

Last summer on a cross-country road trip along Route 20, Mr. Van Loan returned to Nassau for a visit. Now a resident of California, he provided Mr. Vincent with this personally written recollection of his early years growing up in Nassau during the 1940s war years.

All About Nassau

People, Buildings and Memories

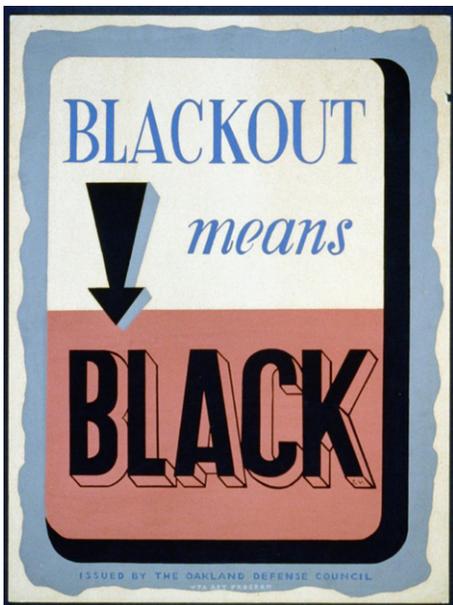
BY KURT VINCENT, NASSAU VILLAGE HISTORIAN

A TODDLER'S WORLD WAR TWO

by Derek Van Loan



A recent picture of Mr. Van Loan sitting in a small sailboat of his design and construction. In his early years in New York he learned the skills of sailing in Kinderhook Lake and along the Hudson River.



As early as 1939 efforts to educate the public about the possibility of war included blackout exercises. Bombers flying over Nassau towards the Watervliet Arsenal were considered a real possibility.

We did not know if we would win the war then. "Don't pick up little bits of colored paper from the ground" my mom and dad told me. "Poisoned paper is being dropped from Japanese hydrogen balloons." After that I did not pick up anything. I knew about poison and the witch from "Snow White."

We could fight back, however, and I had jobs to do: save pieces of soap, stomp tin cans flat for scrap metal, and knead the orange dye dot into the plastic-covered white fat, until it looked like butter. I, after all, was four years old. We did not have clothes or dish detergent, soap was used for everything, and there was no shampoo either. I don't remember that day that shall live in infamy, December 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor day, I was only one then. But, I do have fleeting images before 1942 when we moved from Poughkeepsie to Nassau. I have no early memories of my birthplace, Hudson, where I spent my first year at 422 Warren Street. After we moved to Nassau my dad, a newspaper man for the Albany Knickerbocker News, came home every evening with his paper. I looked at the photos. We listened to Morgan Beatty reading the news on our Philco table radio over dinner at the kitchen table. So the war became quite real for me.

Once a week dad would go off to watch for enemy aircraft, he was a volunteer ground observer. Mom and I would stay home and listen to "Sky King" on the radio, and drink hot Ovaltine. Often at night the fire siren would wail and wail and wail. Then we would shut off all our lights and cover our windows with black shades so not a glimmer could get out of our apartment on Elm Street. Nazi airplanes could see even small amounts of light, adults said, and they could drop bombs on us.

Most weekends we would drive from Nassau to Chatham to shop and to be with my grandparents, the Alvords on Kinderhook Street. My pharmacist step grandfather, Henry Alvord, was the successful proprietor of the drug store in the Masonic Building on Park Row. My great grandfather, A. J. Fellows had founded it in 1872. It took longer to travel then, the "war-time speed limit" was 35 miles per hour. Cars did not have seat belts, and both my parents smoked. Most cars didn't have heaters either, so with the windows closed on a winter day I tried in vain to escape the tobacco smoke from my parents cigarettes. To be fair to them, many adults smoked in those days, and they did not know of my distress.

As I tried to sleep in my Grandparents spare front room, this room had been my dad's while he was growing up, all night long the steam switching engines would pull and push freight cars back and forth in the big railroad yard. Chuff-chuf-chuf-chuf, squee (brakes), carummph-boom. It was im-



possible on a summer's evening with that racket coming through the window screens. Day and night long freights pulled by pounding locomotives carried cannons, and other equipment to the shipping ports. After the war we heard that Chatham and its rail yard were Hitler's fifth most important target in New York State.

