

Growing up in the National Guard Armory

by
Gary Dielman

Last week [June 1999] a community meeting was held at the Extension Building in Baker City to discuss plans for a new Oregon National Guard armory, community center, and fair grounds. For many of those attending, the meeting probably brought back memories about the present buildings. I know it did for me. My memories of the rodeo grounds come from attending a couple of rodeos but mostly from going to amateur baseball games as a child in the 1950's. At that time the local National Guard unit had a baseball team and also ran the concession stand at ball games with my father, Ray Dielman, a member of Co. F, in charge of the concession.

My fondest memories of the community center are of roller-skating there in the 1950's. The hardwood floor made a great skating surface but earned its name when the seat of one's pants forcefully met the "hard" wood. I also remember at age fourteen attending a pancake and sausage dinner at the community center. For the price of the ticket—75 cents—I got a meal and a chance at winning an 8 mm movie camera. And I was the winner! I still have the camera but haven't taken any movies with it for decades. The only home movies I remember are a movie of me doing handsprings across my backyard and one of my wife, Eloise, being bitten by a mad goose.



National Guard Armory in 2001

But most of my memories are of the National Guard building on East Street. The building was constructed in 1954 with dignitaries like Oregon Governor Paul L. Patterson attending the dedication ceremony. At that time the unit was Company F, 2nd Battalion, 186th Infantry, 41st Division of the Oregon National Guard.

When I joined the unit in June 1955, I was only 15 years old. My father, who was a part-time administrative officer for Co. F, recruited me and facilitated my getting in before the minimum age of 17. I'm sure the company commander knew I wasn't old enough, but in those days commander's were under a lot of pressure to get their companies up to strength, so turned a blind eye to the age requirement.



2002 Demolition of the Community Center

Since my father, a veteran of World War II, had joined the local unit in 1947, when I was just seven years old, my contact with the National Guard goes back long before I joined Co. F. Before the present armory was built in 1954, the unit operated out of the old Natatorium, now home to the Oregon Trail Regional Museum. I remember the quarters there being very dark and dingy. To me it was a little creepy.

After the unit moved into the new building on East Street, my father hired me at age fourteen to do some of the janitorial work, which mainly consisted of sweeping up and cleaning the toilets. My favorite job was running the buffing machine. The trick with that machine was balance. Tilt it forward it went right, tilt it back it went left. Tilt too far and the machine ran away with you.

Since I had access to the building during times when it was closed, I had at my disposal some great recreational facilities. For example, there was a basketball court. The hoop was at the west end of the drill hall entry way, but low ceiling height didn't allow for high arching shoots. I also had use of the rifle range located in the southwest corner of the drill hall. As I remember, it was composed of a large, thick iron plate tilted at an angle to deflect the bullets into sand. Also available was a ping pong table in the room in the southeast corner of the building.

During my senior year in high school (1956-57), Co. F conducted a very successful recruitment campaign that enlisted many of my classmates, like Bill Pollock, Darrell Jones, Gary Moser (my brother-in-law to be), Murray Stookey, Larry Taylor, Orin

Hutton, Guy McCoy, John Montgomery, Jim Sherman, Ed McKinney, and Allan Coons. Not long after joining, the governor called Co. F into active duty for two days to fight the flood of February 1957, which turned the center of Baker City east of Main Street and Geiser-Pollman Park into a lake.



2002 Demolition of the Community Center

A warm Chinook wind had filled Powder River with melted snow and ice. At that time Mason Dam did not exist, so there was no way to control the runoff. Normally the river channel, built up during the 1930's, might have contained the flow. The problem came when ice many inches thick on the river south of Baker City started breaking up and floating down river and through town.

Besides filling sandbags, one of my duties was standing on the Washington Street bridge where I used a long pole to push pieces of ice under the bridge. If allowed to accumulate the ice would have created a dam causing even more flooding. As I remember, dynamite was used to blow up ice jams above and below town.

What little sleep we young guardsmen got was on the concrete floor of the armory drill hall. The active duty to fight the flood lasted only a couple of days, but it was probably the most memorable days any of us spent in the unit.

Plans for a new armory and community center discussed at last week's meeting include removal of the community center but retention of the armory building. For those who will be sad to see the community center go, plans are for it not to be simply bulldozed and carted off to the dump but to salvage the building's trusses and hardwood floor.

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