

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

By Bob Hicks

### Epilog

When I commenced this series of essays back in June, 2018, it was intended to be part of the 375th Anniversary celebration project and so it was. The ongoing essays appeared in the town website's 375th Anniversary folder and in the "Hamilton Wenham Chronicle". But that all wrapped up at the end of 2018 and I had a ways to go yet to reach the logical conclusion of "Growing Up in Wenham in World War II". So I soldiered on in 2019 on the pages of the "The Wenhamite". Last month I got to the end of WWII but my growing up was yet to be reached. I figured age 18 was the cutoff but in 1945 I was still only 15. My getting to 18 was just sweating out high school, summer jobs and college entrance. My personal epic stops here as all my years thereafter were after "growing up".

But as I arrived at that point the town was entering its own growing up phase, one that has carried on since! Those of you who have been with me since the beginning (or better yet lived here through those years) know how small and simple the town was in the late 1930s prior to WWII. If not and you wish to do so, you can catch up on that past on the Town of Wenham website in the 375th Anniversary folder. It will give you the necessary perspective to understand how the town has indeed grown up since 1945.

In sum it was a population explosion fueled by demand for housing in so attractive a small, unspoiled community, and with the onrushing horde of new inhabitants that has tripled the population in the intervening 75 years came all the demands for town services that their growing presence were creating. No room here on one page to get into details on how did this all happen. To do it justice would require serious historical research and lotsa pages to present it all. But I thought maybe just describing what happened on my street, Burley Street, in the 80 years I have lived here would give you some idea of the impact of that population explosion.

In March of 1937 the half mile of Burley Street that lay in Wenham before entering Danvers (as a dirt road) had three homes, surrounded by a number of open fields tilled as market gardens and some adjacent scattered woodlands. At that time of our arrival one of my sisters and I joined the neighboring Perkins brothers to total four school age kids. It was a pretty quiet street with little through traffic.

The building of the Beverly Airport in WWII by the US Navy literally cut the street off on the Danvers end (by a runway) and took away one of the homes, that of the elder Perkins too close to the airport site. It was replaced by a cottage built for them

by their son with lumber salvaged from their ancestral farmhouse that had been destroyed by the airport expansion.

A couple of years after the war ended the building boom began. Much of the frontage (not including my family's 600 plus feet at this time) on the street was divided into lots and homes sprang up. By the mid-1950s there were 12 homes and with a search of my not always reliable memory I come up with a head count of about 25 school agers yearly over the decade. It was a young and busy street. Danvers had reconnected its severed end with a detour around the runway that had severed it and paved it and traffic was building as it no longer served only local residents.

In 1956 my parents joined in and set off 600'+ of frontage into three lots, one of which held the old place, with one of the two new ones housing my parents (my mother wanted a new home now that we kids were grown). My newly acquired wife Jane and I bought the old place and my married younger sister built on the other lot. The buildable street frontage was now pretty well filled up, only some wetland at the foot of the street remained unbuilt upon.

The boom was over but some back land remained to be developed. My parents had two more buildable lots out back and so Orchard Lane (a private way) was built in late 1970s to access them and eventually our now adult daughter and son built homes on them. Later on across from us on Burley Street Nathaniel Way was built for two more homes on back land. In recent years a major subdivision, Middlewood ("15 fabulous new townhouses" to quote realtors) was built up the street at the Danvers town line, down in the woods out of sight from old Burley Street itself. Any more room? I can't think of any but...

So, consider just this one rather remote street's impact on the town as it population proliferated. And we now hear that more is coming, some 40+ units of elder housing just around the corner on Maple Street. Where will it all end...

So what about this farm kid who grew up in Wenham in WWII? Well, I'm still here. After college and marriage, Jane and I settled here in my old childhood home. Our daughter and son grew up here and in turn they moved onto the back land, building homes in which to raise their families (two and three children). Our family complex has been a lifelong powerful incentive to stay here and we have never thought of anywhere that would be a better place to live out our lives.