

# From Wall To Wall

## Clay Co. Veterans Office Honors Soldiers With Walls Of Photos

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Each day, Cynthia Aden works under the watchful eyes of her father, uncle, cousins and other relatives.

She isn't part of a family business. Some of the relatives aren't even alive anymore.

As the Clay County Veterans Service Officer (VSO), she is surrounded in her office by nearly 800 photos of local veterans from all eras. The photos — which include her family — cover all four walls and dividers set up for additional display space.

"Right now, we have 765 photos. I really try to keep families' photos together on the wall," she said. "I am also keeping a spreadsheet, so you know where a photo is located when you go around the room."

Clay County may be unique in South Dakota by creating a photo display in its veterans service office, she said. To qualify for the display, veterans must be either past or current Clay County residents. Families or other parties must submit the photos, as the VSO doesn't solicit or collect images.

As she walked around the room, Aden shared stories about some of the veterans in the photos.

"We have Leo Kruse who served in both World War I and II. He was a PFC in the U.S. Army and a B2C in the U.S. Navy," she said. "During World War II, Harold Delaney was killed in action July 16, 1944, while Ernest Delaney was killed in action Sept. 22, 1944."

The military family connections run deep, as the photos include parents and children, siblings and cousins, Aden said.

"For example, we had Wesley J. Christensen who was in the U.S. Navy during World War II, and Wesley P. Christensen was a PFC in the U.S. Army and was activated in 2003 for the Iraq War," she said.

Aden feels her own kinship to the photos. They include her father, Frank Peterson, who served with the U.S. Navy in Korea, and her uncle, Vincent Peterson, who served with the U.S. Navy during World War II.

"My uncle's ship was blown up, and at first, he was presumed dead," she said. "He sustained head injuries and was paralyzed on his right side, similar to a stroke victim. He learned to walk again at a time when they didn't have vocational rehab like they do now."

Aden herself holds a place on the Wall of Fame, with a photo from her U.S. Army service during 1975-78.

"I served at the tail end of the Vietnam War," she said. "I spent two years in Heidelberg, Germany. I was a truck driver for a while, and then I was a legal clerk."

Aden sees the Wall of Fame's impacts on visitors.

"There are a lot of people who just walk in (the office) and look around at all the photos," she said. "They will say, 'Oh, look!' and be very pleased to find people they know. Many (of the pictured veterans) are family members or old neighbors."

### CAPTURING THE MOMENT

Former Clay County VSO Dave Wherry, who started the Wall of Fame about a dozen years ago, found a special fascination with the older portraits.

"The photos I really enjoyed were the ones from the Civil War and Spanish-American War," he said. "We had a couple of families from Clay



The walls of the Clay County Veterans Office in Vermillion are filled with photos of Veterans. What started out as a modest project has turned the office into a shrine that features more than 750 photos. BELOW: Clay County Veterans Service Officer Cynthia Aden is shown with a few of the photos, many of them submitted by veterans and their families.



County who had photos going back to the mid-1800s."

In addition, casual photos taken of the veterans while on duty provide a great feel for their combat site or other locations, Wherry said.

"There were many of (the photos) taken in the field setting, where it wasn't like an official photograph," he said. "We had guys from World War II and Vietnam in the field, and they were really good photos."

Wherry noted his casual military photo wasn't particularly noteworthy. "They have a picture of me up there, and it was taken at a Marine Corps ball at Camp Lejeune," he said with a laugh.

Ray Hofman, who served as Clay County VSO from 2002-11, said he also enjoyed the casual shots that captured the moment.

"The ones I liked the best were the guys who weren't in dress uniform, who were out working on the jeep or standing by the truck or working on airplanes," he said.

Hofman recalled a number of families with military traditions. "We had brothers who served during the Vietnam War and the Korean War. One

family had five or six brothers who served in the military," he said.

The photo gallery isn't strictly a men's club, as the walls include women who served in various capacities, Hofman said.

During his nearly eight years as veterans service officer, Hofman saw the number of photos soar.

"When I took over (as VSO), there were about 300 or so pictures," Hofman said. "During my tenure, by the time I left, we had 700 pictures."

Hofman took measures to accommodate the explosion of photos. The early submissions were 8 by 10 inches, and he later required that photos not exceed 5 by 7 inches. He also set up a divider in his office and later created a horseshoe-shaped display to house more photos.

