

Victory at Last: Celebrating the End of World War II

by Jean Luddy

By early August 1945, the war in Europe was over. Fighting continued in the Pacific, but the use of atomic bombs on the Japanese mainland struck a heavy blow to the imperial war machine. In the United States, rumors of peace spread among war weary communities. Although a few false announcements of the war's end had been made, by Friday, August 10th, the news that Japan had was willing to start peace negotiations created a nation-wide sense of hope.

Knowing that the war would be over soon, community leaders in Rockville developed a plan for a victory celebration. Once the official word of the Japanese surrender had been received, the fire alarm would sound 25 blasts to be followed by mill bells and church bells. A Victory Parade would be ready to proceed through Rockville an hour after the announcement.

The Rockville Journal prepared a special one page edition with information about the Victory Parade, giving the parade route and listing the participants. This special edition also summarized the various ways that companies, town officials and citizen had worked to support the war effort. This edition of the paper was distributed for free by the Boy Scouts.

When news of the Japanese surrender was officially announced on Tuesday, August 14th at 7pm, Rockville, like many cities and towns, celebrated with noise and exuberance. The following account from the Rockville Journal edition of August 16, 1945 describes the reaction to the joyous news:



“At the time there were many automobiles in the center of the city, with radios turned in. The moment Peace was announced it appeared as though every motorist just laid on their horns, such a din started and continued. Immediately mill whistles and the church bells took up the message and one was aware a great moment in American history had arrived.”

Immediately it seemed that most people took to their autos. Those who lived in the east end of the city drove to the west end and those in the west end drove to the east. There were lines going both ways and then they all appeared to congregate in the center. Within a few minutes after 7 pm the parking space in the center was filled with cars headed toward the street for a better vantage point to view the victory parade which was to follow.

... Within a few minutes decorated cars and trucks were streaming through the center on their way to the place where the parade was to assemble. Mill whistles, church bells, mill bells, auto horns, small horns, tin pans, bells, noisemakers of all kinds were being sounded. The din continued.... Police quickly regulated traffic at the crosswalks in the center.

Soon a large group was seen rushing toward the Recreation Field. Groups of youngsters appeared from nowhere (some were not so young) and they were carrying boxes and cartons, wood, old furniture and anything else that would burn. They piled it high on second base on the field and a bonfire was lighted.

More and more materials kept arriving for the fire and it was suggested that it be piled on the cinder track for a second fire, after the parade. It was suggested that it be on the cinder track so as not to cause too great damage to the grass, and the youth cooperated splendidly.

... In the meanwhile, more and more autos with cheering folks were being driven through the streets The noise, the shouting, the cheering continued. Fortunately all liquor establishments closed immediately when Peace was declared. In fact all stores that were not closed when the news came in immediately closed, including eating places, drug stores and other establishments. No one could get a drink, not even a soft drink. Some had provisions ready and there were many a "Victory Drink" partaken, some even seen "mixing" drinks in cars or doorways. But on the whole there was very little drunkenness seen. It can be said that a number seemed "happy."



Yet in the midst of the noise and clamor a woman was seen approaching the "miniature cemetery" in Central Park, where there are crosses, each one in the memory of a boy who had died in the service. The woman knelt at the cross bearing her son's name and offered a prayer. A reminder that the victory that so many were celebrating was also so costly to many others.

Time rushed on. It was eight o'clock. What few remaining members of the celebration committee that were still in the center, arranging last minute details, started for the place where the parade was to assemble. Flags had been distributed. Red lights had been distributed to some of the adult marchers. Literally the center of the city, the walks, the walls along the park, the Board Walk, Middle Road, and even the bank along Lower Road was filled with spectators.

... "Here comes the parade" was heard from many youngsters in the center shortly after 8:30. Down East Main Street Hill came the line of marchers. Red lights added to the picturesque setting. Parade Marshal Nelson Mead, John Dailey and Francis Prichard led the parade. Then followed the police. Then the National Guard with colors. Mayor Raymond E. Hunt then led the next section, city and town officials, court officials and others who hold office, all of them being in white shirts and carrying flags and red fire.

Along about then came the band. And what a band it was. There were 32 pieces. It included members of the Legion Band, Kabrick's Orchestra, the Star Dusters, Rock's

Orchestra and other musicians. The group had assembled and were merged into a great big band. Fortunately two weeks before, a large group of them played together for the first time at the Elks-Lions softball game and augmented by other officials they played well. It had the volume of a military band, and there was excellent playing as well.

The Rockville Fire Department with all its motor apparatus, and practically all its men, were in line. The red lights on the fire apparatus as well as the other lights made it a colorful spectacle.

