

TOTAL WAR: 1939-45

The *Chronicle-Express*, which had given up on editorials at the moment of Roosevelt's first election, never took them up again all through the rest of the Depression or during the war years that followed. There wasn't much doubt, however, about local feeling, as ever-enormous majorities were returned for Republican candidates.

The major political issue in the year or two before the war began in Europe was local option. Former Penn Yan merchant Theodore O. Hamlin - the same man who in his extreme youth had contemplated fighting off potential draft rioters with cannon and crockery - wrote from his Pultneyville retirement in December 1938 that he was greatly cheered to read that four towns in the county had voted to go dry in the election just past. Moving on to other matters, Hamlin noted, "We can safely conclude that the large majority favored constitutional government, integrity of the Supreme Court, the liberty of every citizen to manage his personal affairs, recognition of the unchanged laws of supply and demand, and a peremptory stop of the wasteful spending of *raw dealers* that threatened national bankruptcy."

On the other hand, Eleanor Roosevelt made her second visit to Keuka College in February, 1939 to the universal acclaim of everyone whose opinion appeared in print. There was no mention of the ominous news from Europe; the local weeklies concentrated with singleminded force on local issues and activities. On September 7, buried in the fine print of a digest of current events, appeared a note that refugees were being evacuated from the European war zones.

The Penn Yan Flying Club was inaugurated in September 1940 at a meeting of 30 people in the Farm Bureau office. They all put in \$15 and eventually \$1400 was raised to buy a Piper Cub. They rented space on the old Aaron Plympton farm south of the village and began grading a runway and access road in April 1941. The club purchased the airport property in August 1944. It had a 2000-foot runway, a barn and an historic house. Plans were made by the group (65 members, eight of whom were women) to use the barn as a main hangar - the club owned six planes - and the house, built in 1824 by Aaron Plympton, as a clubroom. The reporter envisioned "a coke-drinking, air-minded gang gathered before the homestead fireplace." This was the only flying club in the area to survive the strict wartime regulation; a 24-hour guard had to be kept, and detailed logbooks.

By early December 1941, news about the war in Europe had begun to penetrate the local weeklies' pages. The *Chronicle-Express* printed a series of letters from Winifred Graville to her relatives in Penn Yan. She was living in Sheffield, England and vividly described the air raids there. Among the holiday preparations knitters were being sought to make up "Bundles for Britain."

The attack on Pearl Harbor was as immediate and shocking to Yates County as it was to the rest of the nation. Some 200 local residents were already in the service, a few of them at Pearl Harbor. There was no immediate word on casualties as late as December 11. The Yates Defense Council met and enlistments took a sudden spurt. Village police and county officers were augmented by a corps of carefully chosen men, most with previous police

experience, reported the *Chronicle-Express*, "men used to quick thinking in an emergency and level-headed." The American Legion registered men to guard railroad bridges and other strategic points. A plan was drawn up to send a Christmas box to every Yates resident already in the service.

Within another week plans were being made for a practice blackout and school children were being put through air raid drills. A civilian service organization, chaired by Mrs. Walter Henricks, made plans for housing and feeding air raid evacuees. Their armbands were sewn as a public service at the Michaels Stern plant. Everywhere were appeals to keep calm, continue at work, not to give way to panic; coupled with weekly illustrated advice on what to do if an air raid struck.

These warnings were put out by the U.S. Office of Civilian Defense. One of the ones printed that winter, complete with a drawing by Milton Caniff of an heroic family putting out a fire in their living room with a hose and a bucket, urged citizens that their safest place during a raid would be at home. "The enemy wants you to run into the streets, create a mob, start a panic. Don't do it!

"If incendiary bombs fall, play a SPRAY from a garden hose (never a splash or stream) of water on the bomb.... Under raid conditions, keep a bathtub and buckets full of water for the use of the fire department in case water mains are broken....

"Should gas be used..., paste paper over glass. Stuff rags in window cracks and under doors."

Tire rationing, which must have brought the reality of war much closer to home than this fantastic advice, began in January, 1942. The local Tire Rationing Board announced that purchase of tires and tubes would be authorized only for vehicles for which there was a public necessity, "and then only after careful investigation of each application."

The same week came news of the third local casualty, the first to have been killed in action (in the Philippines); the first young man to die was shot while on leave in Virginia, the second was a polio victim in a South Carolina training camp.

