

This Week in Saratoga County History

Never Forgotten, Always Honored

Submitted by Harriet Finch May 26, 2022

Harriett Finch is an educator and retired principal who has designed exhibits for Grant Cottage and the NYS Military Museum, and is currently working on the World War II exhibit at the Wilton Town Hall.



Pictured: Maynard Varney, his father Dalas Varney, wife Ruth to the right of their son Jim and daughter Jean. Nephew Ken Petteys and his daughters Audrey, Barbara and Carolyn, seated.

This Memorial Day, Wilton, New York's town hall will begin work on an exhibit which tells the story of Wilton's WWII families. The addition of missing WWII names researched by Marguerite Burns has helped spur the recollections of Betty Ernst Cleveland, Joe Burns, Betty Harrington, Emily and Bill Brower, Bill Morgan, Laurie Westcott and Donald Tooker. There memories are recounted here.

A Wilton resident Frank Covell, 19, was at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Frank was stationed on the island of Oahu and asleep in his tent then the Japanese planes with red orbs flew over. Frank saw American pilots attempting to land on the lanes of a highway.

Betty Harrington remembered the blue stars on white fields that hung in the windows of Wilton homes. Although Wilton had only 342 households in 1942, there were eighty-six service members from seventy families who enlisted.

The town's first concern was "an enemy in the sky." Although an electric siren was eventually attached to Van Rensselaer's general store, Betty Ernst Cleveland's father, a German émigré, made a whistle to alert his neighbors. Betty remembers air raid drills and darkened rooms. She and other siblings played hide and go seek on the floor of their home. William Ernst was the foreman of the newly constructed McGregor Links' clubhouse. His oldest son became a tail gunner who flew sixty two missions in the Pacific. Brothers George and Herbert served in Europe. In recent years, Betty discovered a 1944 article about another gunner, William Jelens. His Austrian born parents lived in Wilton. He died on a mission to destroy a German tank factory somewhere over Austria. His body were never discovered.

Bill Morgan remembered that his father was an aircraft warning observer looked for planes from the top floor of the Met. Life Sanatorium. A description of a plane's direction, number of engines and the shape of its wings and tail, was reported to a central command.

The rationing of sugar, coffee and gasoline began in 1942. A popular slogan read "Do less-so they'll have enough." In 1943, meat was added to the ration list. Donald Tooker remembered going with his father to sell meat in a Saratoga Spring's market. Donald recalled that the "empty market looked as if it had been hit by cyclone"

A 1942 Newspaper clipping announced a scrap day and then a salvage drive. Each town was given a quota. Young students who walked to one of ten small schools began to collect milkweed for use in life vests. Flattened cans, needed metal, magazines, newspapers and corrugated paper which could be used for packing were sent to schools. In turn, teachers sent ration stamps in little booklets home for families to use, Homemakers collected grease. The glycerin in animal fats would be used to make gun powder.

Wilton's high school students took a bus to Lake Avenue in Saratoga Springs. Bill Brower remembered a knitting project. Afghans were sent to families in Britain. Donald Tooker remembered that Wilton students were paired with students living in the city. He recalled, "When you heard the siren, *you went home with a classmate. The all-clear signal meant it was time to return to the school and take the bus back to Wilton.*"

The town's salvage drive was a community effort and a huge success. The town's highway superintendent, Fred Pratt provided trucks. Boy Scouts helped deliver items stored in the schools. John Beagle, Charles Currier, Maynard and Vincent Varney, John Petel, Ken Petteys, Frank Perry and Wesley Worth worked on the collection of anything made of metal.

Ernest Woods became the Salvage Drive Chairman. Bill Morgan remembered that Mr. Woods and his wife got up early on Sundays to heat the church on Parkhurst Road. He operated a garage on Old Saratoga Road and knew many of the town's residents.

The success of the salvage drive's first year raised enough money to pay for an Armed Forces Honor Roll. A ten-piece South Glens Falls band performed at a ceremony on December 6, 1942. Parents of the 86 enlisted boys were honored. The gold star mother of Bud Huntley read the

names. William Foster Huntley Jr. had been killed by a German U boat torpedo off the New Jersey shore.

Some of the enlistees had joined the Armed Forces before 1940. Mildred and Edward Vincek enlisted in 1938. John Biss joined the Army Air Corp in 1937 and spent three years as a Japanese Prisoner of War. Elbert James Perry and Eugene M. Thurston also became Japanese POWs.

Newspapers published small postage stamp sized pictures of the men. Censored letters didn't tell parents much. The Office of War Information limited published details and images. William Burns, the father of seven and his son Joe used a map and a car battery to get news on the radio. William Burns Jr. worked on the Burma Road and his 15-year-old brother, Jimmy, who needed his father's permission to serve in the Navy, went to the Pacific.

Servicemen were the focus of prayers at Wilton's seven churches, and conversations at the Grange on Northern Pines Road and the town's party line.

The number of enlisted and inducted service men increased. Five Zwijacz sons served our country. Bill Brower remembered his parents' conversation about their widowed neighbor, Pearl Grubb. She had two sons in the service. She received two Western Union telegrams delivered by taxi. One telegram told her that her son Hugo had been wounded. The second telegram reported his death on an island in the Pacific. Clinton Oakley's died in the Philippines

At war's end, Wilton's heroes became returning home. John Biss, Eugene M. Thurston and Elbert James Perry did not come home until the fall of 1945.

The last Wilton soldier to die in WWII was Maynard Varney. Bill Morgan remembers being at the Van Rensselaer's General Store the day residents learned of Varney's death. Maynard had worked at the general store, delivered groceries, supported his son's boy scout troop, and collected items for the salvage drive. He was in a forward/defensive position on tank maneuvers driving toward Berlin. Bill remembered the grieving folks in the store and still recalled the scene seventy years later

The Wilton residents who shared memories tell us something about the town's pride and the uncertainty families experienced. Many veterans choose not to talk about their wartime experiences and left little to be included in obituaries.

To the credit of the Wilton's successive town boards and the Wilton Heritage Society, over 50 years, efforts have been made to honor WWII veterans. The new 2021 aluminum Armed Forces Honor Roll on Ballard Road will remain a bookmark in a chapter of the town's history.

On Flag Day, June 14, at 2:00pm, those who shared memories, and contributed photographs and artifacts will meet at the Wilton Town Hall for a ribbon cutting ceremony honoring their service.

