

Growing Up in Wenham in WWII Recollections of a Bygone Era

By Bob Hicks

School Days – Part 5 Wrap Up

The preceding four parts of this School Days topic have hopefully given you some insight into how it was to go to school in Wenham as the 1930s came to an end and World War II descended upon us on December 7, 1941. As I was unlikely to be drafted for military service before the War was over my remaining three years at Center School (before moving on to high school in Beverly) were not substantially different than they would have been without the War intruding.

I was in the 7th Grade and now old enough to know what this all meant. The War Effort in which all of us, including schoolchildren, were constantly exhorted to serve our country in some way, extended into our school life, and depending upon our age (class) level, our part consisted of some added patriotic duties appropriate to our ages.

Some of these were: Junior Red Cross projects; US Savings Bonds and stamps purchases weekly, with an ongoing contest to see who could top the list (90% of a class to achieve Flag recognition); Boy Scout fire fighting training in anticipation of air raids; scrap metal collecting; writing letters and sending small gifts to Wenham servicemen. Miss Bullis organized the biggest of the latter, 169 gifts went out from Center School worldwide to “our Wenham boys” fighting in the War in 1943.

So, wrapping up “School Days” before going on to daily life in the bigger world of Wenham in World War II, here are two personal recollections that have stayed with me over all the intervening years.

In 1943 the town celebrated its Tercentenary (300th) Anniversary and I had a major part in the Center School’s really big effort to mark the occasion, a two hour outdoor pageant on a hot June day. My mother saved the *Salem News* report on the event for a reason that will become obvious as you read it:

June 4, 1943: Tercentenary Pageant is Given by School Children

(From the *Salem News*)

“A broiling sun on the hottest day of the year failed to mar a fine pageant presented by the children of the Center School on the school athletic field yesterday afternoon in commemoration of the Wenham Tercentenary. Every pupil participated in one scene or another, as various incidents in the history of the town were unfolded before an appreciative audience.

With the exception of two scenes written by Mrs. Joseph Harrington, Jr. for a commemorative program several years ago and incorporated into yesterday’s pageant and a scene prepared by

Miss Evelyn Woodason of the school faculty, the entire pageant was prepared by Miss Bessie Buker, principal of the school. To her goes much credit for the interesting manner in which the historical background of the town was woven together in sketches adapted to the age of the various groups presenting them.

From a group singing number at the outset in which pupils attired in the costumes of 1643 followed the gestures of John Donovan who displayed an unusually fine voice as he “lined out” the tune, down to the final number, the singing of the Star Spangled Banner, the spirit of olden days was caught by the youngsters. Even the little tots of the first and second grades in their colonial costumes who repeated their Biblical verses and said their catechisms after the fashion of their ancestors proved accomplished little actors and actresses, really losing themselves in the simple little parts which they portrayed.

Worthy of much praise was the work of Robert Hicks, junior high school pupil, who served as reader for the pageant, but unlike so many who perform such a function, he gave the entire two-hour pageant entirely from memory, a real accomplishment that brought much favorable comment.

Harleton Burr, assisted by members of the industrial arts classes, constructed much of the scenery, while many of the costumes were prepared by Miss Betty Story and members of her domestic arts group. Members of the faculty also helped materially as each instructor carried on rehearsals of particular scenes in recent days, while Miss Barstow, musical instructor aided in the musical num-

bers and Mrs. Eaton, art teacher, helped with that phase of the preparations.

Following the pageant, those present enjoyed a fine exhibit of artwork done by the various classes, which featured Wenham and its early and contemporary history. The pageant and artwork together with classroom activities which have in recent months been tied in with the history of the town have done much to kindle in the minds of the pupils an understanding and interest in the background of their hometown.”

The other recollection was recently reawakened after 75 years when a note arrived in my mail in the winter of 2017 from a classmate of those years. She and I both were on the “staff” of the annual school magazine, *The Breeze*. She was Editor in Chief and I was Literary Editor of the 1943 Tercentenary Edition. Junior High students wrote all the content in Miss Bullis’ English classes, Mrs. Eaton’s art classes did the linoleum block carvings for the illustrations and the Junior High boys printed the magazine in Mr. Burr’s printing class.

My once-upon-a-time Editor in Chief, now terminally ill with ALS, had moved into her daughter’s home in Maine for her last days and came across a copy of my small boat magazine (to which her daughter’s husband subscribed). Lo and behold, there was her former Literary Editor on the Editorial Page rambling on about the small boat world.

After briefly explaining in her note how she had rediscovered me after all these years, she closed with, “Miss Buker and Miss Bullis would be very proud of you.”

It was a poignant moment for me as her words brought back those long ago years. Sadly, before we could make arrangements for a spring trip to Maine to reconnect, a note from her daughter arrived informing me that she had passed away.

