



Spindle City Historic Society

Volume 9 Issue 4

Winter 2006

HISTORIAN'S NOTEBOOK

The Old Cohoes Burying Ground

West End Park, located on the northern side of Columbia Street and characterized by the familiar and imposing Soldiers and Sailors Monument, was once a cemetery.

Established in 1846, it was originally farmland given by the Lansing family to the Cohoes Company to serve as a burial place that promised "restful and perpetual solitude at the end of life's journey." But within ten years, Cohoes residents were complaining that the grounds were not properly maintained. Under continual and severe criticism the Company turned the cemetery over to the Village. As the years progressed, the cemetery conditions did not improve much and it eventually became a potter's field.

Then, as a result of the economic prosperity of the Civil War, the industries in Cohoes began to expand, attracting a larger workforce. Additional housing and other services were in demand, and the "Hill", "Island" and the area below Columbia Street experienced residential growth. The residents of the "Hill" section of the City exerted sufficient pressure on City fathers to create a park in what was the old burying grounds. In 1890, the City purchased a section of Union Cemetery in Crescent in which to transfer any bodies exhumed in converting the cemetery to a park. In 1896 the State Legislature formally approved the project and work began in May of that year.

"Every day three to five hundred people, mostly women, loiter about the old cemetery watching the men at work." The *Cohoes Republican* newspaper reported. Quickly it became very apparent, as the men dug into the earth, why the cemetery had become a potter's field. The newspaper gave vivid accounts of some of the daily activity including how the men unearthed "black slimy bones of the long buried dead."

Cohoes is, in part, built on an abundance of clay - in some places several feet thick. Apparently there was no shortage of it in the cemetery. Digging 3 or 4 feet down the pits became swamp-like, coating the deteriorating pine boxes and remains with a layer of clay slurry.

My search for information has shown that ultimately 981 bodies were exhumed and 3 left behind. Of the 981, 40 could be identified. Of that 40, 13 went to Oakwood Cemetery in Troy, 12 to Waterford Rural Cemetery, 7 to Albany Rural Cemetery and 8 to Union Cemetery in Crescent. It has to be my assumption then that 941 bodies were given a mass burial in the Crescent cemetery.

(continued on p.8)

DID YOU KNOW

....that the median income in 1941 was \$2000?

....that when butter was rationed during World War II, oleomargarine was the substitute? It was white in color, so a yellow colorant was included with the margarine which was mixed in to give it a shade resembling butter.

....that in the 1940s teenagers became significant trend-setters in American society? From fashion, with saddle shoes, multiprint skirts and pegged pants, to dances like the jitterbug, to the music of Frank Sinatra, popular culture was shaped by the interests and enthusiasms of this age group, a trend that would continue in decades to come.

....that in 1940, a new DeSoto cost \$701, and gasoline was 19 cents a gallon?

....that the World War II era greatly affected the roles of women in American society? With many men off to war, women were recruited to work in industries previously off limits to them, giving rise to the iconic "Rosie the Riveter." With these new roles, social strictures on women were loosened, including those discouraging them from wearing pants, smoking in public, and patronizing bars.

....that cigarettes were also rationed during World War II? People made their own by rolling tobacco in cigarette papers which were sealed when filled.

....that Betty Grable was the most popular "pin-up" girl among World War II fighting troops?

....that election night 1948 had one of the greatest political upsets in U.S. history? The next day's *Chicago Tribune* with its headline "Dewey Defeats Truman" was held aloft by a victorious Harry Truman, who had won election in his own right after serving out Franklin Roosevelt's term.

....that Tupperware was introduced in 1945?

....that Golden Krust Bakery began in a tiny storefront on Pulaski Ave in the 1930s? By 1947 the shop moved around the corner to 180 Ontario St.; it eventually grew to include a restaurant and larger baking facilities.

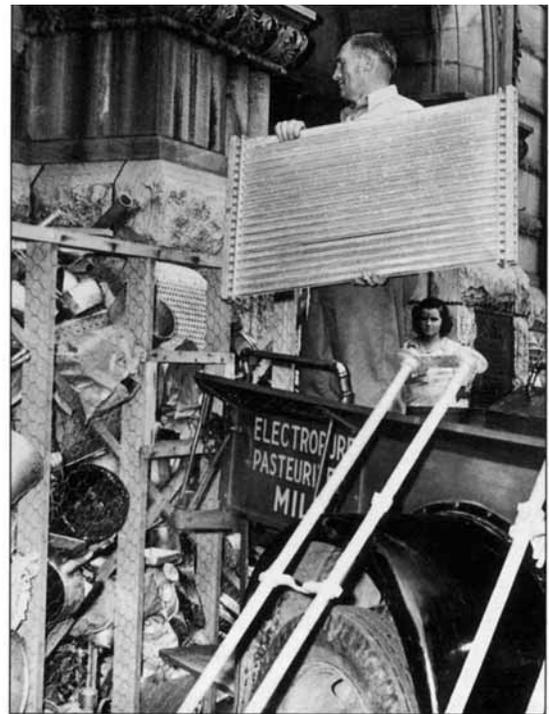
....that during World War II, more than ten percent of the population of Cohoes was in the armed forces?

