



*Historical Document*

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## Ringgold During WW II

By William H.H. Clark

I was five years old when the war started and nine when it ended so what I remember about the war is through the memory of a kid.

The thing that stands out in my mind is being cold. None of the houses were insulated, few were underpinned and the sub-flooring was marginal at best. Sometimes the wind would blow under the house, come up through the knotholes and lift the rugs right off the floor. I looked through a knothole in our living room floor and found a hen's nest on the ground below.

There was no such thing as central heating. Most used a pot-bellied stove that burned wood, coal or coke. I would freeze trying to take a bath in the bathroom so Mother attempted to give me a sponge bath next to the stove from a small pan. One side froze and the other side burned. For my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday she gave me the pan. She and I were the only ones that recognized its significance.

At night Dad would leave the faucet in the kitchen dripping to keep the pipes from freezing. One morning we woke up to a bang, a series of expressions that I had never heard before and Dad on the floor. The pipes had not frozen but the water had frozen in the sink, spilled out on the floor and covered the floor with a sheet of ice.

Our house did not have indoor plumbing when it was built. Later they built a bathroom on the back porch so at night you had to cross the open porch to the bathroom. In the winter you really had to be in pain to cross that frosted porch. In 1940 or 41 we had a two-foot snow similar to the one we had in 1993. Ringgold was declared one of the coldest places in the nation.

I also remember air pollution. Most everyone in town burned coal so in the mornings the whole town was covered in coal smoke. The grammar school had central hot water heat and the boilers burned coal. They would stoke the boilers and cover every kid on the playground with coal smoke. I remember going through the Bachman Tubes to Chattanooga and seeing a low cloud of coal smoke covering the entire city. You couldn't see a single structure. With all of the foundries, you could smell Chattanooga long before you got to it. That was one of the reasons that everyone, who could afford it, moved to the mountain. Twenty-third Street was a city dump and there was always a pile of something being burned.

I remember that all my friends started to disappear as they moved with their Dad to new jobs supporting the war effort or to the military. There weren't many kids left in town to play with. However, I had a passel of cousins that taught me everything I needed to know, and a lot I would have been better off without. I was smoking cigarettes at age seven. You could buy a cigar in any store in town if you were tall enough to point to what you wanted.

The creek was our main source of entertainment. A right of passage was being able to swim from one bank to the other. Every deep place along the creek had a name but "Government Bridge" in our pasture was the most popular. On the weekends there would be 15 to 20 kids at the creek. Walking barefoot along LaFayette Street was a challenge. The heat of the sun would cause the tar to melt and bubble which was hard on bare feet.

At the creek, the law of the jungle prevailed. The big kids made the rules. Boys chased girls and girls enjoyed being chased. Boys fought boys for their place in the pecking order. We would choose up sides and have a mud-ball battle. One learned to dive shallow in order to protect one's parts. We stubbed our toes on the submerged logs and rocks so often that we memorized the creek bottom.

Little Creek that comes from Yates Springs in Woodstation is at least fifteen degrees colder than Chickamauga Creek that comes through the mountain gap. When we got cold we would go up on the bridge, lie on the concrete banister to warm up and scratch our poison ivy.

We would sometimes steal watermelons and float them down to the swimming hole. We would steal green ears of corn, cover them with mud and throw them into a fire for roasting.

We tried just about every means of fishing. We seined, used hooks, trout lines, crank telephones, dynamite and cherry bombs. We were more endangered than the fish. Any boat within half a mile was fair game to bring to the swimming hole.

We had a swing made from a rope tied to a tree with a stick in the loose end. One could easily swing out and drop or do a back flip. A front flip was harder. But to stand someone on the stick and pump as another held on to the stick would throw one almost across the creek.

Some days the creek would be red, blue or green depending on the color the spread house was using that day. Didn't matter. We kept on swimming.

The bridge was a favorite place for some of the smaller Baptist churches to baptize on Sunday afternoon. Just as you enter the creek there is a slick ledge of rock. We knew exactly when the preacher would go under. No respect was paid to kids in the 1940's. They just told us to get out of the creek. That was a mistake. Sometimes we went upstream and polluted their water.

