

Washburn during the war years

1939-1945 — The boys at war

Edward S. Swanson was the son of Mrs. Helen Swanson of Washburn. He entered the Army Air Corps in July 1942 and was sent overseas in February 1943, serving as a radar operator in north Africa and Italy. While in Italy he visited Rome and in a letter to his brother in June 1945, he described some of the "wonders" of ancient city. "Well, it was quite a trip to Rome, I must say. Everything is so old, dating back to B. C., but only slight changes in the originals since 1600-1700; everything was built before. Such beautiful stuff, it's really hard to believe it's all man-made, but they had famous architects, Michelangelo being the most important, in the building of St. Peter's cathedral, which is the largest church in the world. It is impossible to describe it on paper. It holds the tomb of St. Peter and Raphael, the great artist. Some others, too, I think, but I don't remember now as they weren't so important. The inscription on Raphael's tomb reads: 'Here lies Raphael who when living even nature feared to be surpassed.' I saw the original painting of the 'Transfiguration.' Undoubtedly it is the best painting in the world. He just had the top half of it painted when he died



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at 37, I believe, but his pupils finished it and enlarged it four times and put it on one of the walls in St. Peter's. The original is in the Vatican museum with a lot of other stuff.

"The paintings on the ceiling and front wall of the Sistine Chapel are by Michelangelo. The one in front, 'The Last Judgment,' took four to seven years to paint. I don't think you'll find a finer piece of work than the statue of Moses by Michelangelo, in one piece of solid marble. It's so life-like; muscles of his arms, legs, veins in his hands, and the fingernails. The angry look on his face is supposed to be when he sees the people going back to worship the golden calf and he is about to get up and throw the tablets he

has under his arm, he is so enraged. It is known as Michelangelo's masterpiece. He started another in Florence but never finished it before he died. Michelangelo's tomb is in the Santa Croce church in Florence, where I saw it, along with the tombs of Galileo, the scientist and Ros-sini, who wrote a lot of music, including some operas. We did not see the famous bronze doors of the baptistery of the big cathedral in Florence. They were taken off when the war was coming and are crated up in some other building, but I may have a chance to see them yet.

"The Coliseum isn't as big as it looks or is pictured and I can't see how they had chariot races there, as the midget auto track in Chicago isn't much smaller, if any. It hasn't been used for a few centuries now and they have been digging under the arena part and found a lot of rooms and passages, so the center is all excavated. The catacombs, or the Christian burial grounds, during the time when Christianity wasn't tolerated is quite a thing. All under ground, four layers or levels, the last nearly 100 feet down. This one of St. Sebastian we were in has eight

miles of passages so far and all of it hasn't been uncovered yet. This is where they said Peter and Paul were first buried, and later removed to the respective churches. The monks have found bricks and stones with distinct inscriptions, prayers and verses signed by Peter and some by Paul. I did not get to St. Paul's church, where his tomb is, but St. Peter's is under the altar at the big cathedral.

"I remember Mom telling about when Luther went to Rome to see the pope and went up the stairs on his knees and I saw those stairs. They are in the Church of the Holy Stairs and even today people are going up these stairs on their knees, praying as they go. Many of them were going up while we were there. Although there isn't any recorded history, legend goes back to the 5th century that these are the stairs Christ went up when he was to be judged by Pilate. A great woman, traveling in the Holy Land for just those things, learned of them and had them brought to Rome, where they are in this church. The steps are worn so much, that is the stone or marble part, that recently boards were put on them to take the wear, but the rest can be seen."