... There were any other noticeable delegations. Tankeroosan Tribe, Improved Order of Red Men, appeared in their colorful uniforms. Rockville Chapter, American Red Cross, had a float with many of the Nurses Aides and other leaders and workers, both on the float and marching. Boy Scouts, in uniform, had a large delegation. Girl Scouts, in uniform, marched and sang. School children in great numbers marched, sang and cheered. Other organizations appeared, including veteran organizations, fraternal organizations, and social organizations



There were comedy numbers. Andrew Binheimer, dressed in a prison uniform, with a sign, "Hirohito, P of W" was in line. He had a big rope around his neck and was being led by "Little Georgie. There were coffins with the sign "Hirohito" and another with the Nazi insignia. There were captured Japanese and Nazi flags displayed, but not proudly shown, but shown as captured flags in disgrace. The Central Garage had a wrecker and from the crane hung a figure of Hirohito.

The parade returned to the center but being so large, all of the marchers couldn't assemble in front of the reviewing stand. Part of the parade moved and with it the band. Efforts to get the crowd in the center to listen to the quickly planned program were useless. The youngsters wanted to cheer and they didn't want speeches. So the youngsters led the cheers for the men in service, for the country, for the organizations. It was soon decided to omit the program and to let the youngsters enjoy themselves in their won way.

Another bonfire, the second at the Recreation Field, was announced and the crowd flocked to it. The sidewalks overlooking the field were filled to the curb. Some folks stood on autos. Others stood on trucks. Many adults went down on the field. Hundreds of young people went down on the Recreation Field and did snake dances and Conga line marches around the fire and over the field.

... On and on the celebration went. After the second bonfire many went home, but many others remained. The band kept playing at one edge of Central Park. The Block Dance was on near the Reviewing Stan. Many remained at the bonfire until it burned low. A number of autos still raced the streets. Extra police were in the center handling the crowd.

... There were many private parties throughout the city during the evening and the early hours. Until an early hour on Wednesday, there were folks still touring about the city in autos, and other afoot giving forth an occasional cheer of the victory that has for so long been awaited."

As the armed forces started the demobilization process, local service people began to return home. Community leaders wanted to acknowledge the service and sacrifice of our veterans by putting on a “Welcome Home” parade, similar to the one after World War I. With help from local merchants, social organizations, business leaders, clubs and interested citizens, the Town of Vernon and the City of Rockville organized a celebration for returning service men and women.

The Welcome Home Program which was prepared for the event listed the committees that planned the celebration, and included an essay that described life in Vernon and Rockville during the war, listed civilian contributions to the war effort and reflected on how the community had been changed by the war years. There were also short biographies and photographs of the fallen from Vernon, Rockville, Ellington and Tolland, reminding all of those who had paid the supreme sacrifice. The booklet concluded with a list of everyone from those towns who had served in World War II.

Plans for the Welcome Home Parade scheduled for October 26, 1946 were detailed in the October 24, 1946 edition of the *Rockville Journal*:



“The Town of Vernon and the City of Rockville will officially “Welcome Home” its returned war veterans Saturday. It will be a day of great rejoicing when the people of the community will welcome home the more than 1000 men and women who served in the various branches of the armed forces. Throughout the city as well as in the business section, flags will be flying and there will be many visitors to the city, with family reunions, social times in the clubs, and countless reunions taking place.”



At 2pm the parade started at the Belding Silk Mill on the corner of Grove and East Main Street, ran down East Main Street to Rockville Center, continued down Union Street, and went back up Union Street to the Recreation Field. By countermarching back up Union Street, the marchers were able to see the parade for themselves.



At the Recreation Field, veterans in uniform viewed the parade as it passed before them. Also, in the place of honor to view the parade were the Gold Star mothers and fathers, war widows and member of the clergy. The ceremony included brief speeches by the Mayor, city officials, and local clergy. After the ceremony, all veterans were invited back to the Elks Club for a reception. "There will be refreshments and a social time. Not hundreds but thousands of sandwiches and appetizers will be ready. The veterans will have an opportunity to renew acquaintances with each other." A band concert at the Recreation Field entertained the veterans' families and parade goers. The celebrations continued into the evening with dances held at the Princess ballroom, the Italian Friendship club, and the Polish-American Citizens Club with free admission for veterans and their dates.

With the Welcome Home festivities, the community acknowledged the service of those who left to serve, began the process of bringing those people back into the community, and remembered those who would never come home. In the Welcome Home Program, essay author Mrs. E. Fenton Burke eloquently expressed the gratitude of those who waited at home during the years of war:

"Those of us whose lot it was to remain safely and securely at home while you were away on "government business" the past few years have felt, uneasily, when you appeared back in our midst, one and two at a time, that we owed you more than a handshake and "Glad to see you back." It would have sounded sentimental and made both you and us feel silly had we added, "By the way, thanks for fighting that war for me." But never doubt that we feel that way, grateful, and apologetic, and a little guilty, even if we were too young, or too old, or other wise ineligible to join you in the job.

A celebration and a parade, fourteen months after war has ended, can seem an anti-climax and a farce. (We couldn't, of course, have had one every time one or two of you came back. Now, most of you are with us again.) We hope it won't seem that way, because we owe you something. Today's observance is not intended as a receipt, marked "Paid in Full." A year, or two, or three, out of your lives cannot be compensated so singly. But this recognition gives us a chance to display a token of our feeling and so, perhaps, it will have some meaning for you. We hope you will long remember the day we "welcomed you home."