



The History Page

Growing Up in Wenham in WWII Recollections of a Bygone Era

By Bob Hicks

VJ Day & Our Towering Inferno

1945 brought big changes in our lives. On the world scene WWII came to a sudden end, and nationwide what had become the "new normal" after three years of all-out war effort quickly fell into disarray, locally in Wenham this took place also, and in my small corner of the world came a major change just for me and my fellow classmates. More on the big scene later, now here's what happened to those of us living our somewhat self-absorbed teen age lives, still growing up.

Our Class of '44 graduated from Wenham Junior High at the Center School in June and it was off to Beverly High School come fall. Suddenly the dozen of us who had spent nine years growing up together were merged into a sea of 245 Beverly students entering the tenth grade. It was a wrenching re-adjustment for some of us, I being one. The Beverly kids seemed far more socially sophisticated than we were and as a farm kid I soon became known as "Hicks from the Sticks".

I also no longer rode to school in the school bus, I now had to get myself the 3 miles from home on my bicycle (now in its 6th year) to the town center where all the Wenham kids were picked up in front of Trowt's Store (now the fire station) by an Eastern Mass Street Railway bus for transport to Beverly High School. My father now was managing the Eastern States Farmers' Exchange Cooperative (now Agway) warehouse in nearby (to us) Putnamville so he had only an "A" card for gasoline (3 gallons a week) so while he could spare some of it to drop me off in the morning on really bad weather days, he was still at work at 2:30 in the afternoon when we got back to town from Beverly and could not pick me up.

Over the next three years this relative isolation kept me from after school sports and socializing. If I chose to take a regularly scheduled Eastern Mass bus home later, following after-school activities, instead of the school bus (paid for by the town) it cost me hard earned cash, which I didn't really have to spend. My "growing up in Wenham" had now been modified to "... and Beverly".

I had my Saturday and summer vacation job ahead of me on the local estate where I had labored over the winter logging and as spring arrived things began to look up nationwide. The war in Europe came to an end in May with the suicide of Hitler and collapse of his government and the war effort intensity started to dissipate even though Japan remained to be defeated. In her book *Wenham in World War II*, Mrs. Mary Q. Cole described this best in 1947:

"After the menace of German attack on the United States either by plane or submarine had ceased, those large protective groups which had worked and practiced so zealously, the Spotters, the Air Raid Wardens, the Ambulance Corps and Report Center were disbanded, and with the black-out a thing of the past, Wenham returned to a more normal living, though it was still a wartime community. The constant struggle for food which was still rationed continued."

With the euphoria over the end of the War in Europe dissipating as summer arrived, there still remained the ongoing fighting with Japan, which had long demonstrated that it would fight to the last person (man, woman and child). Suddenly as August arrived it all came to an end when atomic bombs were dropped on Japan bringing on its reluctant surrender. Time to celebrate.

Now back to our local scene. The town decided to not host any formal celebration but there were those (some adults as well as we thrill-seeking boys) out here in West Wenham who felt we ought to do something. A bonfire was suggested and a site chosen, the vast gravel plain at the corner of Maple and Burley Streets (opposite where Burnett's Garage now stands) where all the original gravel had been trucked away in 1943 to build the Beverly Airport for the Navy.

At 15 I had no idea about who owned the lot, it didn't seem to be an issue. Prior to the war it had been a small gravel pit operated by a Peabody construction company, McCarthy Brothers, whose motto, "We Move the Earth" was displayed on its trucks with a picture of a dump truck carrying a world globe. They disappeared during the war as did the John Iafolla Company after it hauled away all the gravel, leaving only a barren dustblown plain leaving prominently displayed thereon next to Maple Street a now abandoned wooden structure as big as a three decker tenement that housed the machinery that sifted gravel into different grades and loaded it into trucks that drove beneath its trapdoors.

Uh oh! It wasn't initially in the bonfire picture, which focused on a modest tower of combustibles we had assembled nearby, topped by some old wood and fabric airplane wings collected from the airport. Someone had gotten a fire permit for this (it must have been an adult, we boys knew nothing about such things).

The neighborhood assembled for the show and then things started happening fast. Our little bonfire flared up nicely and then a five gallon pail of home heating oil was carried across the gravel from a nearby house and several persons (adults included) sloshed it up the side of the derelict structure. A flaming broom was carried triumphantly across from the bonfire and the ugly structure, old dry wood soaked in years of grease and oil, went up like a huge torch to a hearty cheer from the assembled multitude. A Towering Inferno indeed!

Soon a siren was heard and Wenham's 1938 Dodge pumper arrived. One look and the volunteer firemen parked it and sat back to enjoy the show. Then Chief Eddie Hall turned up and began circulating the crowd, questioning we teenage boys. None of us professed to know anything about how the fire had gotten away from our bonfire and the Chief, apparently having done his duty, also sat back to watch.

And so the "World War II" part of this series concludes, but I still had some more of the "Growing Up in Wenham..." part to go, so there's a bit more to come.