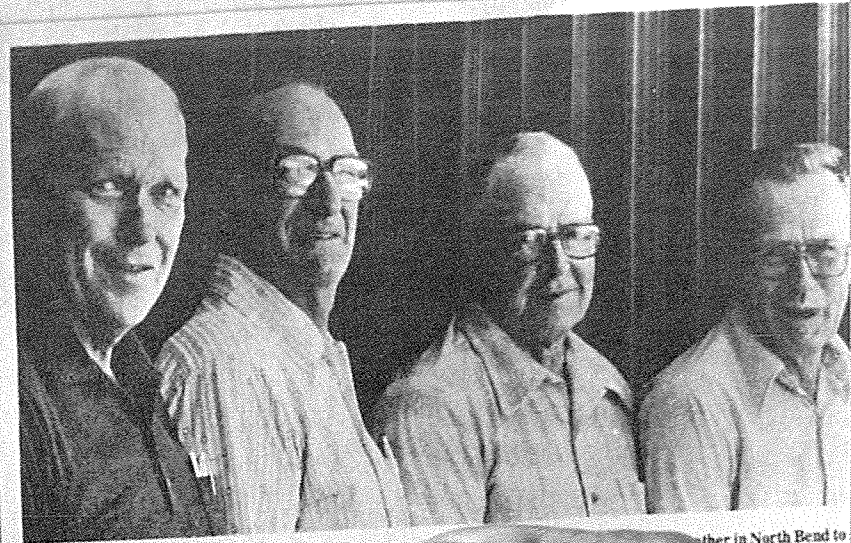
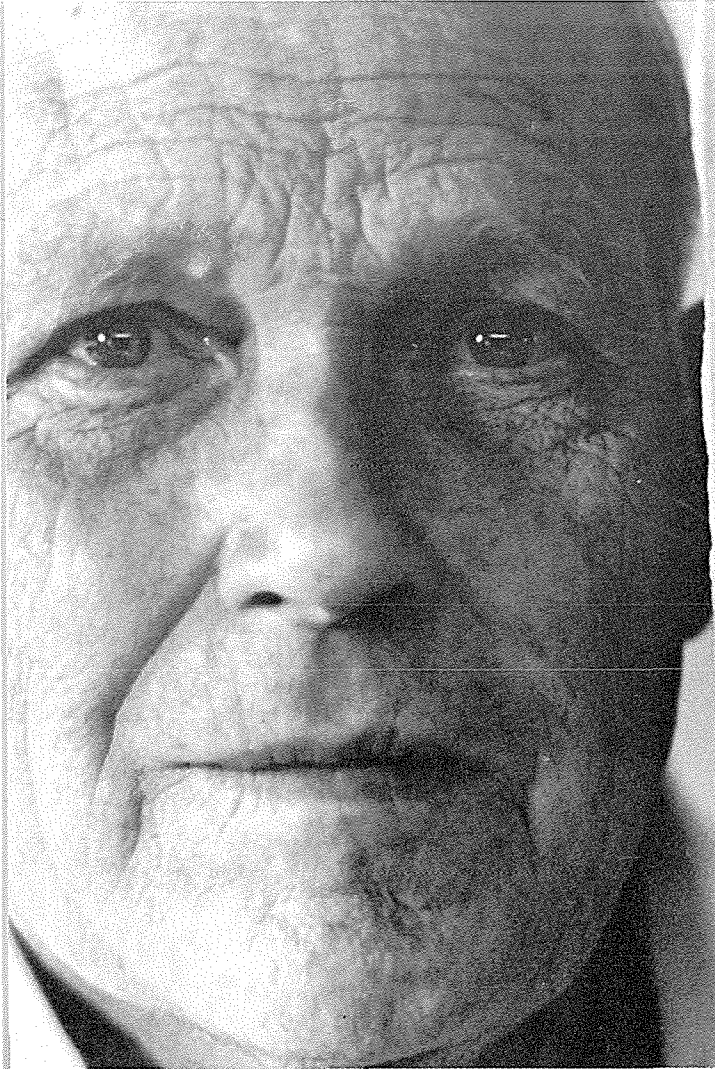
I got home in October. When I got home a lot of my friends took me out hunting and fishing, trying to get me back into the swing of the American way of life again.

I didn't say much about my war experience. I more or less wanted to be by myself. I could only talk to maybe two or three people at a time.

For myself, I can talk about it some and then tonight I probably won't be able to sleep for quite awhile, but . . . I've overcome it.