As in the previous World War, commercial advertising picked up the conflict right from the start. New York State Electric & Gas Corp. ran a series of ads showing its uniformed troops keeping the flow of electricity running to munitions factories. In Penn Yan, the Burnell photographic studio was urging its customers to send pictures to their boys before they went overseas, "and make sure you get one of him." Penn Yan Academy broadcast the news over its intercom system every day at noon, a service said to be especially useful to rural students who couldn't get the news at home.

The indefatigable ladies of the civilian defense took a survey that January of suitable buildings in which to house air raid evacuees. Twenty-six upstate counties were to serve as evacuation centers, and, reported the *Chronicle-Express* with a perfectly straight face, "with the coming of spring, bombing and serious sabotage will likely become a reality." The first of several efforts to raise the huge amounts of money needed to prosecute the war got started

that winter. A town of Italy boy sold a team of ox calves of which he was particularly fond, so he could buy a defense stamp. He told interviewers that he wanted to purchase one of the stamps like the other children at his school and he was otherwise out of funds.

A practice blackout in March was said to be quite successful, with the exception of the hamlet of Crosby in Barrington, which failed entirely to get the signal, "and went through the evening merrily lighted."

A Penn Yan merchant advertised that he had just two new Farmall tractors left with rubber tires, "the last rubber-tired tractors I can furnish for some time." The rationing board allowed only one new car purchase, for a mail carrier. The Elmwood Theater was showing *The Birth of the Blues* for two days only with an extra called *When Air Raids Strike* ("Vital! Timely! Daring!") Citizens were urged to start Victory Gardens, and descriptive circulars were promised. Waste paper was a war material and everyone admonished to save it.

And the Rushville State Bank in a big display ad, said, "OUR JOB IS RIGHT HERE. We may have different opinions about the conduct of the War, but our sole job is to support the government RIGHT HERE IN RUSHVILLE. There is much we can do in the purchase of bonds and stamps, Red Cross work, observation of war rules and regulations, and maintenance of a courageous carry-on spirit until the victory is won."

Salvage operations were begun in earnest in January, 1942. Thirty-nine small boxes were placed around Penn Yan by the salvage committee, into which people could drop pencil erasers, keys, small toys and other items. A station located on Elm Street between Jolley's showroom and the Carpenter liquor store collected larger items like plows and plow points, brass beds and paper.

A shortage of labor which lasted throughout the war was felt the following summer. Young girls were recruited to pick the black raspberry crop. They weren't experienced farm workers, but people whose names were on lists for civilian mobilization, and the account of their long hot scratchy first day's labor is heart-wrenching.

Rationing of gasoline began during the summer of 1942. Citizens were urged to car pool in order to conserve gas and rubber. The *Chronicle-Express* announced voluntary censorship, pledging not to print the names, uniform insignia or movements of local soldiers, weather information or statistics on factory production. Instructions were printed on how to conserve household fats. Civilian Mobilization headquarters was in the Arcade Building in Penn Yan. In an effort to keep migrant farm workers on the job, a day nursery with a nurse in charge was provided at the bean-pickers' camp near Dresden and at another for Comstock workers at Rushville. It was announced that the county needed more volunteer plane spotters. A meat shortage drove the deer kill up that fall, and the Birkett Mills ran a series of ads promoting the liberal use of bread and pastry to supplement expensive meats, eggs, and cheese. Steel quotas forced the rationing of farm machinery, but, as Birkett's also pointed out, wheat and buckwheat flour was unrationed.

Regulations going into effect in January 1943 had the police checking license plates of cars parked on the streets during hours unlikely for conducting

business. They were looking for suspected pleasure drivers. Citizens were asked to report "suspicious vehicles." Many local restaurants and inns were forced to close for the duration, and social clubs saw a decline in activity. Numerous violations of the pleasure-driving ban were reported, however. The immediate problem was a temporary but severe fuel shortage in the northeast; a very large amount of oil was being shipped overseas for the assault on North Africa, and at home it was decided to use limited facilities to move fuel oil rather than gasoline. Advertising for work horses and other farm animals increased. "A fine pair of heavy young horses" could be had in the spring of 1943.

Advertising continued to display a proper martial spirit. "Farmers! Is your tank ready for battle? Do you have all the parts you will need for the spring attack?" Customers were urged to get what parts they needed, but to avoid hoarding.

