

## 1945 March 5-11

### “Mother Peck” and Her Boys

#### **Unit Trained At Camp McCoy Receives Citation For Service**

Mrs. Irvin H. Peck, whose residence at 234 South 10th street has been a “second home” to dozens of American soldiers stationed in the past at Camp McCoy, has received word from one of “her” boys of the 2nd Infantry Division in Europe.

T. Sgt. Clifton Krause, Jr., wrote Mrs. Peck on Dec. 31, telling of a citation which had been bestowed upon his unit for its meritorious achievement in France.

In part, the citation stated: “The 3rd Battalion, 38th Infantry, is cited for outstanding performance of duty in action.

“The conspicuous gallantry and

valorous devotion to duty, the superb tactical skill displayed by all personnel of the 3rd Battalion exemplify and glorify the noblest qualities and finest traditions of the service.

“The 3rd Battalion, 38th Infantry Regiment is entitled to the citation streamer, and the individuals assigned or attached to this unit on the occasion for which the citation was awarded are entitled to wear the distinguished unit badge.”

In his letter, Krause admitted “having a rough time,” but countered with, “I’m happy to report to you that I’m still going.”

Another one of Mrs. Peck’s “boys,” Second Divisioner William Jones, has received an “on the field” commission in France. Prior to his commission as a Second Lieutenant, he held the rank of technical sergeant.

*La Crosse Tribune, 1945 January 28, page 12*

The article above was the first of three from January and February 1945 that shed light on a heartwarming story of generosity involving an extraordinary La Crosse woman and her family in a home on South 10th Street.

Anna G. Eshelman was born in Illinois in 1896.<sup>1</sup> Her family moved to Mather, Wisconsin when Anna was young. Perhaps they thought they were buying good farmland, but the area around Mather was marshy.<sup>2</sup>

Anna had health problems when she was young that required several surgeries. One operation removed one of her kidneys. Later in life, Anna told her family that at least one surgeon thought she was beyond hope, so he was careless about returning her internal organs to their proper places in her abdomen. She would joke with her grandchildren about her organs being in unusual places.<sup>3</sup>

As a young woman, Anna moved to Sparta to live with a seamstress so she could learn that trade. There she met Irvin Peck.<sup>4</sup> They were married in 1916 at Sparta.<sup>5</sup>

There was an early clue that Anna Peck was not the ordinary housewife of the time. She designed their house on the south side of La Crosse and supervised its construction. Anna did the same for at least two other homes in La Crosse.<sup>6</sup>

Even in the midst of the Great Depression, they had good incomes because of their jobs. Irvin Peck worked for the railroad express in La Crosse, so he delivered letters and packages all over the city. Anna, a professional seamstress, was teaching at the Coleman Vocational school and doing sewing jobs at home. The upper crust of La Crosse society would order fancy fabrics from big city stores and hire Anna for sewing jobs.<sup>7</sup>

Anna Peck was the kind of person who dressed up to go out and dressed up when company came to visit.<sup>8</sup>

Irvin and Anna Peck adopted their two daughters, Marian and Edith. Back in those days, a pregnancy out of wedlock was a cause for shame and secrecy. Pregnant unmarried women would stay at St. Ann's in La Crosse where the nuns would take care of them and then put the babies up for adoption. Anna had some contact with the nuns at St. Ann's, and she got to know Marian's mother. Irvin and Anna adopted Marian as an infant. Edith was born of a different mother, and Irvin and Anna adopted her too.<sup>9</sup>

The two girls were different in several ways. Marian had allergies and skin problems as a child, so she was more of an indoor person. Edith, on the other hand, was always out doing something. Anna Peck was teaching sewing at the Coleman Vocational, so she hired a woman to be a housekeeper and to look after the girls. This woman taught Marian how to cook. By the time she was nine years old, Marian was cooking full meals for the family.<sup>10</sup>



Marian and Anna Peck  
(Courtesy of Clay & Pam Nelson)

