262# Thelma Boltin Center (Script by Joanna Grey Talbot)

When the United States was attacked on December 7, 1941, life changed for everyone in America, including in Alachua County. Within a couple years military posts sprouted across the county, including the Alachua Army Air Field, where the Gainesville Regional Airport is now; the 62nd College Training Detachment at the University of Florida; Camp Blanding in Starke; and many more. Servicemen and women would travel to Gainesville on weekend leave and the City leaders decided they needed a place dedicated solely to them.

So, in May 1943, the Soldier Service Center was opened on Northeast Second Avenue. It was operated by the City recreation department and Thelma Boltin was named the program director. As quoted in a Gainesville Sun article from September 5, 1976, Thelma said, “If I never did anything else worthwhile, I was happy to be in charge of that project. My gosh, we did the impossible.”

Thelma Boltin was the winner of the 1985 Florida Folk Heritage Award. A storyteller, emcee and teacher, she was affectionately known as “Cousin Thelma.” She was also the longtime director of the Florida Folk Festival.

The center was open seven days a week. It is estimated that over 4,000 service members came through every weekend. Services included free shaving equipment, the use of an iron, soap and towels and bathing suits, stamps, and a library. Sodas and cigarettes were the only items sold. Local women’s church organizations worked on a rotating schedule to provide coffee, doughnuts, sandwiches, and cakes. The weekly entertainment schedule included pool and ping-pong on Mondays and Tuesdays, dances on Thursdays at nearby bases, game night on Fridays, onsite dances Wednesdays and Saturdays and open houses on Sundays.

After the war ended in 1945, the City took over the building and turned it into a senior recreation center. On April 23, 1991, the former Soldier Service Center was renamed the Thelma A. Boltin Center. Today it serves as a multipurpose facility that hosts seniors’ activities and special events.