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Eckard reviews 'Brunswick County in the Great War' at SOI Chamber meeting

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Ronald and Norma Lee Eckard hold copies of their book, "Brunswick County in the Great War," while relaxing in front of the Caswell Beach Town Hall.

Photo contributed

Dr. Norma Lee Eckard, president of the nonprofit Friends of the Fort Caswell Rifle Range, presented a review of the recently published book, "Brunswick County in the Great War," at the Southport Oak Island Chamber of Commerce meeting.

Lucinda Arnold, past president of the Southport Oak Island Area Chamber of Commerce and

the founder and chairman of Business Connections, introduced Dr. Norma Lee Eckard, president of the nonprofit, Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range, at a recent Southport Oak Island Chamber of Commerce meeting.

Eckard is one of three authors of the book, "Brunswick County in the Great War." She is promoting the book and sharing their experience of writing a local history book. She began her review by holding up the 584-page book, saying, "Our nonprofit had no intention of writing a book. The mission was to save an historic rifle range structure, which is now 104 years old."

The Fort Caswell Rifle Range, a concrete structure 184 feet long, is located in a residential area in Caswell Beach on Oak Island. In 2011, the Volunteer Landscape Committee asked Jim McKee, then the Historic Interpreter of Brunswick Town Ft Anderson, to visit. He then encouraged the State Historic Preservation Office to meet with the volunteers to help identify the historic structure.

"The volunteers were not sure exactly what it was," she said. "Some in the community thought it was a 'bunker,' which is why the street next to the rifle pit was named Bunker Court. All this information is contained in the front part of the book, with additional information about when Fort Caswell was built and why.

Part 1 offers a chronology of their events since 2011 up to 2020. The important thing to remember is the men in Brunswick County used the rifle range to practice marksmanship before leaving for France."

"We found out through research that there are very few rifle ranges left in the world and the one in the subdivision is in one piece, with the exception of 2 lintels that have been cracked by the trees, leaving a 6-inch tilt inward at the narrow passageway," continued Eckerd. "The military men from Fort Caswell hoisted the targets in the western part of the pit so the men 300 yards back at the firing line could practice their marksmanship skills. The volunteer committee felt the historic rifle range should be saved, so they proceeded to plan fundraising events to earn enough funds to hire a structural engineer to determine what needed to be done to prevent further deterioration."

There are 7 parts to the book, but only major parts of the book were discussed due to time constraints.

Veterans who were killed in action, wounded, died of wounds or died of disease while serving in the war were researched. Historical documents about their divisions were used to identify the activity and location of their unit during their injuries or deaths. Thus, 70 WWI Profiles were written in Part 2. The Profiles were posted every Monday starting in December 2017 on the website caswellriflerange.com. The Brunswick Beacon published all of them over a period of more than 2 years.

Snapshots in Part 3 of the book represent short versions of information sent in by family members after the lengthier profiles were written.

The WWI Veterans' List, Part 4, (in alphabetical order) includes the 718 men and one woman nurse from Southport. The research was placed on a spreadsheet covering each of the veterans. This section represents the largest part of the book, due to the number of veterans who served from Brunswick County.

WWI Service Cards probably available in all states includes place of birth, current residence and location where the veteran enlisted or was inducted (drafted). Any of these found to be within Brunswick County qualified the veteran for the list.

Collecting research

The following methods of collecting research was used:

- NC WWI Service Cards
- Lists of men ordered to report to the Brunswick County Board for military duty
- Brunswick County local draft boards
- Passenger lists for US Army Transport to/from France during and after WWI (next of kin name and residence for each soldier are listed on the passenger lists)
- Online WWI Service Cards from other states

The information presented in this list includes details of their military service in WWI, their reported date and location of birth, the date of death and location of the cemetery where they were buried, if known. The names of those who honored a veteran with a donation are

shown below the name of the veteran after the words, "Honored by." Those donations helped to fund the WWI monument that was dedicated to the Brunswick County WWI veterans on the WWI Centennial on Nov. 11, 2018.

Fourteen nurses served at Fort Caswell during the Great War and their profiles are found in Part 6. Since they were not military, it was extremely difficult to find information about them. The Journal of Nursing assisted in providing information on these women, as well as newspaper articles. The University of Appalachian State School of Nursing has added the books' list of nurse profiles on their website for the use of students and others.

Even though Part 7, the World War I Wall of Honor, is last in the book, it was one of the first things done in 2015 to add a human element to the project. We appealed to the public to send stories or information of family members who served in the Great War. The public was encouraged to send pictures of men in uniform and any other military information. The nonprofit promised to place their stories and pictures in the book, when published.

A subtitle of the book follows the title, "Brunswick County in the Great War — Preserving the 1918 Fort Caswell Rifle Range and the Legacies of the Men and Women Who Served."

The subtitle promise should allow the book and the 718 men and woman, including the 14 women nurses to live many years beyond the authors, awarding a legacy to the writers of this local history book and the Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range members.

Robert Dalessandro lives by the following motto for those who served in the Great War. He heads the American Battle Monuments Commission: "Time will not dim the glory of their deeds." May the reader keep these words in mind.

The public library system in their note of thanks for the 10 books placed in the 5 public libraries of Brunswick County sent the following message to the Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range: "Dear neighbors and Friends of the Fort Caswell Rifle Range. Thank you, thank you for the glorious copies of Brunswick County in the Great War. At last, we have them all cataloged and into circulation. Two copies per branch. Barbee's copies were checked out the first day. This book is going to renew interest in local history!"

Anyone wanting to purchase a copy of this book may call Norma Eckard at (910) 278-7584 or purchase a copy from the website (caswellriflerange.com). The Maritime Museum and the

Visitor Center at Fort Fisher is also selling the books. So far, 175 books have been sold; the hardback books have sold out.

"Many thanks to members of the Brunswick Town Chapter of the DAR who worked through the years with events on Veterans Day and the day the US entered the war, April 6, 1917, and with fundraisers. Their work was priceless," concluded Eckerd.