Nelson went back to work for Umpqua Dairy in Roseburg in January 1946, where he stayed until his retirement in 1973. But physical and emotional problems continued to plague him through the years. Nel-





Lloyd Nelson, Bus Sporer, Kenneth Hopkins and Smith (left to right) were civilians on Wake Island the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and America entered World War II. This weekend they and 200 or so others

ther in North Bend to
ar. — World photo

Lloyd Nelson holds a photo of himself and three other former prisoners of war, now deceased. Nelson believes his friends died of cancer traceable to the malnutrition, forced labor, and unhealthy living conditions of POW life.

Photo by Mike Anderson

son was hospitalized twice in 1950 for a stress-induced stomach disorder. He still suffers from hearing loss, nerve damage to his legs and back problems.

Despite their combat role and years of internment, Wake's civilian construction workers were not eligible for Veterans Administration benefits until 1981, when an act of Congress granted them military discharges.

Well, that's the government. When we went out there we were civilians working the military bases.

We'd been fighting to get military status because we was fighting right with the marines. So it's discrimination. There was a lot of work done to it. They finally gave us a discharge and then we didn't have any rating when we checked in for medical problems. "What's your rating?" "N/A—Not Available." So we finally got a full 4-E rating now and that took two, three years to get that.

Nelson is a member of an ex-POW group, Survivors of Wake, Guam and Cavite. They keep up con-

tact with each other, work to maintain their benefits and hold an annual reunion.

We used to have it every December, but due to the weather conditions and everybody's retired, we try to have it in the month of September.

And everybody's getting a little slower—less partying. But then it's a bond between all of us guys that they'll never take it away you know. One guy tries to help another guy if he needs encouragement or something like that.

I just happened to be one of the lucky ones. Just like this picture here: There's Smitty and Hoppy and Bus and myself. This was taken in 1981, we had a reunion then, over in Coos Bay. Smitty died first and Hoppy died next and Bus died next and I'm still here.

This was in a three-year time too. They all died from cancer. Smitty had lung cancer and old Kenny Hopkins had lymphoma and Bus, he had lung cancer and stomach cancer both. And the government don't want to admit it,

but I think it's all traced back to malnutrition, forced slave labor and unhealthy living conditions. 'Cause I'd rather sleep out in a sheep shed around Oregon here than back in that prison camp you know.

Survivors of Wake, Guam and Calvite have joined with other American ex-POW groups and Canadian veterans' organizations in an international class-action lawsuit seeking to collect indemnities from the Japanese government for having violated the Geneva Convention articles dealing with treatment of prisoners of war.

Well, it started in Canada and they was going to sue the Japanese. Then they got in contact with the Human Rights Commission in Geneva, Switzerland. So that's been going on since '84, and they finally got everything all put together now.

When Canada did try to sue them they said, "Well, the war's all over. Everything's all taken care of." But still they got billions of dollars to come and buy American property. We're asking for \$20,000 per man, which is only \$5,000 a year for slave labor and brutality.

And you know, all the medical doctors claim that anybody that was in the Japanese prison camps, for every year he spent in prison camp, the inside of his body has aged four years. Like now, I'm seventy-two, the inside of my body is eighty-eight years old.

While the settlement amount of the suit for indemnification hasn't been firmly set and isn't likely to be very large, Nelson and other survivors of Wake Island feel the payment itself is less important than a public admission by the Japanese government that they were mistreated. They point to recent payments from the German government to Holocaust victims and the United States' payments to Japanese-American internees as precedents.

It seems like somebody just telling you a story. You figure people can't really believe how people can act, how bad they can be. It's not no fiction or anything like that.

In August 1990, the United Nations gave the Japanese government six months to reply to the suit. But time is running out for the men and their widows. Of the twelve young men who left Douglas County for Wake Island in the spring of 1941, only four are still living. Nearly fifty years later, they're still fighting.



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Robert Heilman is an essayist and interviewer living in Myrtle Creek. His writings have appeared in the Oregonian, Congressional Record, and Forest World.



by Sue Waldron



Stars, Bars and

War brings to those not in battle such a mixture of feelings: fear, frustration, anxiety, anger, painful memories, and pride—if not for the country or the cause, then for the men and women who are “in harm’s way.” The general public and the family and friends of enlisted personnel seek ways to be a part of an event that captures a nation’s energy and attention. Displaying yellow ribbons and service flags are ways of participating.

