I Know...I Was There

Celebrating Our Great Nation

Patriotism ran high across North America —
especially in small towns.

By Clancy Strock, Contributing Editor

DAD CAME HOME from World War I service in France 5 years before I was born. As I learned in later years, his time in a foreign country changed him forever.

He became a devoted patriot.

The chance to see another world was life-changing for a farm boy who had, until then, never been outside of Whiteside County, Illinois. As the World War I song so aptly put it, “How ya gonna keep ’em down on the farm after they’ve seen Paree?”

Well, he returned to the farm, but saw America through new eyes. During my childhood, he would tell us how lucky we were to live in America. What he had seen of France had been a huge step back in time. “You wouldn’t believe it,” he marveled, shaking his head. “They don’t have indoor plumbing, and they don’t even have outhouses.” (That was in 1919, remember.)

Many years later, my wife and I took our three teenagers to work and travel in Europe for most of a year. Doing this had the same impact on them that Dad’s adventure had on him. You can’t really appreciate this country and all it offers until you leave it.

That’s why the Fourth of July always has been my favorite holiday. It’s the one day in the year when we properly celebrate our United States. And in the process, we renew our appreciation for what

America gives us.

Perhaps it's nostalgia, but I seem to remember a time when we made more of our country's birthday than we do in our own time—especially in small-town America.

Remember the grand parades? High school bands (a little short of the 76 trombones Meredith Willson celebrated in The Music Man) strutted proudly down the street, saving The Stars and Stripes Forever until they went past the reviewing stand. Up front was the drum major, usually the tallest boy in school. Following him were the drum majorettes in sparkly outfits, twirling their batons. And then came the band itself, with the conductor marching alongside.

Behind the band came, perhaps, a marching formation from the American Legion post, and another representing the Veterans of Foreign Wars. I even remember asking Dad about a half dozen oldsters hobbling along, with canes. "They're veterans of the Spanish-American War," he said. "There aren't many left."

Various other civic groups were represented, some riding on bunting-festooned hayracks pulled by tractors.

Then came automobiles bearing local celebrities such as the mayor and quite likely a state representative from our district. Some things never change: Politicians love the spotlight.

Oh, yes. I almost forgot the little moppets from Mrs. Peterson's Baton Twirling Academy—and the accordion band under the tutelage of her brother-in-law, Harvey.

Many of the groups carried the American flag, and as they went by, veterans saluted and other men placed their hands over their hearts.

Okay, so it sounds rather rural and quaint. But as a neighbor lady

who grew up in a small North Carolina town recalls, “It was the biggest event of the year.” Well, unless the circus also came to town that year.

Frequently, these parades would end up in the town square or park, where a stage had been erected and festooned with red, white and blue crepe paper. That’s where the patriotic oratory was delivered. Quite likely, a church group or a school PTA had put up a concession stand made of sawhorses and planks where they sold cold drinks and ice cream cones and hot dogs. Occasionally, a rambunctious kid would set off a string of firecrackers and quickly vanish into the crowd.

Where I grew up, the local municipal band would then play a concert, heavily laced with John Philip Sousa’s grand march compositions, topped off with The Star-Spangled Banner.

Yes, in most towns, there were fireworks, too. Compared with the intricate, awesome dazzlers we see these days, it was fairly basic stuff. But it still elicited oohs and aahs as the shells exploded overhead.

The final act of this celebration for our family was a return home, where we sat on the front porch, drank lemonade, doled out sparklers for the kids to wave as they ran around the yard, and watched fireflies.

Huh? Yup. July was when the oats crop ripened and turned to gold. And in those days before there were pesticides, the fields would positively glow with thousands and thousands of fireflies…nature’s own fireworks.

So from early morning, when we kids would begin banging away with cap guns and firecrackers until well after dark, we—the whole community—had an entire day of celebration.

As my neighbor lady says, it was the biggest day of the year for many of us. Fun, yes. But also a day when we celebrated living in the country that Dad rediscovered when he came home from what was optimistically called “the war to end all wars.”

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