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Growing Up in World War II

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"We interrupt this broadcast for a special bulletin: Japanese planes bombed Pearl Harbor this morning."

Where was Pearl Harbor? Would the Japanese bomb us next? I was seven years old when I heard this announcement in December 1941. This is what I remember of World War II.

Early in the war, blackouts (night air-raid drills) plunged my neighborhood into pitch-dark silence. It was scary until I realized that Japan and Germany were oceans away from Ohio.

When I was eight, the U.S. Army set up a temporary training camp in a nearby inn. We played on the camp's obstacle course, scaled its stout walls, and swung across deep ditches on ropes, enjoying the course a lot more than the trainees did.

As children, we helped in the war effort by collecting scrap metal to be recycled into ammunition. In those days, there was enough brass in thirty empty lipstick tubes to make twenty cartridges. Tin cans were another source of metal. I prepared each can for scrap drives at school by rinsing it, peeling off its label, removing both ends, sticking the ends into the cylinder, and hammering the cylinder flat.

We also bought War Stamps at school for twenty-five cents each. I pasted each stamp in an album whose cover ordered, "Save to win."

Overseas products vanished "for the duration" (of the war). At home, factories produced war goods, so cars had to last "for the duration," as did shoes. My friends and I minded the bubble gum shortage the most, and rumors of a Fleer "Dubble Bubble" shipment sent us racing to the candy store.

The government also rationed food. Each civilian, kids included, had a ration book containing stamps, or "points," as the value units were called. Canned goods, for instance, not only cost money, but also "blue points." Sugar cost lots of points. Chocolate was scarce, but every year I dreamed of a chocolate birthday cake. Every year my grandmother baked me a gingerbread.

Molasses or honey replaced sugar, but most food substitutes were not as tasty. I especially remember the butter substitute: It looked like lard. Watching Grandma mix yellow food coloring into this yukky white stuff put me off margarine for years.

Saturdays we went to the movies at the Ohio Theater. Tickets cost ten cents, and popcorn was five cents a bag. Usually the Ohio ran a double feature (two movies), a cartoon, and a newsreel. We reenacted the war movies at home. The summer I was nine, we saw *Sahara*, starring Humphrey Bogart, and the Clarks' porch became a tank in North Africa for the rest

of our summer vacation. Newsreels were our version of today's television news. They showed scenes from the war, featured movie stars selling War Bonds, and introduced Rosie the Riveter, who symbolized the women who had assumed traditional male jobs "for the duration."

Comedy radio programs such as *Fibber McGee and Molly* were fun because they allowed you to create each scene in your mind. We laughed every week when Fibber McGee opened the door of his famous overstuffed closet starting an avalanche of sounds, as basketballs, birdcages, and whatever else you could imagine bounced, tumbled, and dribbled out. I recognized radio newscasters Edward R. Murrow and H.V. Kaltenborn by voice just as you know Dan Rather and Peter Jennings by sight.

One hot August day when I was ten, we were playing in the Clarks' side yard. Mrs. Clark burst onto the porch, all excited, waving her arms. "Hey, kids!" she whooped. "Paree is free! Paree is free!" With the Nazis driven out of Paris, we thought the war would be over by Christmas. Unfortunately, Christmas, 1944, found us close by the radio, listening for news of American troops surrounded by the German Army during the Battle of the Bulge.

I turned eleven shortly before President Franklin D. Roosevelt died. Elected before I was born, FDR had been president my whole life. We watched the funeral procession on the newsreels: Six white horses drew the caisson (a two-wheeled vehicle) bearing Roosevelt's flag-draped casket along Pennsylvania Avenue.

Less than a month after President Roosevelt died, Germany surrendered. Newsreels took us through the Nazis' ghastly concentration camps, showing us scenes I will never forget. During the summer of 1945, interest focused on Japan. Thousands of our soldiers died capturing the Pacific islands of Okinawa and Iwo Jima. Rumors about invading Japan always included gloomy predictions of extremely heavy casualties.

My mother and I were at Lakeside (a Methodist camp on Lake Erie) when the atomic bomb destroyed Hiroshima. I learned new words—uranium, plutonium, and fission—and old words used in new ways—Little Boy, Fat Man (code names of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs, respectively), and Hiroshima Maidens (victims later brought to the United States for medical care). Although newsreels showing the terrible atomic destruction shocked us, we were relieved that the war was over and did not realize how this event would affect generations to come.

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