Today the creek is 20 feet wider and a foot more shallow than it was when I was a kid. Several things you seldom see or hear anymore are bullfrogs, whippoorwills, mussels along the sand bars as big as your spread hand and waterdogs. A waterdog was a harmless salamander native to the Northwest Georgia creeks that can grow to be two feet long.

The movies were another major source of entertainment. Mr. Ed Zumstein started the RINGO theater October 7, 1939. The first picture was "Mexicali Rose" with Barbara Stanwick. But its real value was on Saturday afternoon. Everyone in the county came to Ringgold on Saturday to buy their supplies, to pay their bills, to trade livestock or to just get off the farm and socialize. They came in cars, trucks and two-horse wagons. The men squatted in front of the stores and the ladies sat in cars parked in front of the stores. Everyone knew everyone. They sent the kids to the movies at 2:00 P.M., just to get rid of them. It cost 9 cents to get in and popcorn was a nickel. For this you got advertisements, a serial of "Flash Gordon" with Buster Crabb and Ming the Merciless, at least one comedy, news, previews of coming attractions and the main feature. The feature was Rex Allen, Gene Autry, Lash Laroo, Red Rider and Little Beaver, Tim Holt, Tex Ritter, Bob Steele, Hopalong Cassidy and a host of cowboys I don't remember. You could yell and scream all you wished. When it rained, one had to cross a small lake to get to the prized seats on the front row, looking straight up at the screen. Dozens of Indians and bad guys were shot without ever having to reload. Kids would use stick

horses and play out all week what they saw at the movies the previous Saturday. I was forty before I realized that I had more Indians in my family than cowboys.

We received war news through the movies. As a kid it was a little confusing to study little Dutch boys and girls in school and then see news reels showing them eating out of garbage cans.

In the middle of the movie they would stop the film and take up a collection for the polio drive. Not many today realize what a dread disease polio was during the 1940's. Mention an "iron lung" and few know what you are talking about. But polio was only one of the many human diseases we had that have almost disappeared. We had boils. You had to have a boil in your nose to understand how bad they hurt. We had sties in our eyes, strept throat, ear aches, tooth aches, inphytigo, round worms, ground itch, mange, ringworm, mumps, measles, whooping cough and smallpox. In Ringgold we even had a child die of rabies. We had kids with hydrocephalus (water-head), of which most people today have never heard. Mrs. Stegall's vaccines probably saved as many lives as all the doctors in the county. The scalding water of electric dishwashers has done much to kill the bacteria that were passed around through the families.

We were fed a whole host of Hollywood propaganda movies that I still enjoy. Movies like, "Bataan", "The Flying Tigers", "They Were Expendable", "The Fighting Seabees" and "Coming In On A Wing And A Prayer".

The radio was as effective a propaganda machine as the movies. *"Over the dim-lit flare path, an anxious silence reigns. Scanning the blue horizon our anxious eyes were strained. The radio sets were humming and waiting for a word. Then a voice broke through and this is what they heard. "Coming in on a wing and a prayer, how we sing as we limp through the air, though we've one motor gone, we can still carry on, Coming in on a wing and a prayer"*. In WW II there were good guys and bad guys and we all knew who they were.

We listened to the radio just as kids today watch TV. After school radio programs were fifteen minutes long and consisted of running serials of Sky King, Jack Armstrong, the all American Boy, The Shadow, The Green Hornet, and Superman. At night we listened to Fibber McGee and Molly, Duffey's Tavern, Lux Radio Theater, Intersanctum, Jack Benny, Bob Hope, George Burns and Gracie Allen, The FBI In Peace and War, Lum and Abner, and Amos and Andy.

In the evening after dinner the men would migrate downtown to the service station. There they would sit on coca-cola crates, flip cigarette butts and tell lies. Mother, against her better judgment, would sometimes let me go with Dad. That was where we met the characters of the town. One evening on a coke crate is worth a week in school.

Part of the organization for the war was the formation of the local chapter of the American Red Cross. The ladies of the town met in the courtroom of the courthouse to study first aid and roll bandages. I still have the first aid book. Mother took me along because she had no one to leave me with. They needed someone on which to practice their bandaging. Since I was little and unable to protect myself, I was elected. When they were through I looked like a mummy.

