

Growing Up in Wenham in WWII Recollections of a Bygone Era

By Bob Hicks

After the War Was Over

In the summer of '45 peace returned to the world. Its arrival was chaotic, for the end had arrived suddenly when the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan, impelling even the fanatical Japanese government, determined to go down fighting, 100 million strong with spears defending the invasion beaches (yes, that was their plan), gave up. The fallout of this sudden change in the nation's life style impacted our quiet little town.

A quick look around at the big picture first. Those nations on both sides where the fighting went on lay in ruins, with millions of their populations dead, not only the young men who had to fight the war that the old men started, but the civilians who lived in the way of the ongoing land battles and even more so, those who lived in the cities that became the prime targets of mass bombings on a scale never before imaginable.

Worldwide Europe lay in ruins from both land warfare and General "Bomber" Harris' 1,000 bomber air raids which methodically destroyed Germany's major cities, while Japan, never invaded, was destroyed by air in the final year of the war with over 50 major cities burned to the ground by General Curtis LeMay's massive B29 fire bombing raids, including the March, 1945 raid that created a giant firestorm that burned 14 square miles of Tokyo killing over 100,000 civilians caught in the inferno.

In the USA, amongst all the major combatants, we suffered none of this. Untouched by the war's horrors here at home we did share in the lives lost, almost all of ours in military action. While Russia lost over 20 million, and Germany over 3 million, both with large numbers of civilians killed, we suffered 400,000 military killed in action (eight times the Korean and Viet Nam totals) and 12,000 civilians. The latter were all involved in some way someplace where military action was going on.

Here in Wenham, about 170 of our then 1,400 population were in the military, (most drafted, like it or not). Eight never came home, five died in action and three in non-combatant circumstances. Amongst the 170 were eight women.

When peace came, the USA stood astride the world, possessor of overwhelming military power (Russia had more feet on the ground but we had the technology). Our Generals and Admirals sat atop this mighty military machine and were already planning what they could do with it. But it was not to be, for having endured the wartime privations and absence of their young men, the nation demanded that the government bring the boys home. And so we did and from that and the attendant cutback in all the wartime production the chaos arose. Whatta we going to do with everybody?

In addition to those amongst the 12 million or so connected with the military already "losing their jobs", several million civilians who worked in war industry found themselves being laid off as the war industry shut down. Here in Wenham, as elsewhere, some, including town officials, were contemplating the return of the specter of mass unemployment, ala the 1930s Great Depression, from which the war industry had lifted our economy.

Well, it didn't happen. It took a while but there was a pent up demand for all the stuff we missed having during the war. War industries soon switched over to fulfilling the clamor for consumer goods so unemployment never arose as a serious issue. Money saved for nearly four years for lack of anything to spend it on began to be spent as fast as something to spend it on became available.

Housing was the big thing, not nearly enough existed for the fast marrying young couples wishing to start families. The GI Bill made financing very available to veterans and here Wenham began to feel the pressure, it seemed to have lotsa open land upon which new homes could be built. Our small farmers saw their land values skyrocket and soon began to sell off frontage lots. Wenham had no zoning so had to do something to keep this growth manageable, come up with a school to handle projected school age population growth, and install a water system to replace the individual wells that were increasingly failing the town's need.

In her final summation in the Historical Society's 1947 book, "Wenham in World War Two", Editor Adeline P. Cole stated, "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." Indeed. Over the next few years the town enacted a zoning law, began installing town water starting downtown, and built the Buker School. Now 75 years later and just past our 375th year and counting, the beat goes on.

Again, from Mrs. Cole, this time in her 1943 book, "Notes on Wenham History 1643-1943", "We have created a residential town, a place to establish a home, to which to return after the day's work is over, a place to bring up our children, a town of homes". It still seems to fulfill this vision today, which is why I am still here after 83 years.

But, what's this all got to do with the focus of this series of essays, "Growing Up in Wenham in World War II?" Well, I'm just setting the scene here for an epilog next month. With World War II over but my "growing up" not yet completed, a last look at "whatever happened to..." should complete the series.