

March 1945 – World War II at 80

Part 1: Crossing the Rhine River and Advancing into Western Germany

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THE RHINE RIVER — One of the major rivers in Europe, the Rhine stretches across western Germany. At 760 miles in length, it is second only to the Danube River as the longest river in Central and Western Europe.

During World War II, the river provided a significant natural barrier to Allied troops beginning their advance into Western Germany.

With an average width of 1,300 feet (four football fields) at its central section, the swift moving river made it impossible for men to cross on foot or even attempt to swim.

Determined to delay the U.S. advance, German forces bombed and destroyed every bridge — there were 47 of them — that crossed the Rhine River.

Ludendorff Bridge

Miraculously, the Ludendorff railway bridge at Remagen, 35 miles south of Cologne, remained intact at the beginning of March.

The German Army initially used this bridge as an escape route for their retreating forces.

After making it across the Rhine, they attempted to destroy the bridge with demolition charges but failed.

Discovered by members of the U.S. Ninth Armored Division on March 7, the damaged but still functioning bridge, with its 1,000 feet span, provided critical access across the Rhine River.

An 18-day battle over control of the bridgehead ensued between U.S. and German forces.

The damaged bridge finally collapsed on March 17, tragically killing 33 American U.S. Army engineers and wounding 33 others.

But not before five U.S. divisions and their armored vehicles had already crossed the bridge.

By the time the Ludendorff Bridge went down, American



The Ludendorff Bridge at Remagen 2 was one of the last remaining bridges over the Rhine River by March 1945. (Public Domain)

combat engineers had constructed treadway, pontoon, and Bailey bridges across the Rhine, bringing a steady stream of more men and vehicles to the other side.

In an engineering marvel, hundreds of similar temporary bridges were erected all along the Rhine River, as well as ferry service with Naval vessels, to deliver American forces across the waterway.

Richard Reynolds Blunk

Mooresville native, Richard Reynolds Blunk, lost his life in the battle for the Ludendorff Bridge.

A PFC with the First Army, he arrived in Europe in November 1944.

Blunk went missing on March 14, 1945, and was later declared killed in action.

He had married Vivian Burkett of Martinsville in 1943 and was the father of a 2-year-old son, Rick.

Vivian was expecting their second child, a son, Robert S., who was born several weeks after his father's death.



BLUNK

Vivian later married Adrain Stanger of Martinsville, another veteran of World War II, in 1946.

Charles William “Bill” Brummet
Martinsville native, Charles William “Bill” Brummet, survived crossing the Rhine River at Remagen, but just barely.

Drafted into the Army at the age of 18 in October 1944, he was assigned to Company I of the 47th Regiment, 9th Army Division.

The Ludendorff Bridge collapsed shortly after Brummett and his unit crossed it on March 17.

Brummett earned one of his two bronze stars during that battle.

“We went through the countryside with the tanks,” recalled Brummett. “We’d clean out the town and move on to the next one. It was one nightmare after another!”

During the last two weeks of the war, Brummett saved the life of one of his older Army buddies with a one-round shot from his machine gun.

“I see the old man going down, like in a slow-motion picture; blood



BRUMMETT



Ed Williams (Bob to those who knew him in high school) started flying back in the closing days of World War II in Europe. As a part of the 352 Fighter Group who flew fighter escort to both American and British bombers for their missions over Germany, Ed Williams developed a passion for flying which has continued until this day. Prior to the P-51 entry into World War II combat...our Allied bombers did not have escort planes that could go all the way to the German targets...hence the casualty rates to our airmen was staggering and so ever costly.

(Courtesy clipping)

going everywhere,” Brummett said of the German soldier he killed to save his buddy.

That buddy, a logger from California named ‘Pop,’ told Brummett, following the shot that saved his life, “Kid, I’ll never call you kid again!”

Brummett survived the war and died at the age of 88 in 2014.

There were more river crossings later in the month.

