

Growing Up in Wenham in WWII Recollections of a Bygone Era

By Bob Hicks

Introduction

Seventy-five years ago Wenham celebrated its 300th "Tercentenary" Anniversary. It also happened that this took place in the midst of World War II. The onset of that war in 1941 had dragged the town into a new era facing a number of new challenges it was ill prepared for by its quiet, almost pastoral past. It also ended the heavy burden on the town and its citizens of dealing with the Great Depression, as war work brought high wages and jobs for those not drafted into the military for the duration.

The change in how we lived our lives was profound. In the 1937 Town Report, the Selectmen's Report dealt with, amongst the usual small town issues, what to do about the cost of supporting the town poor. A steady rise brought on by the increasing number of those unemployed by the Great Depression (now into its fourth year with no end in sight) had raised the usual annual appropriation of \$100 for support of the poor to over \$1,100 and the Selectmen were frankly baffled by how they would ever come up with the necessary funds.

Ten years later in 1947, with the war now two years in the past, the major issue had become the escalating prices of land being sold off by previously struggling small farmers to persons eager to move into town, financed by savings from war work and GI Bill funding for the returned soldiers and sailors wanting to marry and start families. No zon-

ing existed to control growth, there was no town water system, the school was imminently going to be overwhelmed with new pupils, a new Town Hall was urgently needed and on it went.

In the final chapter of "Wenham in World War II"*, a compendium of everything that happened during that period published by the Historical Association of the Wenham Village Improvement Society in 1947, the Editors addressed "Post-War Developments".

"In march of 1944, the town appointed a Post-War Planning Committee to survey the needs of the town and select those projects which would be most advantageous to the town and suitable to be undertaken in the expected post-war unemployment period."

Leading the pack were the "much discussed water supply problem", closely followed by a "school building and a town building to replace the present Town Hall which is thoroughly inadequate and obsolete." A challenge indeed for a town of about 1500.

The Editors concluded their view into the future with, "The shortage of housing, the soaring price of real estate and food have produced a post-war condition, of which we do not yet see the end." They had no idea...

There are not many of us left who experienced this traumatic time, who lived their daily lives in Wenham as it went through the adaptations brought on by the war emergency. I happen to be one, having moved here in 1937 at age 7, and by Pearl Harbor Day was about to turn 12, too young to go off to war but old enough to be aware of what was going on. In 1943, the town celebrated its 300th Tercentenary Anniversary, and one program offered was the school's annual field day devoted to an eight part stage performance by all the grades. My part, thanks to my 8th Grade teacher, Miss Bullis, was to narrate the entire two hour program from memory!

When today's 375th Anniversary came around I thought, well why not have another go at our town's history, this time focused on this watershed era in which I grew up, by writing a series of essays that combine my memories of those times with the factual backing provided by the Town Reports. If you weren't there you can have no idea of how different our lives were leading up to and coming out from the World War II era.

Next up, "Coming to Wenham in 1937".

*A copy of "Wenham in World War II" is in the Hamilton Wenham Public Library research stacks. Anyone wishing to see/read this book can do so at the library during regular hours only by requesting to do so from the Research Librarian on the second floor. It cannot be loaned out for home reading.



At left: Fire Department training Boy Scouts in fire fighting. Below: Scrap metal collection. Both photos from "Wenham in World War II".