A Victory Corps was established at Penn Yan Academy. "The boy who gets his geometry problem wrong today won't get an accurate aim on his bomb sight tomorrow." New classes were begun on the repair of farm machinery, and the focus of physical education shifted from recreation "to the training of young Atlases." A fitness club was started so girls could learn emergency skills like ladder climbing and crawling under and leaping over obstacles.

In the fall of 1942 the county saw its first full-time female school-bus driver, Mrs. Eugene Bullock of Crosby, "still another Yates County woman who has taken over a job generally considered as exclusively male so that her husband can take a war job." Mrs. Bullock was the only female "full-time driver of a 36-passenger vehicle. Not a slip, skid, tardy mark or absence since September," the *Chronicle-Express* breathlessly reported in April, "and all the children like her. What man could do better?"

Women were being recruited for other jobs as well. Telephone operators were needed "for vital war work. They should be at least 17 years old and some high school is desirable. No experience necessary." Mrs. Russell Moss advertised that her husband had joined the Army and she would carry on his ash- and garbage-collection business herself. By November, 1943 Soldiers & Sailors' Memorial Hospital had reached a crisis that could have forced its closing: a severe shortage of nurses. The state was 4000 nurses short of meeting its quota for the military nursing service, and the hospital urged local people to offer to baby-sit for nurses who were parents so they could return to work part-time.

Besides nurses, the military was withdrawing other talented women from the local job pool. The Women's Army Corps advertised in August, 1944: "Can you drive a car?... Do you get a kick out of handling the wheel like a man?" and urged women with mechanical ability to enlist.

Rationing of stoves began in August 1943. Appeals were made to increase the amount of home canning, since it would release commercial food supplies for the soldiers. The difficulty of finding enough sugar wasn't mentioned, however. "Coal is a war material vital to Victory - Conserve It!" said an ad in July 1943. On the other hand, used cars could be had. Walter L. Hurrin's agency in the former Wagener Bros. building on East Elm Street advertised that "Used Studebakers can take it! No special authorization is needed to buy

one. The number of used Champions, Commanders and Presidents is steadily diminishing - don't wait too long to buy yours."

As the war wore on, more and more appeals for waste paper were published. The National Manufacturing Co. (formerly Milo Mills) and Oswego Tissues (formerly Fox's Mill) were the last two paper mills on the Keuka Outlet. They both were in desperate need of waste paper to aid in the manufacture of ammunition containers; the latter was also buying straw when it could be found, being the last mill east of the Mississippi to use straw in the manufacture of a paper product. By fall every issue of the local papers sported two boxes on the masthead. One proclaimed: "Your Waste Paper Makes Ammunition Cases - Knocks Out Nazis!" and the other: "Your Waste paper Makes Shell Cases - Has Tojo Trembling!"

The labor shortage continued. Walkerbilt in Penn Yan was manufacturing torpedo shell cases in part of its plant and at least one octogenarian was working the line. When the beet harvest of 1943 was threatened by heavy rain and freezing weather, sailors from the Naval Training Station at Sampson in Seneca County, Italian prisoners of war housed in the canning factory's buildings, schoolchildren and farmworkers were pulled into the Comstock plant in Rushville in an effort to salvage the crop. Still, at nearly the same time laborers were being recruited for state highway construction along the west shore of Keuka Lake. The spring of 1944 saw draft boards giving 60-day deferments to harvest workers. Recruiting officers advised youngsters to stay in school instead of dropping out in order to enlist.

It's curiously difficult to get an estimate of how many local men and women served in this war. Very many, apparently, at least 1500; and something over a hundred lives were lost.

By early 1944 the end was in sight. In February, a speaker at the Penn Yan Rotary luncheon explained why farmers were opposed to crop subsidies imposed by the government to increase production and reduce inflation; at the same time he suggested that strong efforts be made to improve the state of rural housing so homecoming soldiers would have decent places to live. The Rochester Business Institute ran a display ad in the *Chronicle-Express* exhorting local youngsters: "You Want a Good Peacetime Job!... Successful men and women are those who have trained to fill a specific position." And Michaels Stern, recruiting women, claimed: "Five Urgent Government Contracts Demand More Help. Help the war effort now and assure yourself a steady job after the war is over." Lown's was advertising "pre-war quality" wool blankets and the oil companies were exhorting people to keep up maintenance on their old cars since it would be at least two or three years post-war before new ones were available. In August 1944 Camp Corey was closed early because of a polio epidemic in western New York (there was one case in Penn Yan); but 200 boys attended, noted the *Chronicle-Express*, adding that "organized camping is a big and growing business."

