

## Growing Up in Wenham in WWII Recollections of a Bygone Era

By Bob Hicks

### War Comes to Wenham

When the Japanese sneak attack on the US Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 drew the USA at last into the ongoing war that had begun four years earlier when Japan invaded China in 1937, followed two years later when Adolf Hitler's Germany fell upon Poland in September of 1939 drawing Great Britain and France into the struggle, the USA was not at all prepared for it. This was due mostly to a nationwide isolationist mindset that preferred to view the foreign fighting as not our affair with all those ocean miles between them and us.

The surprise (sneaky) nature of the Japanese attack swept away the isolationism in a wave of patriotic anger and the country girded itself for what would be just over 3½ years of an all out "war effort" not ending until final victory in August of 1945. Viewed in retrospect as our "last good war", it was indeed to become a struggle between clearly defined good guys (the USA, Great Britain and its allies) and the bad guys (Germany, Japan and their allies). It was an amazing demonstration of national unity.

Tiny Wenham did its part, and I'll go into some details in following essays on just how and when it did so and how it all impacted upon our family's and friend's lives. Right now I first want to set the scene in which this all took place.

In the definitive history, *Wenham in World War II*, published in 1947 by the tireless Adeline P. Cole and her Publication Committee (Minnie E. Ashworth, Katherine H. Campbell and Alene S. Harrington) for the then Historical Association of the Wenham, Village Improvement Society, Inc., following 290 pages of detailed discussion of who and what went on in town during the war, in a short chapter entitled "Social Life", it is remarked that, "On the surface the social life of the town seemed little changed during these war years."

Small wonder. The continental USA suffered none of the catastrophic civilian deaths (an estimated 40 million worldwide) and destruction that devastated those nations where the fighting and the bombing took place. Almost all of the 12,000 US civilians who did die in the war lost their lives as crewmen on the Merchant Marine convoys on the North Atlantic from German submarine attacks.

Our nation did suffer the military deaths of over 400,000 of our fathers, sons and husbands in the fighting, but

that took place elsewhere, not here. Of 160 Wenham citizens (out of a population of about 1,400) who served in the military, eight died, five in action, two in accidents and one from a fatal illness.

For those of us who did not suffer the loss or serious injury of loved ones, nor had family and friends in the military whose well being was a great concern, the war years were pretty much just a major inconvenience, having to make do with much less, what with the rationing of food, clothing and gasoline and the unavailability of new homes, cars, appliances, etc.

For some the war presented an opportunity to escape at last from the Great Depression's financial desperation and earn substantial wages in war industry. The labor shortage was acute with over 10 million mostly young men serving in the military. This opened up to women many jobs always filled by men. One in four married women eventually worked in industry. This great cultural shift in our lives was symbolized in the "Rosie the Riveter" propaganda campaign, in which the strong, bandanna-clad Rosie became one of the most successful recruitment tools in American history, and the most iconic image of working women during World War II. (Of course, when it was over, it was back to the kitchen for most as the returning veterans came home to reclaim their jobs).

Wenham did take note of the war's impact on we youngsters from 6 to 16, in addition to involving us in the war effort tasks I discussed in my "School Days" essays. According to Mrs. Cole, these young people were viewed as being "left with confused ideals and restless activity. The absorption of adult members of the family in war work, the lack of easy transportation to nearby movies or the beach and to each other's homes left the young stranded for amusement and too ready to create their own excitement." (I'll present an example of the latter in an upcoming essay on "Law & Order in Wenham").

To address this apparent need, Mrs. B. Preston Cutler "started to do something about it." The "something" turned out to be showing movies at the Community House in nearby South Hamil-

ton. Mrs. Cutler assembled a high-powered community committee to put the plan into action including ministers of both churches, Scoutmasters, superintendents of schools and Mrs. Frederick Ayer, chairman (sic) of the sports activities of the Wenham Village Improvement Society (note no youth representation was involved).

From June 25, 1943 to June 25, 1947, 218 movies were shown to a total attendance of 30,000. Side benefits included distribution of admission fees (after taxes of 66.6%) to "civic betterment", including the Community House, the Patton Sports Field, the Hamilton Ice Rink and the Sunshine Fund, which provided transportation for the needy sick to hospitals and clinics.

In her book Mrs. Cole noted that, "Hamilton and Wenham were pioneers in this war emergency project, and it was the only one among the many others to survive to 1947, in spite of not showing gangster, mystery or triangle (?) films."

Mrs. Cole goes on to state, "Another byproduct of this experiment was a more decent behavior in public audience, proper respect during the singing of the National Anthem and more careful use of the Community House Property."

My sisters and I were unable to take advantage of this opportunity for entertainment, as that aforementioned "lack of easy transportation" made the eight mile round trip to the Community House from out here on Burley Street insurmountable. My father wasn't about to squander any of the weekly three gallons of gasoline he could buy with his "A-Card" on such a frivolity. I do not recall being too distressed by missing out and probably was well behaved enough to behave properly in public anyway.

Coming up, I'll be getting into all the many details, but first for my next essay I want to set aside my own recollections to bring to you information about this 375th Anniversary Celebration's pioneering effort by a dozen senior history students in the Regional High School AP US History Program to interview and have videotaped oral histories from several Wenham citizens who, like me, were here in World War II and are still here. A preview of the outstanding results of this program will be presented to those interested at the Hamilton Wenham Public Library on Monday evening, June 18 from 6pm to 8pm. Full details to follow.