### OFF TO A FAST START

Wherry didn't envision such a response when he thought of the Wall of Fame.

"I had been in the (VSO) office a year, and I wondered, 'What could you do to show your appreciation for the crop of (veterans) coming out of the military?' It dawned on me, maybe photos," Wherry said.

"I went to the (Clay) county commissioners and told them we should have (the display). They asked, 'How many (portraits) do you think you'll have?' I said, 'I don't know, I think if we get 50 or 100, we will have done really well.' Deep down, Wherry worried he may have initially overestimated the possible response from the public.

"When you go into endeavors like that, you don't know how it will turn out," he said. "To be honest with you, if we got 25 or 30 (photos), it would probably be good. But I didn't think it would go beyond that."

To Wherry's shock, he quickly reached 100 frames just through word of mouth about the project, and the numbers kept going.

The response took a quantum leap following news articles about the wall in the Press & Dakotan, Vermillion Plain Talk and other publications.

"When those stories came out, then it really caught on like wildfire," he said.

During Wherry's VSO tenure, the photos filled the four walls in his office. He made notations about the photos and kept a log book about the display's visitors. He kept family photos grouped together for easier viewing.

"We had our secretary out in the front room, and we kept the office open during noon hour so people could come in and look at the photos," he said.

During her three years as VSO, Aden said she has received an average of 12 photos a year. Quite often, family members find their veteran's photo while cleaning out closets, she said.

"My biggest problem is that I'm running out of room. We have the bigger pictures and group

photos out in the hallway," she said. "I may end up swapping out and rotating photos in the display. And if we have a group photo, that may replace a number of those individuals' photos."

### THE IMPACT OF 9/11

Besides the public's growing familiarity with the project, Hofman credits the wall's popularity to another source — the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

"Following 9/11, there was a really patriotic feeling," he said. "Family members were bringing pictures of veterans down to the courthouse and putting them on the wall."

The war on terror also brought with it a surge of new veterans, Hofman said.

"All of a sudden, 9/11 happened and boom, we have all these veterans (who were deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan)," he said. "When I served during the Vietnam era, you had one or two people at a time who went into the military from your community. Now, you have all these National Guard units with large groups of soldiers coming home from a mission."

For Wherry, 9/11 occurred during the tail end of his time as VSO, but he could see its impact in creating a surge of patriotism.

"9/11 made such a difference," he said. "That's how it goes. In peacetime, the military isn't something that you talk about all the time. Then, when you get into some type of conflict, all of a sudden the spotlight is thrown on the military and how important they are. I was in the Marine Corps for 23 years, and I watched that cycle go up and down."

Hofman noted much different reactions to each conflict. The families of the latest returning veterans are quick to bring photos for the wall. In contrast, the Korean War was more of a forgotten battle, and Vietnam veterans often received a negative welcome home or just didn't want to talk about the war, he said.

"During Vietnam, nobody celebrated," Hofman said.

Aden has also seen a sharp contrast between today's attitudes and the division surrounding the Vietnam War. "The difference with this war (on terror), they aren't blaming people for the fighting like they did in Vietnam," she said.

### A SOURCE OF PRIDE

Regardless of the era served, the local veterans and their families show strong patriotism, Aden said.

"We live in a part of the country, here in the Northern Plains, where there is a higher percentage of veterans per capita than anywhere else. People are very proud of the veterans in their family," she said.

"We get these photos from family members because there is a lot of pride to see their veterans honored. Being a veteran means something."

Hofman has even seen families make special trips to the Wall of Fame during reunions. "They said they have to go see Dad's picture at the courthouse," he said.

The Wall of Fame also reflects Clay County's pride, Hofman said.

"It says that Clay County cares about its veterans," he said. "I hoped, whoever comes after me as Veterans Service Officer, would make it their legacy to continue the Wall of Fame and stay true to it."

Wherry said he was pleased to see the Wall of Fame continue after his departure. He recently viewed the display during a visit to Aden's office.

"I just thought it would be a nice tribute to the veterans of Clay County to have something like that," he said of the display.

"There is no one more amazed about that project than I have been. It has turned out to be hundreds of photographs. I wouldn't have thought it when we started."

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