

PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

Addison County Christmas 1944

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The January 5, 1945 edition of the Middlebury Register carried a poignant story by Pfc. Richard Munson, describing how he spent his Christmas in the naval hospital in San Diego. The first sign that told him he was not home in Vermont for the holidays was the weather: “It wasn’t a white Christmas. Rain fell, then stopped, and fell again.”

The young soldier recounted how nothing was as it should be. For the wounded, there was no family Christmas around the tree, “No sturdy shouldered growing boys to shout, “Aw Gee, Pop, thanks!”” Where he found himself, “For many, Christmas was just another day to endure a leg or body cast.” This wasn’t the Christmas guys dreamed about in Guadalcanal or Belgium; but he recognized that it was still better to be in that naval hospital than back on the front lines. He was learning that, “There was more to Christmas than tinsel and laughter and gifts.” Despite the grim hospital setting, “The true spirit of Christmas was here. War couldn’t kill it. Pain couldn’t dull it. Homesickness couldn’t rob it of its beauty.”

Munson was seeking meaning in one of America’s grimmest Christmas seasons. In mid-December 1944, the Battle of the Bulge erupted in Europe. Earlier hopes for a rapid Allied victory in Europe were beginning to falter. In the bloodiest battle of World War II, 19,000 Americans would be killed in less than a month.

The Middlebury Register provides a window on how that December was experienced here on the home front in Addison County. The front pages were full of war news. Staff Sergeant Joseph Doria, of Middlebury, had just been awarded the Bronze Star “for meritorious service in a Troop Carrier Squadron in the European Theatre of Operations.” Lt. John Caswell of Middlebury was reported reassigned after 50 missions from Italy. A local soldier was hospitalized in Wales for “battle fatigue.” Pvt. Thalia Foote, WAC was spending a 10-day furlough with her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Foote. William Noonan of Addison “received a telegram from the war department Tuesday that his youngest son, 1st Lieutenant George Noonan had been seriously wounded on December 5 in active service. “[He was] somewhere in France the last time they heard from him.”

Local school children were doing their bit for the war effort, collecting enough milkweed pods to provide fibers to make 1000 life jackets. It was announced that, “the school

children in the county have done a fine job, a big job and one to be proud of. They have picked over 1700 full bags of pods.”

The paper carried a front page column in each edition called, “News of Addison County Men in the Service,” but the December 8 paper reminds us that women served as well. A surprise party was given at the Baptist parsonage to honor two young women, Elizabeth Aines and Marian Turner, who had just enlisted in the WAVES. As they came in, unsuspecting, “they were escorted to seats of honor. The room was decorated with American flags and flags of the Allied nations. On the table was a ship-model of an old whaling schooner, pitching on cellophane waves, while its lights blinked on and off.”

By December 15, Middlebury College counted 27 war dead, with 8 former students missing and 5 known prisoners of war. The Class of '43 had suffered the most, with 8 dead and 3 missing.

The local Home Folks Club worked to cheer up the troops by sending them gifts. Soldier Paul Ross wrote to the paper to thank these anonymous donors for remembering him. “It was swell of you and I know that the fellows overseas will get more of a kick out of it. You can’t beat Vermont maple sugar, it just hit the spot and took me back to the good times I’ve had in Midd. Let’s hope that next year you won’t have to send boxes and all of the boys will be home.”

Some holiday rituals went on as usual, even in these troubled times. In a predictable annual migration, the paper reported that, “Mrs. Charles Swift has returned from New York and opened her home on Stewart Lane for the holidays.” The Junior Women’s Club held a formal dance at the high school gymnasium, at which the ‘junior women’ were chaperoned by Mrs. Beers and Mrs. Heinrichs. The MacArthur 4-H Club of Leicester had a Christmas party at Shirley Cole’s, the refreshments including, “popcorn, candy and apples.” In Middlebury, “Groups of young people from the Congregational and Baptist churches sang carols in the village Sunday evening.”

Out in Cornwall, the church held a Christmas, with songs and recitations by the children, closing with “Silent Night.” Santa then appeared, “and the tree was despoiled of gifts.” Sunday morning brought the community back to reality with a sermon on, “Christmas in a Troubled World.”

Christmas would usually be a time for lots of advertisements for local businesses, but this was a year for keeping things low key. Money was tight and no one wanted to look like they were having too much fun when families were worrying about their loved ones at the front. Middlebury’s popular clothing venue, The Grey Store, captured the spirit in a simple ad saying, “Many things have changed in this world, but our wish of a MERRY CHRISTMAS for you remains the same.”

The movies provided a great escape. Middlebury had two theaters (spelled in the English manner, theatre, for some reason). Town Hall Theatre featured Fred Astaire and Bing Crosby in *Holiday Inn*, featuring that wonderful new song, "White Christmas." The Campus Theatre presented, *Something for the Boys*, a rousing musical with Danny Kaye, Dinah Shore and Dana Andrews. The theater boasted 350 children at one Friday afternoon matinee.

Some families had their hope renewed over the holidays. In Weybridge, the Levi Sturtevant family was cheered when Levi, Jr.'s wife received a letter from her husband just before Christmas. It was "the first from him since he has been a German prisoner." He told her to give a generous contribution to the Red Cross, "and say it was from one who appreciated their wonderful work."

Back at the Naval Hospital in San Diego, Private Munson finished his piece on his holiday there. He wrote that he now realized, "It was that "Peace on Earth and Good Will to Men" stuff that really counted...That and the vow to make it stick this time so that broad shouldered growing lad at home never should spend any Christmas in any kind of a hospital."

As we enter another holiday season with our nation at war, let's remember the people who find themselves separated from their loved ones this year and renew that call for peace and good will.