

## War Era Story Project 2012

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*In loving memory of Dick and Audrey Ernst*

They were sweethearts who had met her sophomore year, his junior year, at Libbey High School in Toledo's south side. Marriage had always been in the cards, but the decision to marry on April 11, 1942, when he was 20 and she was just 19, was helped along by international circumstances. "There was a war on," my grandmother had explained with a shrug. "Everything was different because of the war."



And so it was. In the months after that simple ceremony with just their families at Bethel Lutheran Church, when most newlyweds would have spent setting up their housekeeping and learning to refer to each other as "my husband" and "my wife," Dick and Audrey Ernst were staring down several months of separation while he trained stateside, and an undetermined amount of time spent apart when he shipped overseas to the European theater of World War II.

So they made a decision: she would go with him. It wasn't an uncommon occurrence; a number of war brides will tell you they did what they could to spend as much precious time with their soldier husbands. But for my grandmother, who had never left the comfortable surroundings of her Toledo upbringing, going across the country was a daunting adventure. "I can't believe I did that," she'd tell me years

later. "I was so brave."

After basic training, Dick was stationed in Golden, Colorado at the Colorado School of Mines, while he trained in the Army Signal Corp. Some time after he was settled, Audrey traveled to Chicago and boarded the *Burlington Zephyr*. The shiny silver bullet of a train bridged the distance between Chicago and Denver in a legendary 18 hours. It may have been the fastest Audrey was ever able to go from wishing she could see Dick to actually being right in front of him over the course of the war.

She didn't have a job lined up. She didn't know where she would live. She just knew she wanted to be with him. The rest would fall into place.

And it did. She took some secretarial work and found a place for \$14 a month. He would come over to her apartment after his training had finished for the day and cook dinner. And they would eat and try to

act as though this was normal for newlyweds, while the world around them raged with violent uncertainty.

Years later, after they had long since established a home in the Chicago suburb of Naperville, raised three children and eased into a happy pace of retired life, I visited them. We went to the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry, where a new exhibit was on display: the *Burlington Zephyr*. The very train my grandmother had bravely boarded, knowing nothing about what the future would hold, was sitting in a long exhibition hallway, marked with plaques and surrounded by memorabilia. After we toured the train and my grandmother had looked at the passengers seats with a marked familiarity, we stood next to the giant silver time capsule, just taking in its importance in our own family history.

*"I can't believe it's in a museum,"* she sighed.

To which my grandfather harrumphed and replied, *"We should be in a museum."*

I wish, more than anything, that I wasn't the one telling their story for this War Era Story Project. But my grandfather died April 11, 2009, struggling against cancer just long enough to spend the day of his 68<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary with my grandmother. And much like they did at the beginning of their marriage, he went first, but she soon followed him, passing away on December 16, 2009 from heart complications. Because, I believe, that just like then, all she wanted was to be with him.