....that the Spindle City Historic Society is co-sponsoring an event with the Cohoes Remembers Veterans Committee recalling the history of the World War II era? For more information on this December 7 event, see page 8 of this issue.

Remembering the 1940s

On December 8, 1941, the headlines reported the death of 1500 at Pearl Harbor from an attack by Japan. It was the day after the “day that would live in infamy.” A declaration of war by Congress at the request of President Franklin Roosevelt soon followed; the war would profoundly affect the nation throughout the 1940s and into the decades beyond. In the 1940s the United States led the world into the nuclear age and became its major military power. The decade was the beginning of significant social change, some of which would not be fully realized for many years after.

- The attack on Pearl Harbor and declaration of war, and Japanese bombings in the Philippines and across the Pacific mobilized the country. Young men rushed to enlist in the military, and many more were called up to serve through the activation of the draft. This large scale recruitment of young men for military service led to the hiring of an alternate workforce, consisting of women and older men, to perform the jobs the young men had left. Many of these jobs were in heavy industry, positions women had previously not held in significant numbers. Women had always worked in factories, but their work was generally low-paying and concentrated in specific industries (the textile industry, for example), with few supervisory and managerial positions open to them; wartime work gave them the opportunity to learn new skills and earn much higher salaries than before. Women proved effective and capable workers in these non-traditional fields. Although most women left these positions once the war was over, the lessons learned through these experiences were not completely lost and would set the foundation for more permanent social change. The status of women was also advanced by Eleanor Roosevelt, who always sought to encourage women to use their talents in all facets of life and delivered her own address on the night of Pearl Harbor. Women also enlisted during World War II, serving as WACs and WAVEs, performing duties both stateside and overseas in noncombatant roles.
- Civil Defense groups were organized in most communities, with groups trained to deal with potential attacks or invasions. Bomb shelters were established in public buildings and constructed in other locations; a practice that would continue during the Cold War era.
- People were also affected directly by the war through the rationing of consumer goods and other materials needed for the military. Gasoline, butter, sugar, coffee, nylon stockings and cigarettes were all rationed; long lines sometimes formed for the purchase of these items. Cohoesiers generally patronized local markets and groceries, making their purchases at the numerous neighborhood stores throughout the city, including Dziamba’s and Potyrala’s on Ontario Street, Heins’ on Willow Street, Pondillo’s on Van Schaick Island, Klar’s on Columbia Street and Guzek’s on Saratoga Street. Ration books became part of daily life, Victory Gardens were planted to conserve resources, and people collected and recycled tin cans and scrap metal. Most endured these discomforts and minor deprivations with good humor, as they felt part of a collective effort to help the troops and win the war.



Scrap metal collection in front of Cohoes City Hall during World War II.

- The Red Cross was also extremely active at home and overseas, with the Cohoes branch of the organization, established in 1917, doing its part. Local fund-raising activities included tag days, community sings, card parties and food sales.
- The USO (United Service Organization) was established to provide entertainment for servicemen. Many of the best-known movie stars and celebrities of the day made trips to the front to entertain the troops, including comedian Bob Hope, Kate Smith, who cheered the soldiers with her rendition of

“God Bless America”, and columnist Hedda Hopper, who shared the latest Hollywood gossip with the GIs.

- The news and entertainment of the day was delivered to those at home by radio. Families gathered around nightly to hear President Roosevelt’s “fireside chats”, a constant since the days of the Depression. Popular radio personalities of the time included Jack Benny, Fred Allen, Kay Kyser, and Fibber McGee and Molly. Quiz and game shows also had a wide audience, with “Information Please” and “Truth or Consequences” drawing listeners around the country.



A 1940s photograph of Red Cross members in Cohoes.

