

Growing Up in Wenham in WWII Recollections of a Bygone Era

By Bob Hicks

Knowing Our Roots Reflections On Our Town

In concluding my last essay I stated that, for this next essay, I wanted to set aside my own recollections of bygone times in town to bring to you information about a 375th Anniversary Celebration's pioneering effort by a dozen senior history students in the Regional High School AP US History Program, in which they interviewed for videotaping oral histories from several Wenham citizens who, like me, were here in the World War II era and are still here.

A preview of the outstanding results of this program featuring a selection of these videotaped oral histories about life in Wenham in the 1930s and 1940s will be presented to those interested at the Hamilton/Wenham Public Library on Monday evening, June 18 from 6pm to 8pm.

To inform you better about how this all came to pass I thought I'd fill you in here in advance on the background of how this pioneering effort on the part of our high school's senior history students and their teacher, Anne Page, came about.

First, about these dozen history students: The AP US History Program is a senior history effort by a dozen students interested in, and qualified to undertake, a year-long history project at a college level. Our 375 Anniversary year suggested that Wenham might be an appropriate subject and our Town Anniversary Committee was enthusiastic about encouraging this to take place.

Of great additional importance was the pioneering idea of these history students doing this as a series of oral history interviews of Wenham residents who were here in the chosen time period based on World War II. The 1930s and 1940s were as far back in years now that long time residents could be found still with us to tell us their stories. These students would not only be doing research on town history but also learning how to conduct live interviews to be videotaped for ultimate placing in the library's research archives available on line to all who might be interested thereafter, a first for this program at the high school.

I undertook to line up some appropriate candidates for these interviews

from among what is now, after 75 years or so, a limited field from which to choose. A major focus of making such choices was to get as broad an overview of life in town back then as possible, and I settled on six from among those I knew, as the students would be operating in two-person teams. Here first are four with their student interviewers:

Joe Angelini's parents were Italian immigrants who came to this country in 1922 and moved to Wenham in 1939 where they built a home and chicken farming business on Topsfield Road. Joe has returned to the family farm Wenham in retirement. He was interviewed by Nick Oo and Parker Tocci.

Buffy Colt's father, Jim Reynolds, acquired the Larch Farm on Larch Row in the early 1930s, where Buffy grew up on what she refers to as a "gentleman's farm" and after a sojourn elsewhere returned with her husband to build her present home in a corner of that farm. Buffy was interviewed by Emily Benack and Mayo Amorello.

Peggy Gauthier's parents moved to a small cottage at Pleasant Pond in the 1940s, reared a family of thirteen there. Peggy still lives there next door to where she grew up. She was interviewed by James Goudie and Maggie Perotta.

Don Killam's family goes back in town to the 1600s, with most of the generations involved in fire fighting in the town, as was Don, now a retired chief of our present day fire department. Don has lived on Perkins Street since the 1940s. Don was interviewed by Alexandra Padellaro and Ty Santos.

Choice of the two remaining candidates came about when I learned that two World War II veterans who grew up in town lived in nearby Beverly. Visits to both revealed them both willing and able to take part, despite being in their late 90s. Both participated in preliminary get acquainted interviews early this year and all looked promising.

An unanticipated delay in arranging the videotaping by the high school audio/visual students resulted in May in their being unable to do the taping. Nicole Roebuck, our town manager's executive secretary offered her expertise in this field in this last minute crisis and conducted the videotaping (and subsequent editing) of the interviews.

Sadly by now our two vets had succumbed to their advanced years and would no longer be able to participate so some adaptation had to be made to include their messages in the program.

Dean Harwood's family lived on Cherry Street, and he was one of four Harwood brothers who served in the military in the war. Dean served in the Army Air Force but was disabled by a serious illness just prior to being sent overseas. Dean suffered major decline in the interval between the get acquainted interviews and the late scheduling of the videotaping and could not participate. Nathan Giarnese and Katherine Dixon have worked with an audiotaping done at the get acquainted interview to record some of Dean's recollections.

S. Hardy Prince's family lived on Grapevine Road, his father was milk dealer Sidney Prince, who also held the school bus contract for many years. Hardy flew US Navy surveillance aircraft in the Phillipine Sea during the war and settled in Wenham post-war with his wife in a home they built themselves near his family home on Grapevine Road. Dylan Shelby and Charlotte Benchoff worked with family members to assemble what might have been some of Hardy's recollections in a format suitable for recording for posterity.

The efforts on behalf of this project by these students, their teacher and those citizens who contributed their recollections that made it all possible are deserving of our town's collective appreciation. Those of you who find it of interest to attend this preview presentation in recognition of what it has achieved will not be disappointed. Monday evening, June 18, 6-8pm at the Hamilton/Wenham Public Library.