When World War II began, the 2nd "Indianhead" Infantry Division was based at Fort Sam Houston, Texas. It was transferred to Camp McCoy in November 1942 where the men trained until shipping to Ireland in October 1943.<sup>11</sup>



Shoulder patch of the 2nd Infantry Division  
(2nd Indianhead Division Association)

The Peck family, with 15-year-old Marian and 10-year-old Edith, were about to be impacted in a big way by the 2nd Infantry Division's move to Camp McCoy.<sup>12</sup>

Servicemen at Camp McCoy could get a weekend pass to La Crosse but only if they had a place to stay for the weekend. It is uncertain how the arrangement started, but G.I.s on weekend passes started staying at the Peck home. Eventually hundreds did so during the war.<sup>13</sup>

Anna had a guest book that she had all the soldiers sign with their names, unit, and hometowns. Its alphabetical sections are filled with the names of soldiers, from all over the country, who stayed at the Peck house as their home away from home, even if just for a weekend. It undoubtedly contains names of men who were later killed in the war.<sup>14</sup>

NAME	ADDRESS	TELEPHONE
Post. Harry Deugeas	Co. 2, 39th Inf. New York	
Post. Audrey Dearborn	1st. Post. Hdqrs. 7th Div. Chicago	
Post. Robert Blackman	Hdqs. 52 Inf. Panama	
1st. Lt. J. L. Burrows	Co. 2, 25th Inf. Okla.	
Pvt. E. E. Burns	97th B.M. (RHD) Co. N. Y.	
1st. Lt. Roy Beecher	44th Eng. Co. N. Y.	
Pvt. C. M. Burke	215 1st. Hospital N. Y.	
Pvt. A. C. Brown	44th Eng. Pennsylvania	
Pvt. T. W. J. Baker	44th Eng. Penna.	
Pvt. Norman Bicker	467th Q.M. 7317th Base	
Pvt. P. Bussey	1650 S. 4th St. Mich.	
1st. Lt. Mrs. A. Buckley	Co. F. 9th Inf. California	
Cpl. Robert Bardsley	10007 S. S. Tomb K. C. Kans.	
Cpl. Leonard Bardsley	Co. K. 3rd Inf. N. Y.	
1st. Lt. Wm. W. Bardsley	Co. A. 80th Inf. Ohio	
Pvt. G. Bardsley	Co. B. 50th Eng. Malden	
1st. Lt. Bardsley	Co. B. 28th Eng. Penna.	
Sgt. Bardsley	air corps Missouri	
Pvt. John Bryson	Co. M. 417th Inf. Detroit	
Pvt. William D. Bardsley	Co. A. 304 Inf. Philadelphia	
Pvt. James Bardsley	Co. M. 417th Inf. Detroit	
Pvt. Edwin Bardsley	Co. M. 417th Inf. Detroit	

(Courtesy of Clay & Pam Nelson)

Most of the young soldiers wanted to explore what La Crosse had to offer in the way of Saturday night distractions. That was fine with Anna, but she had a curfew for the servicemen; she set a time when they had to be back at her house. Anna wanted to get to bed at a decent time, and she did not want to be waiting up worrying about any of them. They all respected Anna Peck, and nobody ever rebelled against her rules.<sup>15</sup>

When they returned from their excursions to the entertainment spots of La Crosse, the servicemen found places to sleep all around the Peck house. When the house was full of soldiers, Marian and Edith would sleep under the dining room table. They thought it was fun because they pretended they were camping outside in a tent.<sup>16</sup>

Anna and Marian cooked enormous Sunday dinners for the servicemen staying at their house.<sup>17</sup>

Anna also did their laundry and put her sewing expertise to work making any necessary repairs to their uniforms.<sup>18</sup>

Dances were weekly events in La Crosse during the war, and women went to dance with the servicemen. Anna and Marian did too. Irvin and Anna had a car, so she would sometimes fill the car with women, including her daughter Marian, and go to Camp McCoy to attend dances for the servicemen stationed there. There were even busloads of women from La Crosse who went to Camp McCoy for dances.<sup>19</sup>