- Movies also drew crowds, and the movie industry supported the war through its on-screen portrayals of the U.S. armed forces and their enemies. Other films of the era included the adaptation of Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, with Henry Fonda as Tom Joad, and Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman in the now-classic *Casablanca*. During those days, Cohoesers could go to the new Cohoes Theater (opened in August 1941), where there was always a double feature, cartoons, a newsreel, and bingo games and giveaways of dishes or other items. Cohoes also had the Regent and Rialto Theaters. Films were shown in the smaller theaters in places like Cohoes after they had a week’s run in both Albany and Troy, first playing in Albany’s Palace Theater, then in Proctor’s in Troy.
- Other stars in the 1940s were Abbott and Costello, James Cagney, Mickey Rooney, Lucille Ball, Rita Hayworth, Bette Davis, Bing Crosby, Kay Starr and the Andrews Sisters. Popular tunes of the era included “I Don’t Want to Set the World on Fire” and “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy.” The Big Bands were in full swing, with the Glenn Miller Orchestra, Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman and others defining the era. Music was an essential element of night life, with New York City nightclubs such as the Copacabana and the Stork Club popular and trend-setting gathering places.
- Professional sports had its own stars, but would not go unaffected by world affairs. Joe Louis rose to the top in the boxing ring; his defeat of German Max Schmeling a few years earlier was a fight in which symbolism transcended sport. Joe Dimaggio and Ted Williams grabbed baseball headlines. Many of the sport’s standouts would trade baseball uniforms for military uniforms, so the leagues played with depleted ranks during the war years. In the first half of 1941, Eddie Arcaro rode Whirlaway to a Triple Crown win.
- Mass communication and the advertising industry were spurred by the development of the new medium of television, which would also be a force in changing patterns of social interaction. At the start of 1945, there were only nine television stations operating in the entire nation; WRGB in Schenectady, on the air 9 hours a week, had the greatest amount of programming at the time. By 1948, there were 172,000 TV sets sold in the country.
- The defining event of the 1940s, World War II, would change the country in ways large and small for decades to come. The Depression that gripped the country ended, and the U.S. developed increased military and industrial power. A new middle class was created due to increased educational opportunity through the G.I. Bill, which opened higher education up to returning servicemen, many of whom were the first in their families to go to college. The immediate postwar years were also a time of growth of consumerism; following the years of the Depression and diversion of resources during the war years, industries retooled to produce automobiles, appliances, and other consumer goods.



Off the Top...

There are several days in history on which people will always remember exactly where they were when they heard the news. Most recently, that would have been 9-11. Before that the date would be about 40 years earlier: Kennedy's assassination. Now we jump back 65 years to Pearl Harbor. Many people may remember hearing about it, but we have fewer and fewer living veterans to whom to pay tribute who actively served in World War II.

On December 7, 2006, the National Park Service and the U.S. Navy will host more than 1,500 Pearl Harbor survivors from across the nation with a very special tribute in their honor. This ceremony will feature special guest speakers, Morning Colors, wreath presentations, a rifle salute, a Missing Man Flyover and other tributes. A National Moment of Silence will be observed at 7:55 a.m.the exact moment the Japanese attack began 65 years ago at Pearl Harbor. A U.S. Navy ship will render honors to the USS *Arizona*.

The theme of the program is "A Nation Remembers." The ceremony will look directly out to the USS *Arizona* Memorial situated in Pearl Harbor approximately half a mile away. "A Nation Remembers" will reflect on how the recollection of Pearl Harbor has evolved throughout the years since World War II. During the war years, "Remember Pearl Harbor" became a battle cry for the nation, uniting the country to defend democracy and freedom. Today, "Remember Pearl Harbor" has taken on a different definition and provides an opportunity for reflection, a study of lessons learned and gratitude towards the Pearl Harbor veterans who served and those of their comrades who paid the ultimate sacrifice.

The Spindle City Historic Society and the Cohoes Remembers Vets are doing their share to remember our World War II veterans. The Cohoes Remembers Vets will have programs on December 7th and the Spindle City Historic Society will open a retrospective of both photos and news that focuses on World War II and the impact it had on Cohoes. The exhibit will be available through the holidays.

Keep your eyes and ears opened about our future lectures, exhibits, events and tours. Donations of photographs, memorabilia and artifacts have been coming in for our growing collection. The SCHS is grateful for these contributions. Our regular meetings are the last Wednesday of the month at 7 PM (except December due to the holidays) in the Cohoes Visitor's Center. I hope to see each one of you at a meeting or an event. Let's keep memories and history of Cohoes alive!

Have a memorable and safe holiday season.

