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WWII Letters Featured in Journal Article

PIERRE, S.D. – *La Posta: A Journal of American Postal History* in its December/January 2006 issue, features an article on World War II letters written by South Dakota State Archives, manuscript archivist, Matthew T. Reitzel. From September 9, 1942 to November 11, 1945 Steve A. Cihak of Tripp mailed 552 letters to his sweetheart Mary I. Paul. The journal article covers Steve's World War II correspondence during his eight months in basic training in the United States. The correspondence includes hand written letters, typewritten letters, v-mail and air mail, postcards, and Western Union Telegrams.

The South Dakota State Historical Society received Steve's letters on February 8, 2005. Steve's niece, Susan Paul of Tyndall, donated the letters to the State Archives, located in the Cultural Heritage Center in Pierre, South Dakota. All 552 letters, including envelopes, were stored in a 15"x 10"x 7" wooden box which Steve constructed and mailed to Mary during the war. Reitzel mentions, "The letters are historically significant because they make up an entire dialogue of one soldier's experiences from the beginning to the end of World War II."

Steve's letters show some of the day-to-day activities of a World War II soldier. Furthermore, there often appears to be no difference between Steve the civilian and Steve the soldier. "He went to town, saw movies, drank beer, went to church, played with some local kids, had dentist appointments, and joked around with his campmates and coworkers," Reitzel notes. "Activities we all experience; the only difference being Steve was miles away from his home and family back in South Dakota."

Within the letters are accounts of the people, places, and events relating to Steve's home – South Dakota. Reitzel remarks, "As the prototypical South Dakotan, Steve often talked about the weather and crops, both where he was stationed and back home. Other topics covered are local marriages, deaths (both military and otherwise), and other activities of Steve's family."

There are 61 letters in this article comprising Steve's eight months of basic training in the United States. The locations include: Fort Leavenworth in Kansas, Camp Robinson in Arkansas, Fort Ethan Allen near Burlington, Vermont, a camp in Georgetown, Washington, Fort Lewis in Washington, and three letters postmarked from New York – Steve's final stateside visit before being shipped overseas to North Africa.

Reitzel continues, "These letters, written to a loved one, reveal the story of a soldier. The correspondence is of immense importance in highlighting, not the heroic or the patriotic, but the common everyday occurrences of one man's life during war. A diary, so to speak, of how soldiers acted, thought, and made their way through a situation that for many, could have been better or could have been worse."

The State Archives is happy to accept donated materials like Steve Cihak's World War II letters. The archive's frequently receives and retains donated materials of our state's past such as letters, diaries, journals, photos, maps, and other various manuscripts from individuals throughout South Dakota. These materials are stored within the archives climate controlled facilities and used by professional historians, amateur researchers, and genealogists.

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The South Dakota State Historical Society, an office of the Department of Tourism and State Development, is headquartered at the South Dakota Cultural Heritage Center in Pierre. The center houses the society's world-class museum, the archives, and the historic preservation, publishing and administrative/development offices. Call (605) 773-3458 or visit www.sdhistory.org for more information. The society also has an archaeology office in Rapid City; call (605) 394-1936 for more information.