

WORLD WAR II MEMORIES

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The End of the War

The car screeched honking into the driveway with a reckless abandon that I had never witnessed and a man, I have no idea who, flung open the door and yelled to my mother as she stepped out onto the porch. "It's over!"

I shall never forget the look on my mother's face.

I don't know how to describe her smile or, indeed, her whole demeanor, except in contrast to what it had been for the previous several years. Of course I wasn't to realize all of this until I was an adult and able to look back on those years of World War II. Mother had been tense and preoccupied all of the time. She was still there for us as our mother, always ready to stop and talk or play, always up for a walk in the woods, a picnic, a craft project, even as she worked incredibly hard doing the chores or gardening, canning or sewing, the center of our convivial family life that seemed to extend to anyone who set foot on the property. But under the fun and the busy spirit, a part of her was elsewhere, quiet and worried.

Pictures of her brothers in uniform hung on our living room wall -- Uncle Art looking debonair in his sailor suit; Uncle Elmer looking serious in his naval officer's uniform, the one now hanging in the Sturgeon Point lighthouse. Mother often remarked to visitors that Elmer didn't like his picture because "they" had airbrushed out all of his wrinkles. It is a bland-looking picture and he was a handsome man partly because of the deep smile wrinkles that had gathered around his mouth and eyes. There were a number of cousins in the war, also, and friends from the community.

Mother rarely cried and we only saw her cry once during The War. That was the day word came that one of her favorite cousins, Donnie Rasmussen, had been killed in action. She cried the way she always did, briefly and silently, and then pulled herself together and into herself. She carried her sorrow in her face as she busied herself in her endless chores.

But now, on August 14, 1945, Victory in Japan day, a neighbor was tearing around the community spreading the news that it was over. Relief seemed to pour out of every cell of my Mother's body and gather in her smile.

I was nearly eight years old, already gangly and awkward. I grabbed up a hobby horse I had made myself out of a stick and an old sock and began running around and around the living room, whooping and hollering up over the chairs and along the daybed which served as our couch. Nobody stopped me or told me to get off the furniture or even seemed to notice what I was doing.

After I was an adult, I told Mom and Dad about this frenzied ritual I had performed. They both started to laugh and said that adults across the country had behaved the same way.

Daddy had come home from work as relieved and delighted as Mom. They decided that they should do something to celebrate, so after supper and the chores, they left Johnny and me under the guardianship of Sonny and Kathryn and went up to Lookout Inn, the nearest tavern, for a drink.

They got there to find someone in the driveway directing all traffic to LaBell's lumber yard in Ossineke. The state had closed a liquor establishments, hoping to prevent adding carnage on the highways to the already high toll the War had taken on the country.

LaBell's was a nearly new lumberyard at the time. (I believe it still exists.) Sawhorses had been set up with sheets of plywood to make long tables. On them was what appeared to be most of the

liquor from most of the establishments throughout Alpena and Alcona counties. It seemed that most of the residents of those two counties were there also. Daddy spent much of the evening unsuccessfully trying to find out who to pay. Normally moderate people got stinking drunk. Two of Daddy's friends got into an argument that would have ended in fisticuffs had they been able to stand without holding on to one another. Basically, everyone went wild. Fortunately, there were no accidents and everyone somehow got home safely. The nation probably suffered a profound hangover. Daddy never did figure out who had supplied the liquor free of charge.

We were later to realize that for many, the damage from the War would never be over. Our two uncles came home to try to pick up the pieces of their lives that had been interrupted. Uncle Eimer, who had seen such terrible atrocities that he would not be able to talk about the experience at all for many, many years, came home with white hair and clearly suffered from what is now described as Post Trauma Stress Syndrome. He dealt with his pain pretty much alone by throwing himself into restoring his farm. The lights on his tractor could often be seen running up and down his fields late into the night. Uncle Art hadn't seen quite so much action, but a slightly bitter edge had nonetheless found its way into his previous charm and he also poured himself into making up for the years lost in his career. The first divorce in Mother's family came when a cousin's wife literally met him at the dock with her new sweetie. She had collected his benefits all the time he was away. Mother often bitterly remarked that she had probably married him for his life insurance. Once, after a neighbor was killed in an alcohol-related single-car accident, Mother remarked that the community had lost more of its young men after the War to drunk driving than it had during the war. It pained her and I didn't understand until I was older that she saw the connection.

But that day and those succeeding were heady times for the country. Every troop ship that made it's way home was cause for parades and celebration. For the post-Vietnam generations, it's difficult to comprehend how good Americans felt. My brother Frank once remarked that to this day he cannot hear marching music or see the flag go by without getting a lump in his throat. I know what he means, even as I often get angry that the flag is used almost as a bludgeon by those who would force a lifestyle that seems to me filled with oppression and hate. In those day, the flag meant that we were the best country in the world and that we could make the whole world a better place to live.