The yellow ribbon probably became a symbol of remembering during the Indian wars along the Mississippi River in the 1830s. The memento was also popular during the Mexican War of the late 1840s. In 1838 the song “She Wore a Yellow Ribbon”¹ was introduced, which included words about a young lady wearing a yellow ribbon “for her lover who was far, far away.”²

During the Civil War, the Union army uniform had a strip of colored fabric on the outer seam of the pants. The color indicated an individual’s branch of service. A lady whose “lover” was in the cavalry wore a yellow ribbon. Ladies who favored a man in the infantry might wear a white ribbon, while one who supported an artillery man wore red.

By the time of the Spanish American War in 1898, military uniforms had changed. The two-tone blue wool uniform with its identifying stripe became an olive drab uniform with no stripes. The idea of using a ribbon as a patriotic memento faded.

By 1918 the service flag became popular as family and friends searched for a new memento. The

white flag, of any size, had a red border “one third the width of the white.”³ Within the white field a five-point blue star was placed for each enlisted person. In 1918, Massachusetts issued specifications for ten different stars to be placed on the service flag to show branch of service and rank. But only one found wide favor, the gold star that indicated “death in service.” The flag was usually displayed vertically in a window facing the street.⁴ Also used during World War II, the service flag is seldom seen today.

Yellow ribbons reappeared when radicals in Iran took American hostages following the overthrow of their shah. Whether people remembered the old song “She Wore a Yellow Ribbon” (which had been re-published in 1950 as the theme song for a John Wayne movie) or took the idea from the 1973 song by Tony Orlando and Dawn “Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Old Oak Tree” is hard to say. But the country blossomed with yellow ribbons as a constant reminder of those held against their will.

Our country is again at war and once more yellow ribbons and American flags fly throughout our communities to remind us of those away from home. May they soon return safe.



ENDNOTES

1. The song is also known by the titles “All Round My Hat I Wore a Yellow Ribbon”; “Round Her Neck She Wore a Yellow Ribbon”; and “For Her Love Who Was Far Away.”

2. Edward Arthur Dolph, “Sound Off!” *Soldier Songs of the Revolutionary to World War II* (New York: Farrer and Rein-

hart, 1929); and Theodore Rath, *The Songs We Sang, a Treasury of American Popular Music*. (New York, A. S. Barnes and Co., 1964).

3. *Encyclopedia Americana* (1947), p. 319

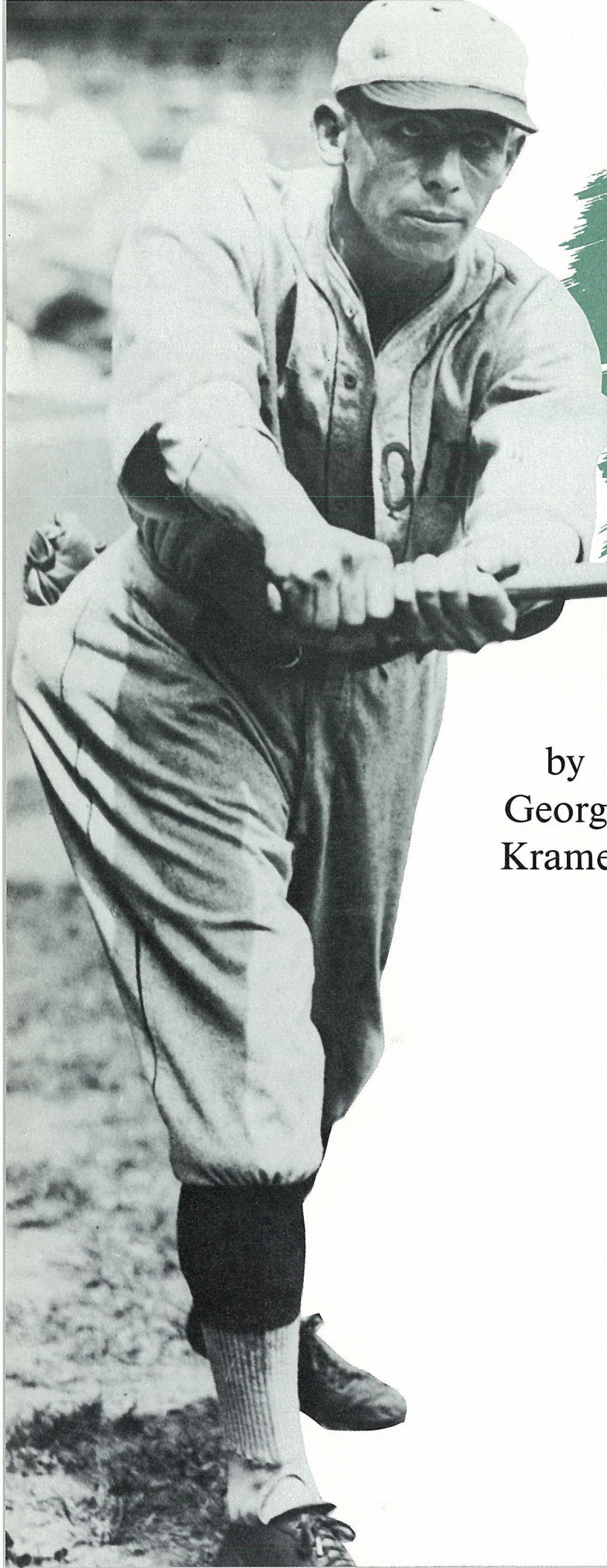
4. Whitney Smith, *The Flag Book of the United States* (New York, Wm. Morrow & Co., Inc., 1977), p. 247.