NAME	ADDRESS	TELEPHONE
Pvt. Vernon Kirkland	Co. K. 9th Inf. Alabama	
Pvt. Fred Kiehnig	Co. 2. 39th Inf. Ohio	
PFC. Mathias Kiefer	Co. E. 7th Inf. Ind	
Sgt. Clifton Krome	H-3 35th Inf. Tex	
Capt. F. D. Kayser	1st Co. 412 Inf. New York	
Mrs. Jane H. Kayser	Wife	New York
Cpt. Robert Kaprielian	Tomb, Wis	California
Pvt. Rene Kasal	Co. I. 355th Co. 8th Inf. N.Y.	New Jersey
1st Lt. & Mrs. Kaphak	2nd Co. 1st Inf. Buffalo, N.Y.	
Roman Kapchynski	271 ORD Co. M.M. Mich.	
Pvt. Alan M. Kasewing	24th Hosp. Cal.	Chicago, Ill.
Pvt. FRANK KODLOWSKI	H 9 & H 9 Co 441st Eng. CO.	MICHIGAN CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
Pvt. STANLEY KASPOST	H 9 & H 9 Co.	Windsor Locks Connecticut
Pvt. Paul Kitz	607th Eng. D. Co.	
Pvt. Bernard King	Co. B 280 Eng.	New York, N.Y.
Pvt. Arthur H. Kaye	Co. B 280 Eng.	New York, N.Y.
Pvt. Alvin Layman	Co. D 1263 Eng.	New York, N.Y.
Sgt. Richard Keller	Co. B 417th Inf.	Union City, N.J.
Sgt. J. Kallomel	Co. H 15 2515 Eng.	Chatt. Tenn.
1159. Koryuk	Co. F 417	Cleveland, Ohio
Pvt. Leo H. Koski	Co. 2 417th	Madison, Mich.
Pvt. Joseph Kuffert	Co. L 309	Youngstown Ohio

(Courtesy of Clay & Pam Nelson)

The servicemen who stayed with the Peck family received more than room and board, with laundry service, for a weekend. It was a respite from the routine of military training in a warm, welcoming environment. A chance to talk about something besides the war. An opportunity to receive a little "mothering" from a loving woman. Maybe even a little teasing of the young girls who may have reminded them of kid sisters back home. These men were in an infantry division, and they knew they would be in combat in the near future where these experiences would be only fond memories.

But they, nor their families, would not forget the hospitality of the Peck family, even after they were overseas. They wrote letters to Anna Peck, such as the one by Clifton Krause Jr. mentioned in the article above. The article also mentions a battlefield commission for William Jones. Just days after this article appeared, Anna Peck received a message that Lt. William H. Jones had been declared missing in action since December 19, just one month after attaining officer's rank.<sup>20</sup> The wife of 1st Lt. Henry M. Shields sent Anna Peck a clipping written about his unit, the 251st Engineer Combat Battalion, being called "The Lucky 251st" because nobody in the unit had been killed.<sup>21</sup>

The 2nd Infantry Division landed in France on June 7, 1944, one day after the D-Day invasion. It fought in Normandy, liberated the city of Brest, and attacked the Siegfried Line on the German frontier. Following action in the Battle of the Bulge, the 2nd Division was transferred from the First Army to Patton's Third Army. The 2nd Division advanced across Czechoslovakia until meeting up with the Russian Army as the war in Europe ended.<sup>22</sup>

Many soldiers and their families continued to correspond with Anna Peck for the rest of her life. The son of one serviceman, who had read the letters between his father and Anna, came to La Crosse for a visit.<sup>23</sup>



Former Irving & Anna Peck house at 234 10<sup>th</sup> Street South

(Jeff Rand, 2020 February 12)