Part of the local war effort was the formation of Troop 77 of the Boy Scouts by the Ringgold Baptist Church. Their duties were carrying messages and traffic control. I was too young to join but was very impressed with their uniforms, training and the serious way they took their responsibilities.

From time to time Ringgold would have air-raid drills. At night the spread house whistle would sound and everyone was supposed to would turn off their lights. Lester Nehring, our Georgia Power representative, would ride around with red crape paper over his headlights and see that everyone had their lights out.

The spread house was located in the gap of the mountain and the building is still there. It was probably the largest employer in the county. They blew the whistle at 8:00 A.M., 12:00, 12:30 and 4:30. The entire east side of the county went to work by the spread house whistle

At this time the 6<sup>th</sup> Cavalry still had their horses. They were a beautiful sight with flags and pennants marching two abreast in front of our house on their way to the Rifle Range. If the horses got loose they would line up behind each other and walk single file back to Fort Oglethorpe where they knew they would be fed.

Dad sold lumber to the Army. One day two officers took us to Fort Oglethorpe in a jeep. For a kid, that was the thrill of a lifetime. The area at the corner of today's Battlefield Parkway and Highway 27 was filled with half-tracks.

Many of the homes in town had a small flag in their window. It had gold trim, a white background and one or more blue stars indicating the number of boys the home had in the military. Sometimes the star changed to gold indicating that one of the boys would not be returning.

Rationing was a big part of the civilian side of WW II. Every auto had an "A", "B", or "C" sticker indicating how much gasoline it was authorized. We still have ration books for meat, sugar, shoes, gas and tires. Meat was also rationed. Dad had a herd of about thirty cattle and offered to take them to the market to help relieve the shortage. The government would not let him market the cattle because "meat was rationed". That was when we discovered that few things were in short supply. The rationing program was primarily an effort to get the average citizen into the war effort.

There was a German POW camp at Fort Oglethorpe. My Granddad had about 400 acres of woods behind Chapman Road. The Army would bring POWs and go through the woods digging up dogwood trees to set out inside the Park along Boynton Drive. Chickamauga Park and Fort Oglethorpe were immaculate with all the cheap POW labor. This was not forced labor. The Germans had rather be out working that cooped up in the stockade. In South Georgia they were leased out to farmers to pick cotton. They enjoyed talking to kids and would sometimes make them little things. There was no thought of escaping since there was nowhere for them to go. As POWs, they were eating better than they had for months in the German army. Many stayed in the U.S. after the war.

Lt. Braudas Taylor flew an observation plane for the Infantry and Artillery. He was stationed at Ft. Benning and from time to time would land on the Salem Valley road to visit his Mother. Later he brought a friend, LTC Tibbets to visit. LTC Tibbets dropped the first atomic bomb on Japan. Taylor also flew the first jet from the U.S. to Europe. He made a pass over his house on his way to England.

Ralph Kittle was the pilot of the B-17, "Savannah". On a practice run he brought it through the gap of the mountain and rattled every window in town. He and his cousin Billy were both in German POW camps at the same time.

Two local boys challenged another to join the Navy with them. They flunked the physical and he shipped out for three years. Ray Bandy said his army physical consisted

of one doctor looking down one end and another looking up the other end. If they didn't see each other you passed.

Rev. William Studer was the preacher at the Ringgold Baptist Church. His son Billy was my age and we would visit and play with our toy airplanes. Years later when a volcano was threatening Clark AFB in the Philippines and the decision was made to evacuate everything and everybody, Major General Billy Studer was the Base Commander.

My Granddad was in the Georgia Senate and was part of the party that met Pres. Roosevelt at the train when he visited Fort Oglethorpe. I was standing with Mother in front of the meat counter at R.L. Magill's grocery (today's Citizen Finance) when it was announced that Roosevelt had died. We didn't realize he was that sick.

I don't remember their ever being a doubt but that we would win the war. But there was great concern as to whether family members would return and the state of their health if they did return. For some the war will never end. They still dream of incoming German 88mm artillery rounds and have bouts with malaria that they caught in the South Pacific over sixty years ago.