On March 22, the Fifth Infantry Division of General Patton’s Third Army crossed the Rhine River in assault boats at Oppenheim, 93 miles south of Remagen.

Operations Varsity and Plunder

Two days later, on March 24th, Operation Varsity began along the Rhine River in northwestern Germany.

Part of Operation Plunder, British General Montgomery’s planned advance across the Rhine River, over 16,000 American and British paratroopers jumped from thousands of cargo planes to support the advancing ground troops.

It was the largest airborne operation of World War II.

Edward R. “Bob” Williams

Martinsville native, Edward R. “Bob” Williams, took part in the operation.

A 1941 graduate of Martinsville High School, Williams was a Second Lieutenant P-51 pilot serving with the 352nd Fighter Group, part of the 8th Air Force.

His group helped protect the cargo planes and bombers used in the massive operation.

But the month of March ended with sadness for at least one Morgan County family.

Wayne McClary

Wayne McClary, age 25, of Morgantown, was killed in action in Germany on March 31, 1945.

McClary was a PFC in the Army and assigned to the 191st Field Artillery Battery, part of the Third Army.

He served as the staff driver for Major H.P. Smith, the brother-in-law of Gen. Douglas MacArthur, in command of the western Pacific forces.

The details of his death were not known.

The notification of his death produced a bitter irony for the Blount and Verna McClary family, who sent three other sons off to the war.

Within hours of younger son Jack leaving to begin his military service, Mrs. McClary received word of her son Wayne’s death.

Families never knew when the dreaded telegram might arrive announcing the death of a loved one.

What was known to Morgan County families and the rest of the nation at the end of March was that the Rhine River crossings for Allied forces signaled that victory in Germany was drawing near.

Next time: March 1945 – Part 2: Action in the Pacific Theater

Learn more about Ronald P. May and his books at ronaldpmay.com or contact him by email at ron@ronaldpmay.com. Check out his videos on YouTube at: World War II History & Stories with Ron May.

Hats off to the Milliner

If you are a moderate age, you can probably rattle off some jobs that you remember people having that are no longer viable professions. No I am not talking about the clerk at Blockbuster Video. I am thinking about blacksmiths, cobblers, tinkers and the subject of our article today — the milliner.

The hatter was primarily the maker of men’s hats, and the milliner specialized in women’s hats. The term millinery included not only the construction of ladies headwear but included the design, manufacturing and sales. A milliner’s shop often sold more than just hats. They often sold fashion accessories from certain articles of clothing, ribbons, hairpieces, jewelry, gloves and purses.

Today, ladies hats are not the popular have-to-have accessory they once were. Now this is the exception to our neighbors across the pond. How many times did you see Queen Elizabeth outside sans headgear? The track at Ascot is all about the hats and their lavishness. We do mimic this a bit in this country with the ladies and their chapeaus at the Kentucky Derby.

But the millinery trade particularly in the 1800s was a prominent establishment. Many prominent modern day fashion designers such as Coco Chanel and Indiana-born Halston began their careers as milliners.

Elaborate headpieces go back to ancient civilizations like the Egyptians. In ancient Egypt, hats were symbols of status and power. We seldom see renderings of the pharaohs or queens without wearing an elaborate headpiece of some kind. King Tut would not have been as impressive wearing an IU ball cap.

These hats were not only status but served a practical function to shield the wearer from harsh weather. I thought the “fascinator” was a modern day contrivance, but this form of headdress came to be in the 15th and 16th century.

The actual title “milliner” dates back to the 16th century with the term originating from Milan, Italy, where



History Musings
ELLEN WILSON-PRUITT

hats and fashion items were being produced. The 17th and 18th century brought the milliner’s role into prominence with the age of elaborate wigs and hats being the fashion of the day.

Between the years of 1870-1920, the demand for fine feathers for women’s hats brought about the “plume trade,” which the hunting of tropical birds brought about decimation of some species. Never was the tropical feather trend as prominent as it was in the Victorian era.

