

Genesee County Children and World War Two

by

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Good morning. I am very excited to be with all of you in the *History Heroes Summer Program*. Heroes come in many different forms. There are really dramatic examples, like the character of Superman. But we should remember that in our country there are many kinds of heroes – and those heroes could be here, right at home. They could also be children and young adults, like all of you. On these very streets, here in Genesee County, children and young adults have also been heroes. That is what we are going to talk about this morning – young heroes who walked on the very ground that all of us still walk on. Those heroes were seen in World War Two – something that happened before any of you were born. In fact, it was even before I was born!

Our country was involved in the Second World War between 1941 and 1945 – more than seventy-three years ago. It was a scary time for many Americans – the Japanese had attacked us in Hawaii, and Germany and Italy had declared war on us. And it was not just those countries that were fighting against us. Romania and Bulgaria declared war on us. So too did Hungary and Croatia. Even little Albania took up arms against us, as did the Philippines. If even some of these countries invaded our homeland many Americans would face a terrible experience – if they were not simply killed. We all had to stand together – and that included children and young people right here in Genesee County.

Not everyone could actually fight the enemy in Europe, Asia, Africa, and elsewhere. Some people were too old, and others – like all of you – were too young. Some people were needed here to do all of the hard work of feeding our soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, Coast Guardsmen, and Merchant Mariners – not to mention everybody else. Other people were needed here at home to build the ships, tanks, and airplanes needed to defend ourselves and to eventually attack the enemy and win the war. All Americans had a role to play – and that

included our nation's children and young people. These children and young people were also heroes.

Youngsters in Genesee County did many things to help us win World War Two. One of their important activities was to participate in scrap drives. For example, in Batavia, the Cub Scouts collected metal that was then turned over to the government. The metal was used to build ships and airplanes. The Cub Scouts also collected paper to be given to the federal government. The paper was used to wrap supplies and was also needed by the military for other purposes.

One person in Batavia remembered how hard the Cub Scouts worked to get metal and paper needed for the war effort. Some Cub Scouts entered the Tonawanda Creek in order to bring out metal that had been dumped in the Creek. Springs and even car fenders were dragged out of the water. But some of the metal could not be used because it was too rusty. But that did not stop the brave Cub Scouts, who tried again to get as much metal out of the Creek as they could.

Young children also saved their money to buy "defense stamps" at school. Each stamp cost either ten cents or twenty-five cents. The children collected the stamps, putting them in a stamp book. When a boy or girl filled the book, they could trade them in for a \$25.00 Defense Bond – which cost \$18.75. What was a Defense Bond? It was a way for the federal government to raise money by borrowing it from the boy or girl. This money was needed to pay for the war effort. The young person held onto the bond for ten years, and at the end would receive \$25.00. They made a profit of \$6.25 – and in the process helped the government pay the salary of the people in uniform, along with all of the other costs involved in fighting a major war. Young people also had the satisfaction of knowing that their sacrifice was helping us beat an enemy trying to destroy us. Some of the Genesee County young people who saved their money to buy Defense Bonds were Patricia Ann Moretto – aged seven – and her brother, Louis Jr., aged four – of Batavia. They saved \$35.00 in a tin can. The can weighed about twenty-one pounds. They bought their bonds on June 6th, 1944 – the day of the Normandy invasion, in which American troops and their allies landed on the beaches of German-occupied France. This was also Patricia's and Louis' way of

showing their love and respect for their uncle, Joseph Moretto, who was in the service.

Along with collecting metal and paper – and buying Defense Bonds – children and young people had to act heroically in another way. They had to stay calm in the event of attack. They practiced this during the air raid drills. A practice could always become something real – young people knew from the news how German and Japanese bombers attacked people in faraway lands – and there was always the chance that it could happen here. Young people heard that Buffalo and Niagara Falls would be targets – and they are not very far from Genesee County.

The chance for invasion and bombing seemed very possible – why else would there be air raid drills? Why else would houses have to make sure that no light from inside could be seen from the outside? The war never seemed far away. Indeed, youngsters would sit in empty lots in Batavia on the corner of Franklin and Pearl Streets and watch German prisoners of war walk past as they made their way to and from work. It seemed like the war was everywhere – elementary school students in Stafford built an Honor Roll that displayed the pictures of former students in Stafford who were now fighting America's enemies.

The courage and patriotism of these young Genesee County residents was also displayed in another way. Genesee County Boy Scouts helped to raise \$177,000, which helped to build a B-25 bomber and a P-51 fighter plane for the Army Air Force. On the side of the B-25 bomber the slogan "Genesee County Boy Scouts" was written, while the P-51 airplane was named for the "Genesee County 4-H Club." Along with these efforts, our hometown young heroes were featured in a full-page *Daily News* public notice on October 31st, 1944. Recognized as "Home Front Soldiers," the Notice said:

YOUNG BATAVIANS

in the Past Month You Have Contributed Over
80,000 Pounds of WASTE PAPER to the War Effort

The paper has already been reprocessed and is on its way to our folks in the armed forces.

Each week more and more Batavia boys and girls are becoming home front soldiers.

KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK!

BOYS AND GIRLS SATURDAY IS THE DAY

Bring every scrap of waste paper you can find to No. 16 Main Street each Saturday. You will be paid top prices for the paper you collect and your efforts in this drive are desperately needed.

Keep Right 'on Being a Home Front Soldier!

Young people played their part in the war effort by understanding that the demands made by the war meant sacrificing in order to support our soldiers and sailors abroad. Because of the need to ration gasoline school buses that previously took players and students to basketball games at night could no longer do so. If a game or activity continued it took place right after school in order to reduce extra gas used by school buses and private cars. Soap was also rationed, so often young people helped to make the family's soap at home. Stockings became very hard to find, because materials like nylon was needed to make parachutes and ropes used on airplanes and ships. Therefore, some young women painted their legs in order to make it look like they were wearing stockings. Being a hero took many forms – and the children and young adults of Genesee County all displayed, in one way or another, the qualities that we think of when we think of heroes – bravery, patience, a positive attitude, and reliability.

They also displayed something else – their love of their families, their neighborhoods, Genesee County, and the United States. They were willing to be grown-up in ways that were far beyond their actual age, and to make the sacrifices necessary to keep American freedom going in the face of grave danger. They were even brave when they lost their best friend – their dog. One family in Pembroke lost their dog, which had been in service in the army for twenty-one months before being killed in action in 1945. For these young Genesee County people, any sacrifice – even that of their four-legged best friend – was acceptable

because their nation needed them. Heroes often do what does not keep one safe or happy – but they do it anyway because our nation needs it done. Genesee County’s history reveals many such heroes – including its children and young adults serving as “Home Front Soldiers” during World War Two.