My hometown: A place to stand to view the world

by Martin E. Marty in the March 25, 2008 issue

Sixty-nine years after I moved away, I still read the *West Point News*, the weekly in my Nebraska hometown. Recently some items in the paper's "75 Years Ago" column caught my attention: "February 9, 1933: The Stanton County Courthouse is without a telephone. All but one were to be removed, but it was deemed impractical so all were taken out. Monthly cost was said to be $18.50, or $222 a year." The Depression had hit Stanton County, and a phone in a courthouse was a luxury.

The column continues: "A number of fire laddies from both companies are spending the nights at City Hall during this cold snap in order to be fully prepared to battle the frigid weather if any alarms are turned in."

"The Kautz twins, Jean and Joan, celebrated their 12th birthdays."

With George Santayana I believe that one needs a *locus standi*, a place to stand to view the world. Santayana had two: the Spain of his childhood and the Harvard of his later years. My places are Nebraska and Chicago. I keep up with West Point not in a spirit of nostalgia, which would not fit my theology or psychology, but as a way of keeping perspective and stoking my imagination.

Most striking from that "75 Years Ago" column: "Germany's new leader is Adolph [*sic*] Hitler, head of the Fascists. He upset the European political picture when he became chancellor."

Could those Nebraska farmers have foreseen what the "upset" of 1933 was to mean for "the European political picture" and eight years later for towns like West Point? Some have criticized Ken Burns's documentary *The War* for keeping a camera eye not only on Anzio and Iwo Jima but also on ordinary family life in four American towns and cities. They've said his portrait is sentimental, but I stand with those who find it spiritually enriching.

Take West Point (pop. 2,225 then). One of the 11-year-old boys of the community in 1933 was Karl Timmermann, who probably cared more about fire fighting and parties for 12-year-old twins than he did about “the European political picture.” But 12 years later, on March 7, 1945, he was commander of the company that crossed the last railroad bridge across the Rhine, at Remagen, and under merciless German machine gun fire secured the bridge, across which over 25,000 American troops moved in ten days, thus helping to end the war that Hitler and his fascists had occasioned. Timmermann received the Distinguished Service Cross, and the town’s ballpark was named after him.

On July 16, 1942, another West Point boy, Sergeant Adrian Kaup, was the first of dozens of local casualties. He was killed in a plane crash in the southwest Pacific. Others: “died in New Guinea . . . died in France . . . trapped in a burning tank . . . wounded by shell fragments . . . died in action . . . killed in action over Luzon . . . killed in action in Germany . . . died from wounds . . . missing and considered dead . . .”

And the other side of the world came to West Point, too. In October 1944, 55 German prisoners of war arrived to be imprisoned behind barbed wire at the county fair grounds. “A few helped out farmers with the harvest. Some local residents paid visits and brought food to the prisoners and this did not sit well with others.” By seeing such “upsets” in local “political pictures,” we gain a better understanding of a complex nation where, in 1933, each citizen was seeking a *locus standi*, a place to stand in a world in which, often against their will, they also had to act.