Sue Waldron is a researcher and writer for the Southern Oregon Historical Society. Her articles appear frequently in the Table Rock Sentinel.



Ribbons

On the day of the assassination, the death of Kennedy, which was the subject of the Office's investigation, was during the day of the assassination.



Grants

by
George
Kramer

In the early years of the twentieth century the growing popularity of radio and a strong national press helped vault major-league baseball into a national pastime. The heroes of the diamond were celebrities in a way that modern ballplayers—who must fight for renown with actors, musicians, and a variety of other pro sports stars—can only approximate. By the 1920s, legends of baseball such as Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, and Ty Cobb were the idols of millions of adoring fans. Here in southern Oregon, when the local papers reported baseball highlights there was often some local pride as well. One of the stars of the 1920s, Ken Williams, an outfielder with the St. Louis Browns (later the Baltimore Orioles), was born and raised in Josephine County.

Williams? Do you mean *Ted* Williams of the Red Sox? No. Ken Williams, born near Merlin in 1890. After playing a little minor-league and semi-pro ball, he broke into the “big” in 1915 with Cincinnati of the National League. In late 1918 he was traded to the St. Louis Browns of the American League. He finally became a starter at the age of thirty in 1920.

Williams quickly established himself as a powerful hitter, a good fielder and a feared baserunner. Unlike Ruth, with whom he was often compared, Williams was both quick and powerful. “With all due respect to the Babe, Williams doesn’t have to exert himself to hold up his end of the fielding