Boarding men would also change the Peck family in a fundamental way. Clinton Nelson was a farm boy from Westby who wanted to be a mechanic when there was a shortage of mechanics because of the war. He and his friend, Harold Hosch, stayed with Irvin and Anna Peck while they were going to school at Coleman Vocational. That is how Clinton Nelson met 16-year-old Marian Peck, five years his junior. Clinton ended up marrying Marian Peck, and his buddy Harold married her sister, Edith.<sup>24</sup>

Clinton enlisted in the Navy where he took training as a tool and die maker. He was stationed in Bremerton, Washington, and Marian was now 17 years old. Clinton sent a letter to Marian asking her to come to Bremerton to be with him. Anna and Marian Peck traveled to Bremerton where Clinton and Marian got married. They lived in a small apartment in Bremerton until Clinton went to sea in a submarine tender. Marian returned to La Crosse to live with her parents until Clinton got out of the Navy.<sup>25</sup>

Anna Peck drew up plans for a house at 2142 Mississippi Street and supervised its construction. It was ready for Clinton and Marian when he discharged from the Navy. They paid Anna back, with interest, and that was their home until Marian Nelson went into a nursing home toward the end of her life.<sup>26</sup>

Harold Hosch and Edith Peck were married in September 1950. They lived at 2212 Hyde Avenue in La Crosse from 1954 until Harold died in December 2012. Edith Hosch worked at the Trane Employees Credit Union (now Altra) for 39 years. She died in February 2015 at the age of 83.<sup>27</sup>

After the war, Anna Peck remained involved in the community. She did alterations on clothing at Doerflinger's for many years. Anna was active in the Wesley Methodist Church.<sup>28</sup> She was a member of the General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC).<sup>29</sup> This was a progressive women's club that met in the member's homes. They had tea get-togethers and fashion shows, but they also invited speakers on diverse topics and advocated for various causes.<sup>30</sup> Anna taught at Logan High School too.<sup>31</sup>

Irvin and Anna Peck left their house on South 10<sup>th</sup> Street in 1957 or 1958.<sup>32</sup>

Irvin Peck died in May 1960.<sup>33</sup> When Anna was on her own after the death of her husband, she moved frequently because she wanted a change of scenery.<sup>34</sup> Her last residence was at 1315 Cass Street before moving to the Bethany-Riverside Nursing Home for the rest of her life.<sup>35</sup>





Anna Peck in 1984  
(Courtesy of Clay & Pam Nelson)

Three days after her 93rd birthday, Anna Peck died on April 5, 1989.<sup>36</sup>

Marian (Peck) Nelson was a person determined to take care of her possessions and affairs while she was still capable of doing it herself. One day she was cleaning out mementoes and had the living room floor covered with rubber-banded bundles of letters and postcards. It was all the years of correspondence from their soldier boys and their families that her mother had accumulated.<sup>37</sup> She was trying to sort it by the name of the serviceman and the date.<sup>38</sup> Marian thought it was the personal history of her mother and herself, and nobody else would care about it. She got rid of all of it---the letters, postcards, and Anna Peck's four scrapbooks---proof of the remarkable story of her family's generosity in sharing their home with men who were going off to war.<sup>39</sup>

Although most of the tangible evidence of what happened at a modest house on South 10th Street is no longer here, as long as anyone knows the story of "Mother Peck and her boys," it is not forgotten.

Jeff Rand  
Adult Services Librarian  
La Crosse Public Library

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## Sources & Notes:

