

Growing Up in Wenham in WWII Recollections of a Bygone Era

By Bob Hicks

School Days – Part 3 Let's Hear It for Our Teachers! (continued)

My entry into Junior High in September 1941 was followed that December with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, which forced the US into what became World War II. The ensuing nationwide "War Effort" readjustment impacted upon how we all would come to live our lives here in Wenham for the next three-and-a-half years, a major subject I'll get to later in this series.

At this time I'll only note its impact on our Center School's teaching staff. It was not noticeable to me as I moved up through the seventh, eighth and ninth grades. Miss Bullis still lay in wait for us in her seventh and eighth grades, while a new hire, Miss Tobey, came on as we arrived at the ninth grade.

The real impact came upon the School Board and Superintendent to replace several teachers who chose to resign during the war years. Teachers were suddenly in short supply, over 200,000 had left their jobs nationwide as war work offered sudden riches. There were 70,000 vacancies, and enrollment in teachers colleges was off 60%. The inflation that ensued from all the war related government spending forced the School Board to offer ever higher salaries in order to retain the staff already in hand as well as entice newcomers.

With that bit of background, it's back to "Let's Hear It for the Teachers:"

Miss Bullis' seventh and eighth grades proved to be as fearsome as we had been forewarned. Initially I seemed to have made it onto her approved list (not a teacher's pet, no such person existed in her eyes). She had found out early that I was an avid reader so she required me to do 15 book reports a year rather than the standard 10. She also noted that I seemed to easily memorize the lengthy epic poems we studied in her English class, such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Evangeline*:

"This is the forest primeval,
The murmuring pines and the hemlocks,
Bearded with moss, and in garments
green, indistinct in the twilight,
Stand like Druids of eld, with voices
sad and prophetic,
Stand like harpers hoar, with beards that
rest on their bosoms."

My ability to memorize lengthy subjects led to being assigned (no choice) a

couple of leading parts in the annual school plays that she directed, as well as a major part in 1943 narrating a two hour school pageant which was part of the town's 300th Anniversary Celebration. While I could memorize all I had to say, I was an indifferent actor. Ultimately her choosing me for one of the leading parts in the ninth grade annual school play ("Strike Up the Band") brought on my downfall when I came down seriously sick just before the play was to go on stage.

Miss Bullis suspected me of faking it and did not believe my mother's confirmation of the reality. It took a visit to our home from the school nurse, at Miss Bullis' insistence, to convince her that I was just not gonna be there. I do not recall how it all worked out for her as there was no understudy for my part, but the play went on without me.

After many years had passed, I came to realize that she saw something in me and did her best to develop it. Of course, at the time I was unaware of this and they were not a happy two years of my life at Center School.

Moving on to my ninth grade teacher, Miss Tobey, we both arrived the same year, fall of 1943. Our class of 13 for the first time enjoyed our very own classroom. Miss Tobey was young and attractive and to our adolescent male eyes the first teacher we had who we viewed as a "young woman" rather than an "older teacher." She was aware of this impact she had on us and used it to get our cooperation in whatever she wanted us to do but nothing untoward happened and she was gone at the end of the year, off to greener pastures when we also departed off to Beverly High.

Junior High continued our exposure to culture with Miss Cleaveland's music and Mrs Eaton's drawing (not art) still with us from grammar school. Their efforts were pretty much wasted on me as I lacked any talent for singing or any interest in playing a musical instrument, and drawing left me cold also. School

reports from this era mention how successful Miss Cleaveland was in her field and with encouraging and involving those musically inclined amongst the student body.

She retired after 20 years in 1942. I can still see her small elderly figure by that grand piano in the Assembly Hall in her long, almost ankle length black dress with high button shoes (I kid you not) peeking out beneath, repeatedly flipping over images of all the classical musical instruments on an easel, awaiting our instant identification until she achieved it.

Mr Burr's manual arts and printing classes were an entirely different experience for us in his shop in one of the basement rooms, a haven of refuge for seven adolescent boys in which to indulge in hands-on making of stuff and learning how to print the school magazine, *The Breeze*. He was a great guy, who we all idolized. He also was the school sports coach, chiefly, as I recall, of the six-man football team. Sports during WWII were restricted to only "at home" events (gasoline rationing), hence limited in scope.

One major woodworking project for me occupied much of a year in manual arts. I undertook to saw out a sizeable image of an elephant from a slab of 1" thick rock maple to become a gift cutting board for my mother. It measured about 10"x12" and was very hard wood indeed. My hand-held and driven jigsaw made little progress against the rock hard wood and pressing on too firmly to overcome this resulted in an increasing number of broken blades. Mr Burr began to get concerned for I was fast diminishing the limited stock of these blades his budget had permitted him to acquire.

I wasn't the only student to be sawing wood with a jigsaw but was well in the lead in broken blades. I believe my father eventually bought some blades to see me through and the cutting board enjoyed a long career in my mother's kitchen, ending up back with me upon her death.

So what about Miss Buker? Well, I realize that I stated earlier that I would be writing about her in this Part 3 of School Days, but there's quite a lot to say about her which will occupy all of my next essay.