

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

By Bob Hicks

### What Manner of Town is This Wenham? – Part 2

I concluded my last discussion of “What Manner of Town is This Wenham?” commenting that I would expand on how the town was run in 1937 next and perhaps say something about the demographics before I launched into my personal recollection of the next ten years in town. To be sure I was on firm ground using the term, I looked up “demographics: statistical data relating to the population and particular groups within it.” Okay, I’m all set then. Wenham’s approximately 1,500 citizens at the time came from “all walks of life.”

But before I get into that fascinating stuff I want to take a look at how the town was run. This subject was of no interest to me at age seven but it did get my father’s attention, as a lifetime bean counter he was always looking at the numbers that showed where his money was being spent, especially for taxes!

In Part 1 of this topic I mentioned that the town budget for 1937 was about \$70,000. That year the Assessors reported that 4,597 acres of land, 382 dwellings, 373 personal properties, 100 cows, 110 horses and 5,234 fowl had been assessed for tax purposes.

According to the Selectmen’s Report there were “no significant changes in town affairs,” which was good news. Their big news was the replacement of the 1854 tin roof on Town Hall with a new tin roof. The town got a pretty good run out of that original tin.

Population statistics reported included 18 births, 13 marriages and 16 deaths.

School affairs loomed large in town, among several major issues was the introduction of English language and typing courses into the Junior High (grades 7-9) to bring students up to the level of Beverly where Wenham’s high school students grades 10-12 would attend. Five new typewriters had to be purchased and additional part time teachers hired.

Discovery of student dental needs raised the prospect for establishing a school dental clinic when an examination by a local dentist hired by the school showed that some 130 of the 150 students in grades 1-9 needed dental work that their families were unable to afford.

Students living at Idlewood Lake (there were a lot of them) at the end

of Pleasant Street were added to the West Wenham school bus route. It had been quite a hike, especially for the little kids, all the way from the far end of Pleasant Street to Cherry, thence up Monument to Main and onto Arbor to the Center School.

The Salem Savings Bank reported that it had received \$175 in student deposits during the school year through their weekly visits to its school stamp machine.

A school band was organized to be entirely funded by those taking part. The existing Drama Club was taken over by 7-8 grades teacher, Miss Bullis, which would introduce repercussions into my life when I arrived in her room in a few years. An Aviation Club enlarged its purview from making model planes to studying the growing aviation field as possible future employment and a Camera Club was introduced due to demand. Another extra curricular club was the All Around Club, with no explanation supplied about its activities.

The Fire Department announced that it had answered 39 alarms, including three buildings, the worst being the “Porter Fire” which burned out the Post Office. Twenty-one grass fires predominated. Fifteen cisterns were listed scattered around town for fire fighting as there was no town water system and hence no hydrants.

The Police Department fielded 83 complaints, arrested two drunks, suspended five driving licenses, investigated six accidents and served six summons.

The Highway Department’s major effort was on the permanent paving (asphalt, not tar) of Topsfield Road at the Beverly end aided by a paving contractor funded in part by state Chapter 90 money (about \$2,000 from the town and \$10,000 from Chapter 90). They also completed permanent paved sidewalks on Perkins Street and Friend Court.

The lingering effects of the Great Depression (which suffered a relapse in 1937) continued, included the employment of 16 townsmen on WPA proj-

ects, the major one being the building of the present stone wall fronting Pingree Park. Six women who worked on the WPA Sewing Project (employed making clothing distributed to the needy by the town) lost their jobs when that WPA program was cancelled for towns with under 3,000 population.

Public Assistance was still ongoing as a result of the Great Depression’s impact on townspeople, with in excess of \$10,000 distributed through Public Welfare, Old Age Assistance, Soldiers Relief, Mothers Aid, Aid to Dependent Children, State Aid and local Charities.

The Board of Health was busy monitoring milk deliveries in town as ten milk dealers, including seven located in Wenham, were licensed to sell milk in town and ongoing inspection of ten dairies in town went on throughout the year.

The Library, located in the Town Hall, circulated 12,375 volumes, indicating a well read community. A used typewriter (said to have been in good condition) and a new encyclopedia were acquired to fill growing needs of school students.

The Tree Warden dealt with 400 town trees needing attention or removal, indicating that efforts of the Wenham Village Improvement Society 30 years earlier to plant trees in town as a much needed “improvement” had been quite successful.

A special committee was appointed to start planning for the town’s 300th (Tercentenary) celebration six years hence in 1943. Two hundred dollars was appropriated for their expenses (no town money was appropriated for our 375th Committee, which has had to do its own fundraising to pay for this year’s events and activities).

Coming up next, how about those demographics? Well, it looks like they will have to await my next History Page as I’ve used up all my space for this time. It’s interesting stuff contemplating the social/economic range in the population of 1,500 or so townspeople (and the particular groups within it), from the affluent estates like top taxpayer Mrs Ruby Miller’s Penguin Hall, to the tiny summer camps at Idlewood Lake.