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- <sup>1</sup> Anna G. Peck obituary, *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1989 April 6, page B-5.
- <sup>2</sup> Clay Nelson, Onalaska, Wisconsin, interview with the author, 2020 March 6. Mr. Nelson is Anna Peck's grandson.
- <sup>3</sup> Clay Nelson, 2020 March 6. She outlived most of the surgeons who had operated on her.
- <sup>4</sup> Clay Nelson, 2020 March 6. Some sources show Irvin Peck's name as "Irving."
- <sup>5</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1989 April 6.
- <sup>6</sup> Pam Nelson, Onalaska, Wisconsin, telephone interview with the author, 2020 February 26. Pam Nelson is married to Irvin and Anna Peck's grandson, Clay Nelson.
- <sup>7</sup> Pam Nelson, 2020 February 26.
- <sup>8</sup> Pam Nelson, 2020 February 26.
- <sup>9</sup> Pam Nelson, 2020 February 26. Anna Peck talked about Marian's mother, and Marian knew her biological mother's name, but they never met. As an adult, Edith joined a card club. After a while, she was shocked to discover that one of the women she was playing cards with was her biological mother.
- <sup>10</sup> Pam Nelson, 2020 February 26.
- <sup>11</sup> "History," *2nd Indianhead Division Association*, accessed 2020 March 3, <http://www.2ida.org/history/>.
- <sup>12</sup> Year: 1940; Census Place: La Crosse, La Crosse, Wisconsin; Roll: m-to627-04490; Page: 3B; Enumeration District: 32-17A. The girls' ages in 1940 are recorded as 13 and 8; the author added two years to arrive at the approximate ages in 1942.
- <sup>13</sup> Pam Nelson, 2020 February 26. The names of Clinton Nelson's two brothers are in the guest book, so perhaps they were the catalyst.
- <sup>14</sup> Pam Nelson, 2020 February 26. Clayton and Pam Nelson have possession of the guest book.
- <sup>15</sup> Pam Nelson, 2020 February 26.
- <sup>16</sup> Pam Nelson, 2020 February 26.
- <sup>17</sup> Pam Nelson, 2020 February 26.
- <sup>18</sup> Pam Nelson, 2020 February 26.
- <sup>19</sup> Pam Nelson, 2020 February 26.
- <sup>20</sup> Lieut. William Jones Is Reported Missing," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 February 8, page 7.
- <sup>21</sup> 'Lucky 251st' Has Plenty of Everything, Including Steaks," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 February 15, page 15.
- <sup>22</sup> "History," *2nd Indianhead Division Association*, accessed 2020 March 3, <http://www.2ida.org/history/>.
- <sup>23</sup> Pam Nelson, 2020 February 26.
- <sup>24</sup> Pam Nelson, 2020 February 26.
- <sup>25</sup> Pam Nelson, 2020 February 26. A submarine tender supplied and repaired submarines.
- <sup>26</sup> Pam Nelson, 2020 February 26.
- <sup>27</sup> Edith A. Hosch obituary, *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 2015 February 5, page B-3.
- <sup>28</sup> Pam Nelson, 2020 February 26.
- <sup>29</sup> Pam Nelson, telephone message to the author, 2020 March 06. Marian (Peck) Nelson was a member of the club for 50 years.
- <sup>30</sup> Pam Nelson, 2020 February 26. Pam says Anna Peck was also progressive in her child-rearing views. Clayton and Pam would go to Anna's once a month for a meal, and then they would watch the Lawrence Welk television show. One time their four-year-old son wanted to help in the kitchen. Grandmother Marian was against it, but Great-Grandmother Anna said he could. Anna always fixed canned corn for a meal. She gave the four-year-old boy the canned corn dish to take to the table. He spilled it. Marian was fretting, but Anna was calm. She cleaned up the mess, and then she gave the boy another dish of canned corn to take to the table. He did it successfully without spilling anything. Anna was teaching him how to deal with mishaps and learn from the experience.
- <sup>31</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1989 April 6.
- <sup>32</sup> Clay Nelson, 2020 March 6.
- <sup>33</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1989 April 6.
- <sup>34</sup> Pam Nelson, 2020 February 26.



