



1941 and the start of WWII

1941 An ominous yet propitious year.

We had our usual summer with baths at the lake, visiting with Mrs. Hansen's granddaughters, and weeding the garden. Curiously, one of Mrs. Hansen's granddaughters came from Long Island and was far more cityfied than we, but her other granddaughter came from France. She had the most elegant play clothes and spoke two languages. We wanted to know them both better, but there was a reserve there and we felt it. Oh, they were nice enough, but we were barefoot kids who had chores to do and a father who worked every day at Fuller Brush in Hartford and every day on our farm.

In the fall, I went off to the North Street School, off Route 44 and up a long steep hill running by the Congregational Church; The Second Congregational Church. I always assumed the first must be in South Coventry, a place I never saw. North Street had one-room but only 7th and 8th grades. We were 11 students in 7th and maybe 12 in the 8th. There were several one room elementary schools around town and we all met in 7th grade. I should add that all of my stories took place in North Coventry centered on Route 44, and Route 31 that led to the Lake and to the south end. I knew that we weren't really two towns, but clearly, we were in the country and less favored end.

There was a lot of war talk. Our father listened to the news every night. So, we all listened, as not a peep was forthcoming from the mouths of five children or our mother. Our parents read newspapers and Mother subscribed to Good Housekeeping and Life and Colliers. Dad's magazine was the National Geographic. We were each given 6 books every birthday and Christmas by our grandfather, Mother's dad. He was from England and used to sing English songs with a wonderful Yorkshire accent.

And there was a library at the church. So, every Sunday, we could borrow up to six books. We were all avid readers and storytellers, so the younger children never felt left out. When I caught on that there were two classes in town, in our dramatizations at night, I was the ritzy wife and Hazel played the farmer's wife. And we entertained the others for hours after we went to bed. Now that I think of it, I was the oldest and never gave a thought to Hazel's role. None of us did, though as we grew older, Hazel must have felt some annoyance because later on she wanted to be the ritzy one. Of course, I wouldn't let her. And it never surfaced again.

This sort of understanding in our house carried over in many ways. The boys read boy books and we read girl books. And to this day, I don't know the Hardy Boys. I have some serious lapses in my reading repertoire.

At school, there were two smart girls and one smart boy in 7th grade. So, now I had some serious competition and as my training didn't allow for competition (I was the first child, after all) I never did get the grades that the others took home. I was still good, but I know now that I could have and should have tried harder. All these things were so subtle in our house and in our families. But, I still knew there was a difference. For one thing, only poor kids had more than 2 children. When our neighbors, newly arrived from Long Island, had a third child we heard whispers about mistakes.

The Conklin's had a son in the Navy and we never met him until the end of the war. Bernice was a year younger than I and so we didn't really meet until she entered 7th and I was in 8th.

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We were all very much aware of the war in Europe and we were taught that the English were good and the Nazis were bad. I didn't learn about the Fascists until high school. But it was not our war and so life went on.

And then: December 7, 1941. We all sat by the radio on a Sunday morning, in complete shock and puzzlement. Why were the Japanese mad at us? Keep in mind that in those days, newspapers printed only what they were told by the government about the war in Europe and the radio was our only source of direct communication. We had no widespread telephones, certainly no computers or television or Internet. We did have Edward R. Murrow who broadcast from London, I believe. He and other overseas correspondents print and radio, did their level best to keep us informed. It must be considered though, that this was war and we were extremely patriotic and we were the good guys. What we heard was plain and simple propoganda with just enough of war's reality to make us all fierce partisans.

After Pearl Harbor, my father tried to join the Merchant Marine service. He was refused because he had five children and I'm sure my mother breathed a huge sigh of relief. She didn't drive, for one thing, and we were miles from a grocery store.

Life changed immediately. My mother taught classes in sewing, embroidery, knitting and crochet for the Extension Service run out of the University of Connecticut at Storrs. We girls learned all the handcrafts and we all had a time for knitting wool scarves for our men in the service. In 8th grade, we all learned to make socks. If you haven't tried turning a toe in sock making, try it sometime. We wanted everything to be perfect for our boys overseas and sometimes the tears just rolled down our cheeks when the darn toe or heel wouldn't 'turn'. The boys saved all the foil from cigarette packages and made balls of foil. To this day, I don't know why.

We all joined the 4-H Club: heart, hand, health and head, maybe not in that exact order. Dad bought a cow for milk and butter and, worse from my point of view, for sour cream to feed the pigs. Oh yes, our little farm was growing. My job was to feed the pigs before school and even in the summer time at 6 am, whatever the weather. As time went on in those first years of the War, Dad bought guinea hens and stored them in the garage. Why, I don't know. I suppose he had no time to build a coop because we never did have one.

Bobbie, at age 9, learned to drive our big yellow Case tractor. With the Conklin's we grew hay and in the late summer, all would bring in the hay. If you haven't tried that, don't. Hay in the heat and humidity of late August is itchy. Ooh, how I hated raking hay. But Bobbie drove all the vehicles with the men as Mr. Conklin's son was away and all our uncles used to come to help out. The Conklin's had a hay barn and I suppose we shared because we had only a small space in our barn. They had a red Farmall tractor, much smaller than ours, and for once we were ahead of the game.

And in the fall of the years when we had pigs (until we left in 1946), we had a butchering session. By then, many of our relatives had moved to Willimantic, no country for them, and they spent a lot of time helping us to do chores. All proceeds were shared, of course, so it was an excellent arrangement for all.

But if you have never seen a hog butchered, I wouldn't look for an occasion. They were strung up on a specially built arch, squealing away like pigs are wont to do. Someone slit their throats, the blood was collected for sausage, and then the men who took turns at certain parts of the pig did the butchering. Girls were to stay inside while all this went on. But we still had ears to hear. And the lucky women made the sausage and all sorts of

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Birthplace of Nathan Hale

awful things like headcheese. This took a couple of days and I still don't know where everyone slept. We were all on rationed gas so there wasn't a whole lot of coming and going.

At graduation from 8th grade in 1943, we were asked to deliver speeches relating to the armed services. I gave mine on the WAVES. My mother was able to get my first pair of nylons and I had stopped chewing my nails 6 months before. My mother let me polish them with clear polish and Dad never said a word.

Respectfully submitted, Jean Thibault Castagno

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