Pass Slugger

KEN WILLIAMS

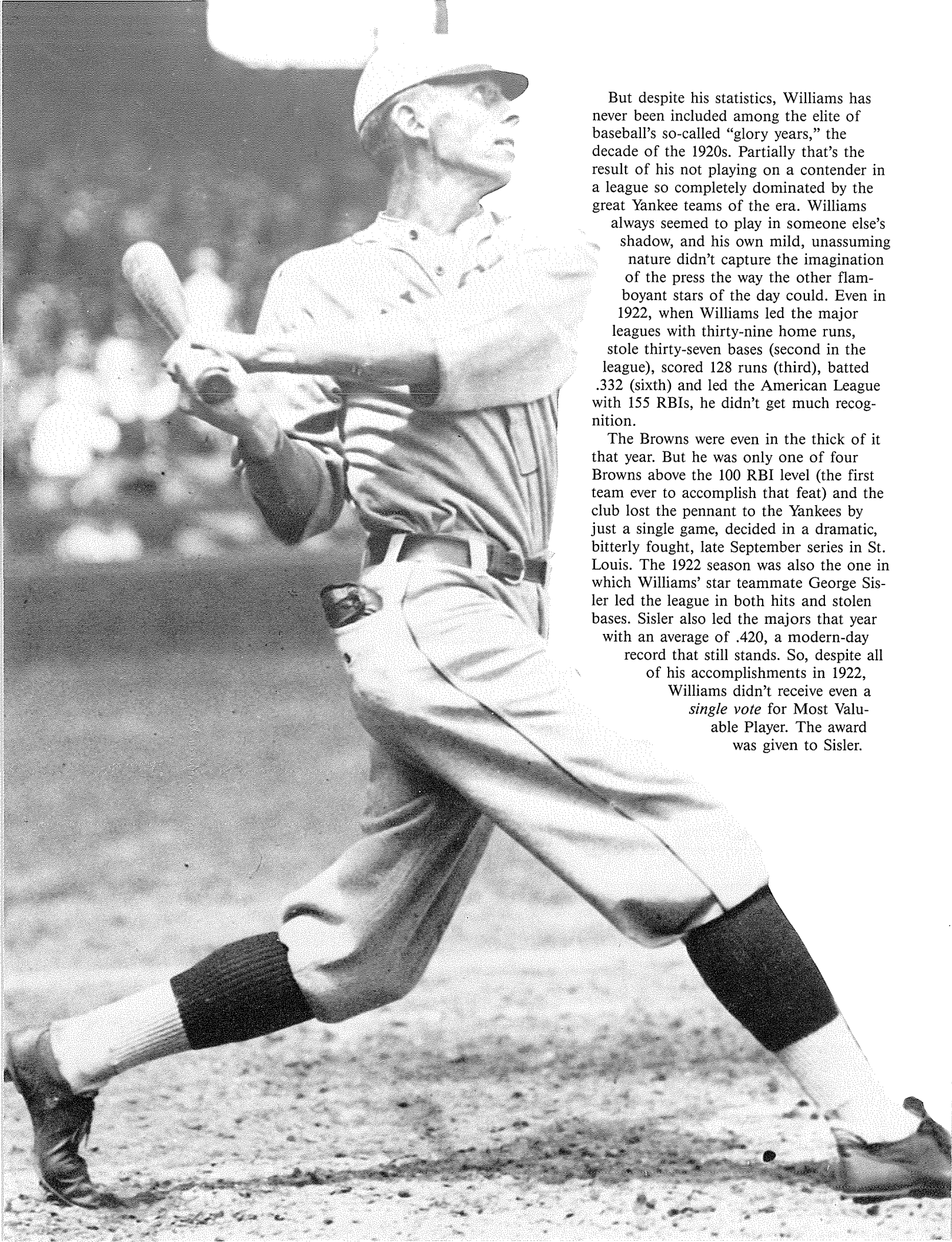


*In base running,
Williams was,
of course,
Babe Ruth's
superior.*

game. In baserunning Williams is, of course, Babe's superior,"¹ wrote one sports-writer.

Williams' skill is borne out by a list of his baseball accomplishments. He was the first major-leaguer to hit thirty homers and steal thirty bases in the same year, 1922. It wasn't until 1956 that another player (a fellow named Willie Mays) would duplicate this feat. And even though Ruth is known as the Sultan of Swat, Williams was the first player to hit homers in six consecutive games, the first to hit three homers in one game, and the first to hit two in a single inning. Williams' lifetime batting average was .319, and over the nine seasons he was a starter (1920-1929) he batted .325—all in all, a good record.





But despite his statistics, Williams has never been included among the elite of baseball's so-called "glory years," the decade of the 1920s. Partially that's the result of his not playing on a contender in a league so completely dominated by the great Yankee teams of the era. Williams always seemed to play in someone else's shadow, and his own mild, unassuming nature didn't capture the imagination of the press the way the other flamboyant stars of the day could. Even in 1922, when Williams led the major leagues with thirty-nine home runs, stole thirty-seven bases (second in the league), scored 128 runs (third), batted .332 (sixth) and led the American League with 155 RBIs, he didn't get much recognition.

The Browns were even in the thick of it that year. But he was only one of four Browns above the 100 RBI level (the first team ever to accomplish that feat) and the club lost the pennant to the Yankees by just a single game, decided in a dramatic, bitterly fought, late September series in St. Louis. The 1922 season was also the one in which Williams' star teammate George Sisler led the league in both hits and stolen bases. Sisler also led the majors that year with an average of .420, a modern-day record that still stands. So, despite all of his accomplishments in 1922, Williams didn't receive even a *single vote* for Most Valuable Player. The award was given to Sisler.



***In 1922,
Williams led the
major leagues
with thirty-nine
home runs
and stole
thirty-seven
bases.***

Not even Ken's home run title in 1922, for which he bested Ruth himself, would garner him much lasting respect. Ruth would later write of his own 1922 season: "... my home runs dropped off from fifty-nine to thirty-five. That was still a lot of homers, but it wasn't good enough to keep my HR title that season."² Most baseball fans, and sportswriters too, noted that the Babe had missed the first month of the season since Commissioner Kennesaw Mountain Landis suspended him for an illegal barnstorming trip. And, since Williams had almost 200 more at-bats than Ruth did, of course he beat out Ruth for the homer title. At least so said the pundits.