Paul D. Dunleavy
President

Albany Rural Cemetery Tour – Fall Edition

The summer tour of Albany Rural Cemetery offered by SCHS was such a success that another tour was arranged. A group gathered on Saturday October 14 for the tour, which followed a different route from the summer tour (with 467 acres of grounds and over 30 miles of roads and paths, there is much to explore). This tour, like that offered in the summer, included enjoyment of peak fall foliage and the burial sites of notable Cohoesers and those with Cohoes connections. Among these were Joel Rathbone, who was a business partner in stove manufacturing with Levi Silliman, father of Horace Silliman and founder of the Presbyterian church in Cohoes; New York State Geologist James Hall, who directed the excavation of the Cohoes Mastodont; and George H. McDowell, a bookkeeper at the National Bank of Cohoes who later became proprietor of the Egbert Woolen Mills and Cascade Mills, which manufactured fine knit underwear. Tour participants also visited the mausoleum of the Van Benthuyzen family. Obadiah Van Benthuyzen was a printer, publisher and inventor of the steam-powered printing press. His son Charles was New York State and United States Printer, printing official documents. The Van Benthuyzens built a paper mill in Cohoes; the building would later be purchased by the Harmony Company and renamed Harmony Mill #4.



Visits were also made to gravesites of other notables, including historian, printer and author Joel Munsell,

James H. Armsby, co-founder (with Alden March [visited on the summer tour]) of Albany Medical College, noted Albany architect Marcus T. Reynolds (who designed the D&H Building at the foot of State Street, among other landmark structures), pioneering



19th century geologist Ebenezer Emmons (who named the Adirondacks, and wrote extensively on New York State's natural history and agriculture), sculptor Charles Calverly (who created the Robert Burns statue in Washington Park), horticulturist Louis

Menand (for whom Menands is named), and Janet G. Travell (Powell), who was the first female and first civilian appointed Physician to the President of the United States, serving as physician for John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson.

Tour of Green Island Hydroelectric Station



Jim Beshia explains the workings and history of the Green Island hydroelectric plant.

On November 4 a group of SCHS members visited the historic Green Island Hydroelectric Station. The hydropower plant was built in 1922 by Henry Ford to provide power to the adjacent (now demolished) Ford Motor Company plant. The power plant was designed by famed industrial architect Albert Kahn, who designed numerous buildings for Ford. Henry

Ford was convinced by his close associate Thomas Edison (the foremost proponent of direct current) that DC was preferable for running his auto factory so the plant was originally designed to generate direct current; it was later converted to alternating current. The plant, still generating power today, has four turbines, each spinning at 80 revolutions per minute and generating about 1,500 kilowatts of electricity. At the time they were installed, the vertical propeller turbines in the hydropower plant were the largest of their type in the world.



A view down the generator hall. The hydroelectric turbines are located underneath each generator, about 20 feet below the floor.

Gateway Gala

On October 19, the Hudson Mohawk Industrial Gateway held its annual Gala reception in Harmony Mill #3 in Cohoes. The Gateway honored those involved in the revitalization of North Mohawk Street in its annual recognition of individuals and organizations involved in preserving the industrial history of the region and the historic character of communities in the Gateway, which includes Troy, Cohoes, Green Island, Waterford and Watervliet. Among this year's honorees were Uri Kaufman, who is converting Harmony Mill #3 into loft apartments, architect Peter Seidner, and Mayor John McDonald and the City of Cohoes. The Spindle City Historic Society was also honored for the work some of its members did in developing interpretive signage for Power Canal Park; reproductions of these signs were on display during the reception. This was the first time that the Gateway has selected honorees from the west side of the Hudson River. It is hoped that this honor will foster greater interest in historic preservation and adaptive reuse in the city of Cohoes.

A Brief History of Cohoes Company B

The forerunner of Company B was organized on December 1, 1875 when a group of Cohoesiers gathered around a pot-bellied stove decided to form a National Guard unit. The group, eventually consisting of 100 members, was accepted in February 1876 as the Third Separate Company of the 10th Brigade and Third Division. The company was first called to duty in July 1877 during a railroad strike in Troy. In 1898 the unit became known as Company B of the Second Regiment and 109 men volunteered for service in the war against Spain. The declaration of war was on April 25, 1898 and Company B was called into service on May 20, 1898. Company B never saw action but was sent to Florida, and then to Cuba. The company suffered 32 casualties, primarily due to typhoid fever and other illnesses contracted in conditions of excessive heat with a lack of sanitary facilities. They returned home in late summer, arriving by train in Troy on August 27, 1898.