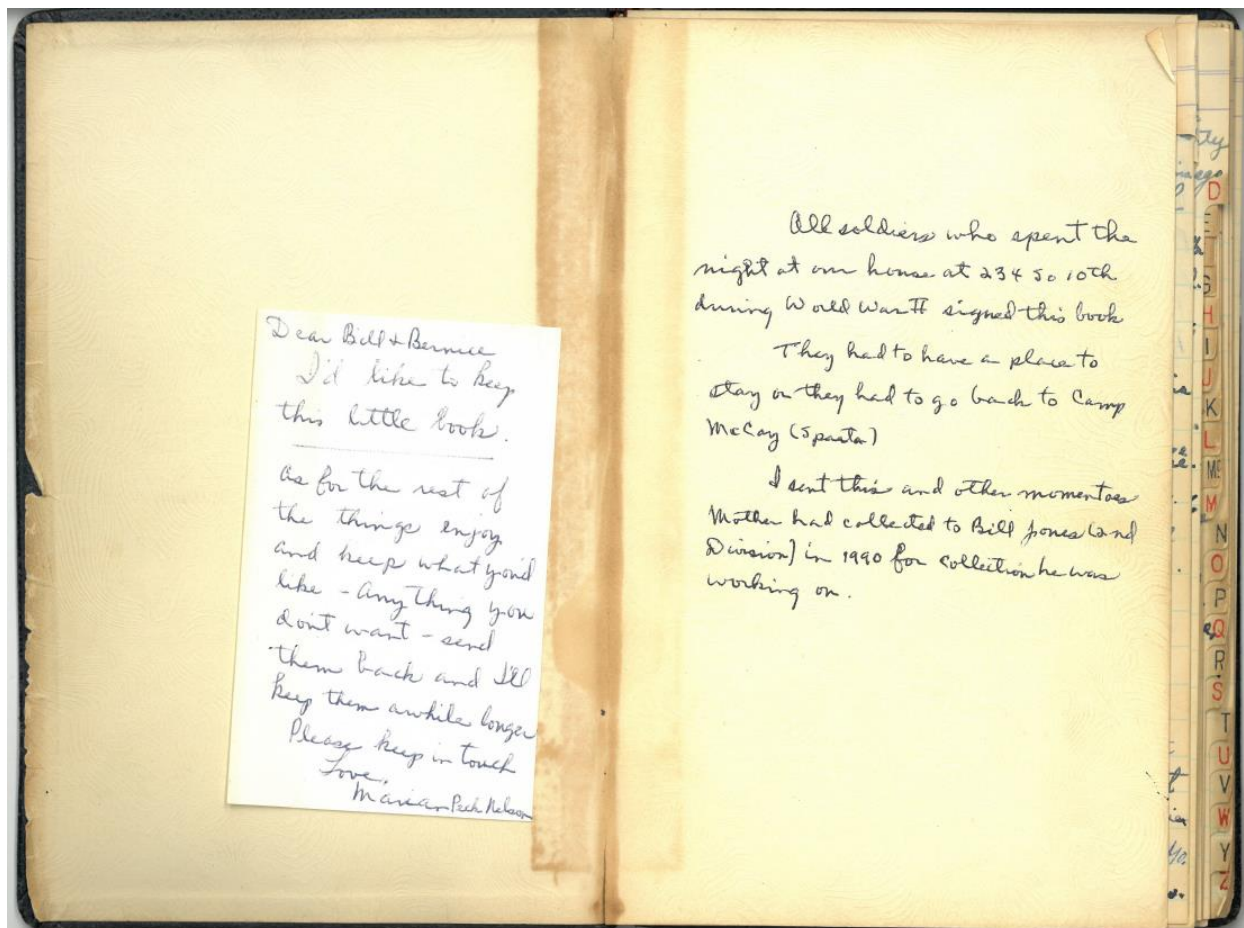
<sup>35</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1989 April 6.

<sup>36</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1989 April 6.

<sup>37</sup> Pam Nelson, 2020 February 26.

<sup>38</sup> Clay Nelson, 2020 March 6.

<sup>39</sup> Pam Nelson, 2020 February 26. It appears from the notes in the guest book (see below) that Marian Nelson sent the materials to a Bill Jones, and her only request was to get the guest book back. Whatever the final disposition, the family no longer has any of these documents except for the guest book.



(Courtesy of Clay & Pam Nelson)