In 1928 the Browns traded Williams to the Boston Red Sox, for whom he played only two years. In his last season, 1929, he batted a very respectable .345, not bad for a forty-year-old player. In 1931 Williams returned to Grants Pass, where he would variously work as a policeman and tavern owner and even coach a local semi-pro ball club. Grants Pass was proud of its local hero, and Williams was frequently asked to participate in local celebrations or gatherings. "Grants Pass showed its support for its baseball star, who was selected by one national magazine as the greatest player ever to come from Oregon."³

In later life Williams would receive much-deserved recognition for his baseball

exploits, including being inducted into both the Oregon and the Missouri sports halls of fame, but he has never been enshrined in the Major League Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. While many people have strongly advocated that he deserves that honor, including many St. Louis sportswriters, with each passing year, as older reporters who remember him retire, his chances for this honor fade.

In 1958, only a year before he died, Ken Williams did receive one honor that perhaps meant more to him than anything else. The St. Louis baseball writers voted him, along with Sisler, Rogers Hornsby, Stan Musial and others, to that city's "all-time" team. It was an honor richly deserved by a Josephine County boy who could play ball with the best of them.

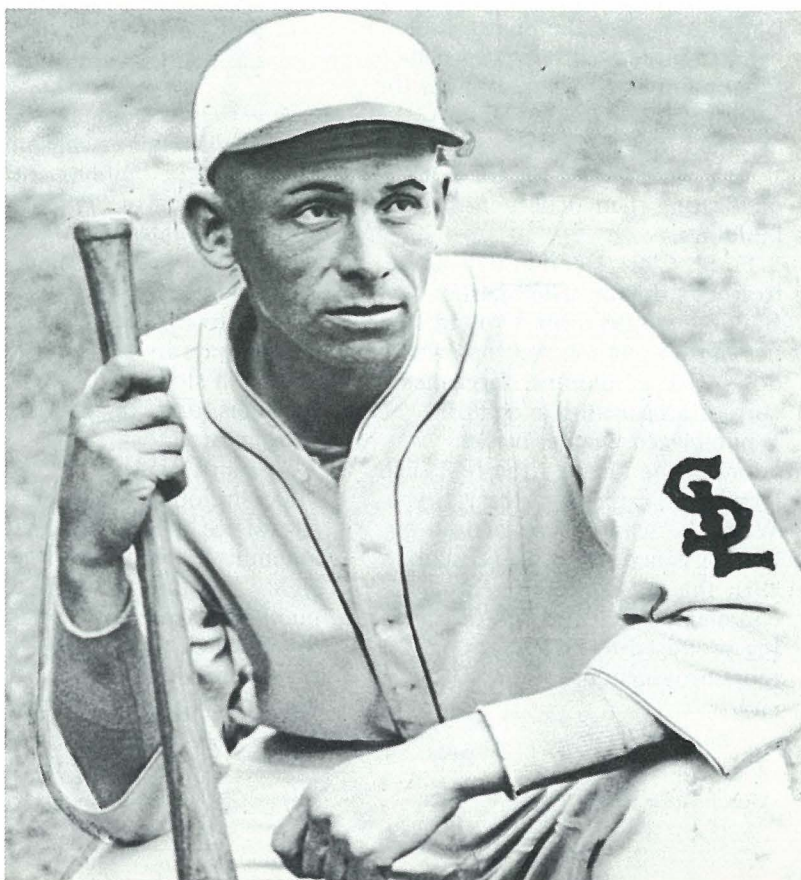


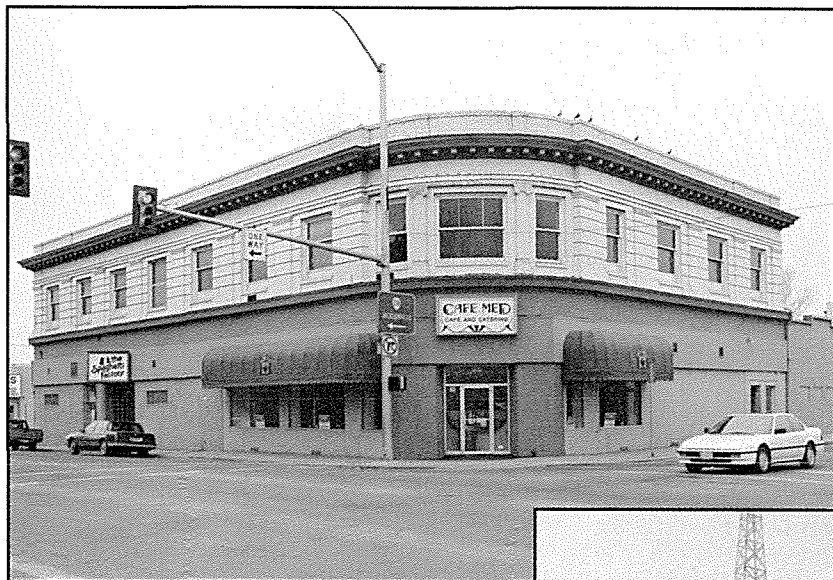
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1. *Baseball Magazine*, July 1922 (as quoted in Greg Hanberg, "Fame Eludes Williams," *Grants Pass Daily Courier*, 28 August 1987, B:1).
