

Leaving a Legacy

The Gray County Veterans Memorial Center in Cimarron recently embarked on a project, supported by a KHC Heritage grant, to collect oral histories from Korean War veterans. Project director **Kathleen Holt** shares why it is important for the southwest Kansas county to preserve the stories of “the forgotten war” before it’s too late.



Kathleen Holt

The old adage that warns against putting off until tomorrow what should be done today is perhaps nowhere more applicable than when applied to a KHC-funded project to collect the Korean War Era veterans’ oral histories in Gray County. In 2011, nearly 900 World War II and Korean War veterans died every day in the United States.

In 2006, Gray County dedicated a veterans’ memorial that holds more than 2,000 names beginning with those who fought in the Civil War. The memorial and oral history projects were inspired by Wiley McFarland, a Navy veteran. McFarland served on the Gray County Commission and wanted to leave a legacy that recognized the many contributions of everyday soldiers who left our rural county for U.S. bases, as well as foreign shores. “The stories may seem ordinary and unimportant to many, but unless they are told, recorded and made available, we cannot understand those fathers and mothers, those sons and daughters, those friends and neighbors whose military experience shaped not only their, but also our, lives,” McFarland said.

Project scholar Joyce Suellentrop, formerly of Newman University, was born and raised in Ingalls, and as the advisor and interviewer for this project, knows many of the veterans whom she will be interviewing. Suellentrop points out that the Korean War, while often called the “forgotten war” is essentially an “unknown war.” The start of the U.S. ground war experience in Korea (under the flag of the United Nations) is generally dated from June 29, 1950, to the signing of a cease-fire on July 27, 1953. “Retrieving the memories of veterans who served throughout the 1950s will help us all understand this important part of history,” commented Ms. Sullentrop.

One interviewee, Paul Meadows, served on the other side of the world in Germany in a Transportation and Motor Unit. He

recalled being extremely homesick for his wife and son back in Cimarron. “It was after I returned to my family and town that I realized what a valuable experience it was to have seen hard-working people rebuilding devastated homes and businesses. While I was there, I saw the people and the lives as different, but when I got home, I realized that despite the differences, there were many things about the people and the towns that were just the same.”

After reading the transcripts online, veterans’ family members and friends have written from several states. A recurring theme of the heartfelt letters of appreciation is, “I had no idea. My dad had never told these stories to us. It’s like talking with him all over again.”

Transcripts of 20 Korean War veterans’ stories can be found in a resource center of the Gray County Courthouse and will soon be available on the Kansas Historical Society’s Kansas Memory website, www.kansasmemory.org.



Wiley McFarland at the Veterans’ Memorial in Gray County.

Heritage grants for veterans’ oral history projects are available. Visit www.kansashumanities.org/grants or contact Murl Riedel, director of grants, at murl@kansashumanities.org or (785) 357-0359 for more information.