Major cities like New York and London became the centers for the trade, sponsoring large-scale hunting and trading operations. Snowy egrets and birds of paradise were especially sought after. In 1918, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in the U.S. made it illegal to hunt and trade in feathers of many bird species, which helped protect their populations.

In colonial times, the milliner’s shop was the place where women could find fashionable accessories. It was, in fact, one of the few reputable businesses that could be owned and operated by a woman.

With the 20th century came innovations and changes to the millinery styles. The Victorian era introduced the “cloche” style hat that I think of when I picture Jane Austin. It had been a long tradition that ladies would look forward to getting a new bonnet to wear with their finery on Easter. It was such a big deal that they even wrote a popular song about it.

In later years, hats became mass-produced, so the term “milliner” became more associated to those who

actually applied hand craftsmanship to design, make, sell or trim hats. Many a hat shop would receive designs from a city supplier. These sometimes were of a basic design and the milliner would “doll” up the piece with trims, ribbon and even silk flowers and transform it into an original piece.

In Martinsville, at the turn of the past century, the downtown was filled with people from all across the country who were frequenting the numerous sanitariums. Often times, these out-of-town visitors were of substantial financial means. I can imagine the ladies strolling around the square shopping in big fine hats.

Growing up, I can remember many of the older ladies coming to church wearing a hat. The women in my family were not big hat wearers, and that is why I was totally amazed when I came across a photo of my grandma, Clo-na Dow Stevens, as a young lady wearing the largest hat I believe I had ever seen.

In the photo, it looks as if the large white area at the top of the hat was a feather or “bodacious” adornment of some kind. The only hat I ever saw my grandma wear was a straw hat when she was working outside in the yard or garden, so finding this photo was truly a revelation.

The turn of the century fashion dictated a necessary presence in town for an establishment where ladies could purchase their hats. The designs were influenced by the art nouveau fashion of the day. Lavish brims swept around the face, many with frills and fluff. Hatpins were needed to anchor the hat upon the head. By 1904, the hat’s height was more important than the width. By 1908, the big Merry Widow picture hat became popular. The Merry Widow hat was always black and usually encased in filmy chiffon and festooned in feathers. By 1907, another style of the turban became popular.

The earliest I could find of a millinery in Martinsville was in 1905. A millinery and dressmaking store could be found on South Main Street and was operated by

Townsend & Fogleman. By 1908, a millinery store was operated by a Mrs. Sarah Koons. In 1910, Miller’s Millinery Parlor was operating on the south side of the square, and I believe this location served as a hat shop for some time through various owners. On South Main, 1913 saw Sarah Burgett expanding her shop and taking on additional space in the rear to increase the size of her workroom. By 1914, Mrs. Frank McClure, Mrs. Alice Jones, Mrs. Sarah Burgett, Mrs. Augusta Traub as well as the Phelps and Barskins store were all selling hats in town.

The Millinery Bazaar was situated on East Washington around 1916. Proprietor Miss Blanche Hess’s resume included three years of study at the Chicago Institute of art. She purchased the store from her sister Marie Stansberry.

In 1917, Mrs. Chas Johnson assumed possession of The Hat Shop, which had formerly been in the Shireman room on East Washington. That year, the selections included shades of “tableau, monkey skin, copen, rose, red and gooseberry green from prices of \$4.95-\$6.95.”

I am an artist, and I had to look up the color of tableau, and I think it is a blue of some kind. As to the color of “monkey skin,” I have no idea.

To be frank, I was almost afraid to do a computer search for fear of what might pop up. I can just imagine a conversation between two ladies as one pays compliment to the other on how nicely the color of her new hat flatters her complexion, and her friend smiles and replies, “Thank you, it is monkey skin.”

You could even buy hats from Moore’s 5 and 10-cent Store — later known as Kivett’s. You could cover your head for the price of \$2.49-\$2.98, so there was no reason for a lady to be walking around town bareheaded.