2. Babe Ruth, as told to Bob Considine, *The Babe Ruth Story* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1948), p. 113.
3. Hanberg.

George Kramer, an October fan if ever there was one, came across a short story about "the Babe" visiting an old southern Oregon rival while researching a historic property in the Ashland Daily Tidings. Curiosity is truly an enlightening compulsion.

Photos courtesy
National Baseball Museum



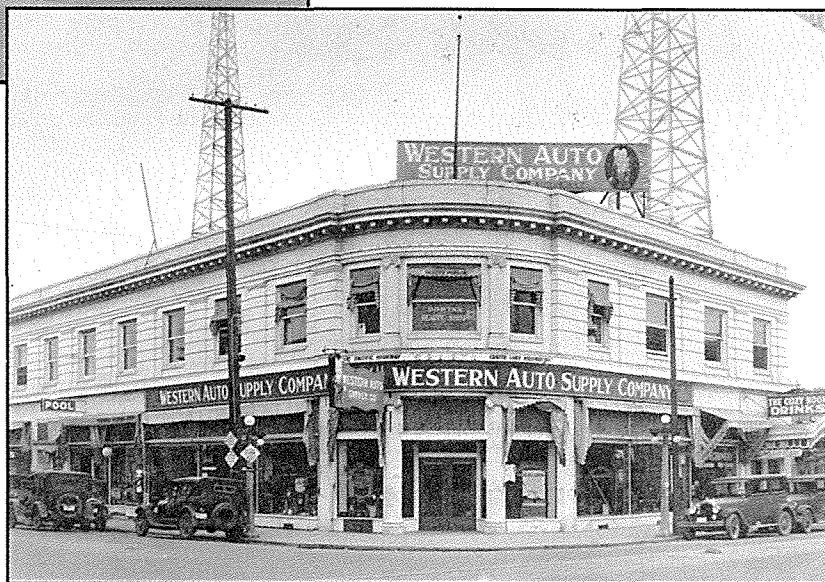


The roof of the Sparta Building sported KMED's transmitter antennas, ca. 1928. Today, the structure sits vacant on the corner of East Main and Riverside. SOHS #7940; photo by Susan Ray

Thanks to the whirlwind rise of a profitable orchard industry, 1911 was a good year for Medford. Businesses boomed and buildings were erected as fast as cash could purchase contractors and materials.

In the midst of this hubbub, orchardist and businessman J. N. Root purchased a prime lot on the corner of East Main and Riverside, where he envisioned constructing the classiest office building in Medford. He commissioned the area's prominent architect, Frank Clark, to design the Sparta Building. He hired well-respected contractor Elmer Childers to build the \$40,000 investment. And Root dreamed that the finest professionals would fight for the honor of locating their offices in the building.

Frank Clark's design did justice to Root's dream. The Sparta Building would sport a round corner façade (with curved bay windows), Ionic columns, sheet metal cornice and teeth-like dentils. White-glazed enamel bricks adorned the façade—the first such terra cotta exterior in the valley. When the white bricks arrived on the construction site in February 1911, the *Medford Mail Tribune* commented that the Sparta Building promised to be "one of the most ornamental buildings in the city."



