

## **World War II In Chatham**

### **AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE**

**by spencer grey**

With the attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, the changes in the lives of Chatham residents were immediate and widespread. Several men from the area were stationed in Hawaii on that day, and one of them, Robert Brown, who was in the army and stationed at Hickam Field, was killed in the attack, which President Roosevelt immediately called a day of infamy when calling upon Congress to declare that a state of war existed between the United States and Japan. Three other local men also were stationed at the airfield or on one of the ships moored in Pearl Harbor. Those who were not already in the military quickly signed up with one of the branches, and before long local women were joining the WAVES, the navy branch for women, or the SPARS, the Coast Guard equivalent.

The presence of the United States Navy was evident in many parts of town. The Marconi Radio Station was operated solely by women, the Wayside Inn had a room where off-duty servicemen could relax, the USO club was housed in the former Chatham Bars Inn chauffeurs' dormitory on Chatham Bars Avenue, and the WAVES were housed at Rose Acres Inn on Cross Street.

Most fishermen were exempt from the military because with the shortage of meat, fish was an important substitute. But otherwise nearly all men who were young enough and healthy enough enlisted in one of the many enlistment offices in the area. Even Chatham's youngest doctor, Henry Hopkins, closed his practice to become a medical officer in the Navy. During his service on Guadalcanal, he became a hero of some renown when he attempted to save two men from a plane that had crashed on the airfield after having been riddled by bullets from a passing Japanese plane, even though it was burning and had a 500-pound bomb attached to its underside. Unfortunately, the men were already dead but fortunately the bomb did not explode until five minutes after he had finished the attempted rescue.

Because lights along the coast would silhouette passing ships, a black out was put into effect, making it necessary for all buildings to have opaque shades in their windows, and if anyone failed to pull down a shade, the warden patrolling the area would remind them with a knock on the door. Driving cars at night was discouraged, but those who had to be out were required to paint the top side of their headlights with black paint to prevent the light from shining up.

With so much food necessary to feed the troops around the world, certain items soon became in short supply. In particular, sugar, coffee, butter, cheese, meat, and to some extent potatoes became scarce, making it necessary to ration them. Every member of a family over 14 years of age had a ration book for items such as coffee, sugar, cheese, and butter. Gasoline also was rationed, depending on one's need to drive an automobile. If it was essential for a person to drive to work or in his line of work, he was entitled to an A book, which allowed the greatest use of gasoline; anyone else would have a book of a lower denomination that limited the amount of gasoline he could purchase each month.

Even with rationing, many food items remained so scarce that lines of people formed outside of stores, such as the First National Store across from the Wayside Inn, to turn in their ration coupons for items such as butter, sugar, and meat.

Because so many men were in the service, women stepped up to organize and supervise the home front. The Women's Civil Defense Committee of Chatham divided the town into seven districts with a chairman and a co-chairman, under whom were the wardens, canteen and first aid workers, and child guardians whose responsibility it was to care for the children of civil defense workers and homemakers, and to conduct classes in first aid. One of the first actions of this group was to open an air raid warning center. Under the leadership of Mrs. Edith Wheelwright and Mrs. Mildred Jergensen, women were scheduled to stand two-hour watches at the center. Besides these women, there was a women's motor corps to be on call for transporting anyone without his own automobile.

One local woman who maintained close communication with servicemen around the world was Mrs. Edna Matteson, who started a monthly newsletter that she called "Home Fires." She sent it to all Chatham men and women in uniform to give them news of their home town. Addressing them in her folksy manner, she often advised them to "eat all you can get, and we all will think of you as we count our ration points and eat what we can get." Apparently her news letters were very much appreciated by those serving in far-away places, as they provided a link to home.

Another wartime organization, the Naval Loran Station (long range aid to navigation), opened in 1942 on the top of Great Hill. The SPARS division of the Coast Guard operated the station, making it the only Loran Station in the world to be operated totally by women.

Probably the most active woman in town was the imposing and indomitable Mrs. Francis G. Shaw, who organized the Victory Market to raise money for needy causes and institutions. She coaxed people into donating what she called "discards," such as clothing, kitchen utensils, andirons, music boxes, eel spears, and rat traps, which the market then sold. In 1944 the Victory Market raised \$5,842.10, the equivalent of more than \$62,000 in today's dollars.

By day everyone carried on a routine that was somewhat limited by the unusual conditions. At night, Coast Guardsmen patrolled the beaches with their dogs, on the lookout for any signs of enemy saboteurs. Men and women in uniform made their way through the blacked-out streets to the USO Rooms at the Wayside Inn or to the USO center on Chatham Bars Avenue. Life quickly returned to normal, however, after the Japanese surrendered in late August of 1945.

*Materials from the Atwood House Museum archived were used in preparing this story.*

