

WPJ “The Time Machine” Article #4  
“The Courage of Cleon”  
by Jebb Willis – volunteer  
Wadena County Historical Society

Each generation has lived in a unique era, marked by the events of their time. Those born between 1900 and 1928 are part of what has been called “The Greatest Generation.” Their lives were very much influenced by the “Great Depression,” and they were the primary participants in World War II.

Looking back through the lens of today, this next story is hard to comprehend.

Cleon Erckenbrack is in every football team picture from 1940, as a 7<sup>th</sup> grader, through 1944, his junior year. He was part of a Wadena High School football team that was undefeated in 1943 and 1944, earning a varsity letter in each of those two seasons. A major contributor during the WHS record setting 15-game winning streak. A record that still stands today. He must have loved playing football and being a part of the team.



At the end of the 1944 football season the Wadena Pioneer Journal acknowledged the 14 seniors that had recently played their last football game for WHS. This acknowledgment was a much-deserved annual recognition bestowed upon the seniors for their contribution and dedication. All high school athletes must cross that bridge, leaving behind the high school sports they loved while entering an exciting next phase of their lives. However, this season the WPJ also acknowledged that the 17-year old junior, Cleon Erckenbrack, would not be returning for his senior year. Cleon apparently had decided there was something else more important for him to do. Cleon had enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Corp, the equivalent of today’s Air Force. America was at war with Germany and Japan.

At just 17 years of age, Cleon Erckenbrack decided to cross that bridge before he had to do so. His courageous choice is indeed hard to comprehend.

After the war Cleon returned to Wadena. In 1947 he married Phyllis Utermarck. They moved to California where Cleon was a baker and where they raised their family of 10 children. Almost enough for a football team.

Cleon (1985) and Phyllis (1990) eventually returned home for burial in the Wadena Cemetery.