A variety of reputable professional and retail establishments did move into the building. In 1913, soon-to-be-mayor "Pop" Gates moved his Gates Auto Company to the main floor showroom, and conducted a thriving business until moving to a larger location a block away. In 1925, Western Auto opened a store in the area vacated by Gates, and stayed there for many years.

Upstairs, southern Oregon's first radio station, KMED, occupied five office spaces. Transmitter antennas—consisting of two eighty-five-foot windmill towers purchased from a local farmer—were erected on the roof. From this location, KMED broadcasted the second Dempsey-Tunney prize

fight (1927), numerous World Series matches, the staple Amos 'n' Andy show, and Presbyterian church services.

After KMED left the Sparta Building in the 1930s, other occupants included physicians and music teachers, the Southern Oregon Art Association, So Yick Herb Company, and the State Board of Parole and Probation.

By the 1960s, the Sparta Building faced hard times. A fire gutted the upstairs, which has remained vacant ever since. A series of restaurants and bars came, tried to make a go of it, and failed. Currently unoccupied, the building is for sale—an empty testament to the faith in a city that had "arrived."

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*Indicates upgraded membership
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From the Collections_____Janette Meek

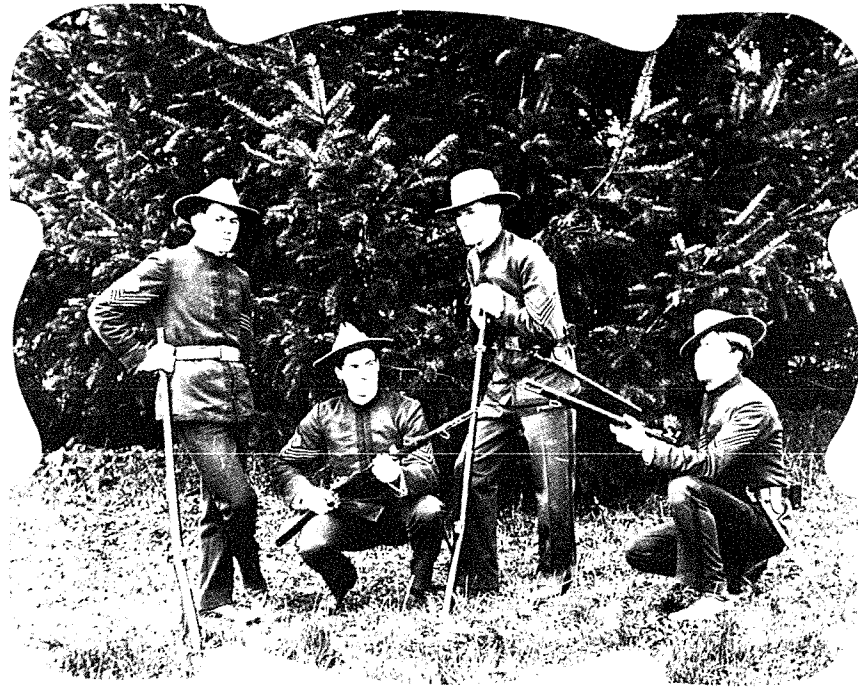
It happened one year in Medford that a trophy was won for losing a Kitten Ball game. Kitten Ball originated in the late 1890s when the game of baseball was played indoors, calling for a smaller playing area and a larger ball. The game was known by a variety of names: Big Ball, Twilight Ball, Mush Ball, Sissy Ball, Dainty Drawers, and Softball. It was not until 1933, when the first national tournament was played as part of the Chicago World's Fair, that the Amateur Softball Association was formed and softball became the official name of the game.

A team of fourteen dedicated players from Medford, managed by E. T. Weed, played together for four years. In 1928 and 1929, the team lost only one game. Pitcher Harold Vane Elliot, or "High Voltage" Elliot, credits the wins to flawless defense. This trophy, with the inscription "Kitten Ball Champions," was given to the team by the Gold Seal Creamery Club for the loss.

A player stands poised atop the thirteen-inch-high silver trophy. The riser displays in relief a face mask, mitt, balls, and bats surrounded by two olive branches. The players' names, manager's name, date, and club name all are inscribed around the relief.

A friend who listened to Elliott's stories about the wins and the single loss, Ralph G. Merton, donated the trophy to the Southern Oregon Historical Society in 1974. The Society houses numerous objects that, owing to limited exhibit space, are not often seen by visitors. We hope that featuring an item in each issue of the *Table Rock Sentinel* will provide an enjoyable and educational glimpse of the scope of its collection.





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