My husband’s great-grandmother Ruby Dille Crews owned Crews Hat Shop on the south side of the square until her death. In 1932, Fannie Kivett purchased this shop from Mrs.

“Moore For Your Money at Moore’s”

OUR BALCONY HAT SHOP FOR LADIES AND CHILDREN
NOW OPEN

Care in Buying to Select the Best Styles to Suit All Classes of Trade.
Special Prices Offered This Week to Induce You to Come and Look

Profits Off This Week on Hats

LOT No. 1—1 lot of latest Velvet trimmed and untrimmed styles in Turbans and street Hats, worth up to \$5.00, Sale Price this week	LOT No. 2—1 lot of wide and medium sized velvet shapes and Hats for Ladies, also few sailor shapes, worth up to \$7 and \$8.00 Sale Price
..\$2.49	..\$2.98

“We know you say there cannot be much to a Hat that cost \$2.49 and \$2.98; all we ask is this, COME AND SEE.

HATS THAT ARE LATEST STYLES FROM NEW YORK or otherwise right here on sale.

Remember we have hats at \$2.49, \$1.98, \$2.98, \$3.25, \$4.00, \$3.69, \$4.39, \$5.00, \$6.25, \$6.39 \$6.89, \$7.00 or \$8.00; \$7.49, \$8.25, \$9.00, \$9.69, \$10.00, \$9.99.

WE CAN SATISFY THE MOST PARTICULAR IN HATS

Complete line of trimmings in stock, about 1000 different trimmings to select from.

A lady in charge. She will be glad to take time with you. Come see what we have to offer.

Located South of Interurban Station	MOORE’S HAT SHOP AT MOORE’S 5 and 10c STORE Many Items Over 10¢	Located 2nd door North of Corner Drug Store
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Hats – Moore’s 5 and 10-cent Store – later known as Kivett’s – had a “balcony hat shop for ladies and children,” with prices ranging from \$1.98 to \$10. (Courtesy clipping)

Crews’ estate.

By the time of World War II, women were still wearing hats, but sporting the latest fashion had taken a back seat to rationing and the war effort. Post war saw all that was new.

In 1948, the Millinery Merchants Association proclaimed the fall fashion to be small hats designed to blend with suits and dresses. Apparently ladies in the ‘40s were going hatless rather than wearing the larger hats of pre-war designs.

The publicity proclaimed to ladies: “It takes 20 years off a woman’s appearance to have some, but not all of her hair show.” I don’t think the 20-years-younger claim would work for me if I had any of my gray hair peeking out. The publicity also shared that women with large heads could finally find ready-made head attire to fit. No more bigheaded ladies walking around uncovered!

I am not sure when the last hat shop finally closed in town. Growing up, I can remember Mrs. Petro’s Dress Shop always had some ladies hats in their display window. My mom never wore hats. I acquired her hat sense and only remember one Easter hat growing up.

Today, I really fight wearing a hat even in the dead of winter. Jackie Kennedy made the pillbox hat the rage all over world in the ‘60s. Let’s not forget that the

hat was accompanied with a matching pair of gloves. Once the free love of the late ‘60s came around, ladies hats were more the floppy “hippie” hats. Then in the ‘70s, the picture hat became popular. This big wide-brimmed hat was popular attire for the wedding party, including the bride. Thus, every wedding shop often featured an array of these “lace sombreros” as I like to think of them. I’m sure many a bridesmaid during that time is still having nightmares.

Today, the upscale weddings and especially those of royal warrant find a sea of hats and fascinators in the crowd. This rules out us short people being able to get a clear view of the festivities. That is why I continue to decline all royal wedding invitations to this day.

If you decide to wear an Easter bonnet this year, you may want to reflect back on the days when ladies and their hats were a part of every day life in downtown Martinsville.

The millinery proprietor was a fixture of many a downtown retail community.

If you enjoy these articles or have a memory or comment to share, feel free to email me at historymusingsmcc@gmail.com. Hats off to you!