Our family consisted of me, my mom and dad. We had a good, small car for the war, it used very little fuel, getting as much as 35 miles per gallon. It was a Willys, and had the same engine as the jeep, but no four-wheel-drive. After 1941 there were no new cars. The few cars that were manufactured went to the Army. Car factories were busy building tanks and airplanes. We had an "A" sticker on the windshield, signifying that we could purchase as much as three gallons of gasoline per week. My father generally rode to work on the bus. He did not drive much in the winter-time. When it snowed we had "mud hooks," chains that he strapped around the back tires through the slits in the wheels. One year, 1943 or 1944, I helped my dad put on the new license plate. That year only the part that showed the year came, not a whole new plate. This was to save metal. My father used red reflector with wing nuts to attach the partial plate over the previous year's. On this day I remember seeing streaks of white high up in the sky. "Con trails," dad said, aircraft being flown to the front. At the beginning of winter my father and I would drive to Sturm's garage. I remember the pungent odor of de-natured alcohol being poured into the radiator to keep it from freezing and bursting.

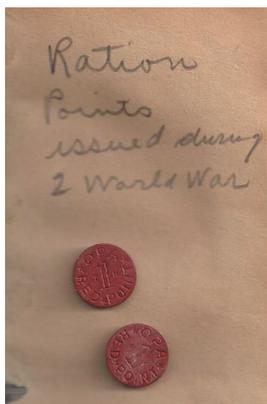
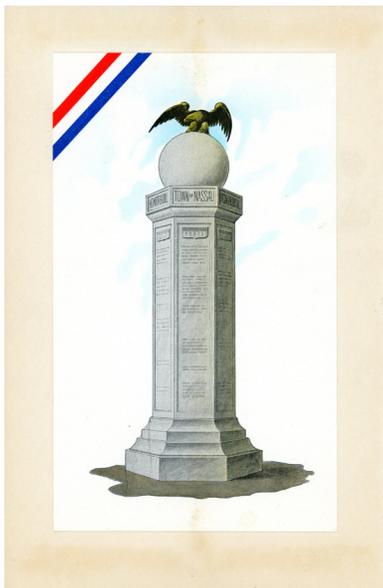
Once, when we had saved enough gasoline, we drove on a long trip on a summer day into Massachusetts, along streams with huge brick mills teeming with workers. A thrashing, chugging noise came from the open windows of the mills. We drove up Mount Graylock. We drove into Vermont to the Bennington Monument. I climbed up the stone tower with my Dad. My mother was pregnant with my little brother, Howard, who was born the fall of 1944. I remember metal painted stairs. I had to rest often, my father was very patient with me. At the top dad held me up to look out the windows over the green hills and the houses. To keep the generator from overcharging the battery (our car, an older model, did not have a voltage regulator), dad kept the headlights on as we drove.

Busses in those days were very old. My mom and I once rode to Albany on one of the old busses. Busses were very tall and square, and had big, barrel-shaped headlights. Our bus groaned along, the gears ground when the driver shifted, and we broke down near Nassau Lake so that another old bus had to come pick us up. I remember that we were right next to the abandoned electric railway. In the silence as we waited people conversed, saying that the trolley had been better than the bus. That day we ate at Jack's Restaurant on State Street. I had a tuna fish sandwich and cherry pie. What a treat!

Ration tokens and stamps were 2 attractive red and blue toys for a kid. But you could not buy scarce foods such as sugar and meat without also giving the store clerk the proper ration token. With so many farmers gone off to war, and with so much food being shipped to our soldiers overseas, rationing was the system used so everyone on the home front got a fair share of food. We were hungry. We ate everything that was on our plates.

(Part Two of Mr. Van Loan's story will continue next month.)

Above, an honor roll for town residents serving in the military is dedicated in 1943 at the Village Square. Below - ration tokens.



If you would like to share your Nassau stories and/or pictures contact us at info@nassau12123.com or telephone Mr. Vincent at 766-2291. We would love to include your material in a future edition.