1916 saw WWI begin to intensify and the governor ordered the company recruited to war strength for border service in Texas. Their return home was very brief and by March 25, 1917 the company was activated by Woodrow Wilson for training at Little Falls. While in Little Falls, they guarded the canal and railroad against sabotage. On October 1, 1917 they became part of the 105th infantry and they sailed from Norfolk, Virginia to France on May 17 on the U.S.S. Grant, arriving in Brest on Decoration (Memorial) Day. They went for training at Mount Kemmel, near Ypres. By July a portion of the company was at the front in the Dischenbusch Lake area of Belgium, getting a taste of

Soldiers pose in front of the Cohoes Armory in 1917, as the men prepare to fight in World War I. They distinguished themselves in battle, winning most of the honors given by the U.S. and receiving recognition from foreign governments as well.

“Flanders mud”; other units were at Scherpenberg on the north face of Lys Salient. Two men in the company earned the Distinguished Service Medal. From there they were directed to another sector and told to storm the Hindenberg Line. The early morning of September 29 was a time of crisis; after having been under fire all night, with only 42 men remaining, they went “over the top” and again distinguished themselves as part of the division attack that broke the Hindenberg Line. The following men earned the Distinguished Service Medal for their actions on that day: Sgt 1/c Edward T. Ruane (the American Legion post in Cohoes was later named after him), Sgt. Boykin, Pvt. M.J. Murphy and Pvt. S.J. Howland. Sgt. Ruane would later be killed in action at Busigny, France on October 16, 1918. The war’s toll on company B included 29 killed and 103 wounded; 53 soldiers escaped injury and 18 were transferred. Surviving soldiers recuperated at a rest camp and then returned home, arriving in Hoboken on March 25, 1919.

Twenty years of peacetime training following WW I ended abruptly in the 1940s, when the company was again called to war. They were given jungle training at Fort McClellan in Alabama, and then sent to Camp Haan in California and on to Fort Ord for more intense training. They left for Hawaii on March 10, 1942 to fight in the Pacific. Company B remained in Hawaii waiting for the expected assault, and in November went to a location near Pearl Harbor on the island of Oahu for additional jungle training. From there, 200 non-commissioned officers and others left the 105th Regiment for the mainland to help reactivate the 42nd Rainbow Division, but were instead assigned to the 11th Airborne Division. The company, part of the 27th division, joined the fighting in Siapan on July 6, 1944. At the time of the Saipan invasion, the 27th Division consisted of three infantry regiments: the 105th Regiment, the 106th Infantry Regiment from the Albany-Schenectady-Utica area and the 165th Infantry Regiment from the New York City area.

Historian's Notebook (continued from p.1)

As a postscript, and to compound this depressing tale, in 1968 the Union Cemetery Board of Trustees notified Mayor James McDonald that the City of Cohoes was behind in the payment of their annual upkeep annuity of twenty-two dollars for minimal maintenance. The City had been negligent since 1952. The Mayor's response was: "I can't see why we should pay this money annually when we aren't getting any use of it."

Today those hallowed grounds are a forgotten disgrace.

Walter Lipka

ANNOUNCEMENTS AND UPCOMING EVENTS

Thursday, December 7 – Remembering the World War II Era, at home and at war. The event will feature presentations by World War II veterans, an exhibit of newspapers and memorabilia from the period and WW II photographs, including work of photographer Haig Shekerjian. We also welcome recollections and photographs of the period from any who wish to share their own memories. Co-sponsored by Cohoes Remembers Veterans Committee. Cohoes Visitor's Center.

Wednesday, January 31 - Spindle City Historic Society meeting. 7 p.m., Cohoes Visitor's Center.

Wednesday, February 28 - Spindle City Historic Society meeting. 7 p.m., Cohoes Visitor's Center.

Wednesday, March 28 - Spindle City Historic Society meeting. 7 p.m., Cohoes Visitor's Center.

Wednesday, April 25 - Spindle City Historic Society meeting. 7 p.m., Cohoes Visitor's Center.



☞ Many thanks to La Fédération Franco-Américaine du New York ☞
☞ for sponsoring this issue of our newsletter ☞

Photo credits this issue: Walter Cherniak, Paul Dunleavy, Tor Shekerjian

☞ SCHS Newsletter Staff ☞

Daniele Cherniak ~ June Cherniak ~ Linda Christopher ~ Dennis Rivage
Editorial Assistance: Tor Shekerjian ~ Columnists: Paul Dunleavy, Walter Lipka

Spindle City Historic Society

P.O. Box 375

Cohoes, New York 12047