The paper praised Denmark for the increasing number of incidents of sabotage and general resistance to the Nazis in that country, one of the few times notice was taken of foreign news. The summer of '44 was a hot one and coincided with an ice shortage caused by lack of labor the previous winter to harvest ice on the lake. One hopeful note was the fact that new telephones for private installation were again being manufactured; none were being

hooked up yet locally, however, since the Pacific Coast had a greater "war need" for the instruments.

V-E Day in May was marked fairly quietly, with store closings at noon, worship services and flag displays. All places serving alcoholic beverages closed voluntarily except one (unnamed in the news report) in Penn Yan. The brownout regulations were eased, though: once more the store windows remained lit and the Elmwood marquee showed "a blaze of illumination."

At the same time 64 new men were reporting to the induction center, others were returning. Dr. Ralph Davis reopened his office in the Arcade Building in Penn Yan in August after being retired to inactive duty, and New York City native Sam Lano, just back from service in the Mediterranean, was manager of the newly chartered Penn Yan Grape Juice Company's plant on Sheppard Street.

The same issue of the *Chronicle-Express* that reported on the explosion of joy that greeted the end of the war in the Pacific saw a huge page-wide headline: "Death and Injuries Take Toll as PY Celebrates Peace Tuesday." A couple of dozen young bean pickers from the camp a mile west of Dresden had crowded in and on a truck headed for Penn Yan to join the celebration. A man returning home to Dresden brushed the truck's fender at Legg's Corners, killing two teenaged girls and injuring three others, one of whom had to have her left leg amputated. The death of one of the victims, 13-year-old Dorothy Mikula, was particularly poignant, since her mother and brother had left the camp on Sunday to greet the arrival of her father, Sgt. Michael Mikula, just returned from France.

Evidently, President Truman's announcement came after days of expectation. "A riot of whistles, bells, horns, shouts, parades, fire crackers or dynamite caps, bonfires and bottles" greeted the news. Bonfires were built at the four corners in Penn Yan and at the corner of Water and Main Streets. Tojo's coffin was paraded through the streets by a noisy crowd of snake dancers - reminiscent of the celebration of the Kaiser's "funeral" a quarter-century earlier. Fire trucks were stationed in the street to douse the bonfires when they got too high, men from the Shore Patrol were on hand to help keep order, some storeowners even went to the length of emptying their show windows as a precaution. A light shower calmed things down toward midnight but one unknown celebrant got things going again at two a.m. by activating a fire alarm. The only injury reported was that of a man who fell and cut his head on the bumper of a parked police car.

Only a week later the *Chronicle-Express* surveyed local industry to ascertain what the effect of peace would be on the high level of employment engendered by the war. The outlook was good. Michaels Stern, among the county's largest employers, was looking for more workers. Uniforms made under government contract would be needed by occupation forces, and returning soldiers would be buying civilian clothes. Similar thoughts were echoed by officials at the Comstock cannery, the paper mills and Penn Yan Boats. Both Walkerbilt and Penn Yan Buses were already in a slack period but expected business to pick up shortly. Birkett Mills had made contact with their largest foreign customer - Finland - and were ready to start shipping again as soon as minefields could be cleared. A Naval ordnance processing plant begun by Dupont in Dresden only the previous November - it had the

mayor bragging that "it looks like Penn Yan and Geneva will soon be nothing but suburbs of Dresden" - would be completed and the work continued, since the product (hydrogen peroxide, though this was unannounced at the time) had important peacetime applications. "Every housewife in the village is getting spare rooms ready," cheerfully noted the local correspondent. In addition, the big Greenidge electrical-generation plant - new in the few years prior to the war, the first new industry in Dresden in a long time - was going to be expanded to meet the increased demand.

"All in all," the article summed up, "the survey indicates that Penn Yan's [and presumably the county's] employment strength lies in its diversity of industry, avoiding extreme booms of employment and prosperity and also the depths of unemployment and depression."