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Assignment #5

When we look back at history, we usually see it from the majority's point of view. We learn from government accounts and other major documents. Historians also rely on journalism as one of their main sources in trying to understand the past. Newspapers cover events, although not always accurately, and give us an idea of what happened and what people thought of it at the time. However, most of the newspapers that we gain our knowledge from are elite, urban, major newspapers—printed in London, Paris, New York, Berlin, Rome, etc. But what about newspapers from much smaller areas? How did they portray events and people and from what perspectives? I looked at a small weekly newspaper's coverage of World War II to try to answer these questions.

The *Walton Reporter* is a newspaper covering the news in Walton, New York as well as the surrounding area of Delaware County. Very rarely does this paper cover much else besides local news, mainly school and business events, as well as the comings and goings of residents. Typically, the headlines read, "Delhi Physician Plays at Railroading" or they tell of "James W. Honeywell of 7 High Street" passing his bar exam. (September 1, 1939) Most people from this area are farmers or factory workers; there are few businessmen and fewer doctors. The women are homemakers who work as hard as the men. It would take something big in the world to make this close-knit community sit up and take notice.

That is exactly what World War II did, even before the United States became involved. The people of this area wanted to know how their economy would be affected by the European war, since there were many factories there. When the United States did become involved, the local boys went off to fight. Everyone wanted information then, because everyone knew the boys that were over there. The people back home also wanted to help however they could. In a way, it was easier for the people of Delaware County to contribute in the ways that the government was asking, such as cutting rubber supplies, electricity, and planting “Victory Gardens.” For the area’s many farmers, it was difficult to get by without rubber for tires, but not impossible, since many remembered their parents doing their farm chores with only horses and so did the same. Electricity was a luxury that many enjoyed, but it was not so difficult for people to go back to kerosene and candles as it would be in the cities. As for “Victory Gardens,” most families already had one in their backyards, not for the war effort, but just for themselves. Seeds are less expensive than canned goods. But this was all a given for the people in this area; they already knew this and so did not need to be told. So what did the newspaper cover?

World War II began on September 1, 1939. This was the day that Hitler had the German army invade Poland. Britain and France, as well as other countries, then declared war on Germany within days. (The History Place) The *Walton Reporter* had a section called “News of the Week Briefly Told for Busy Readers.” This section was featured in most of the papers for the rest of the war, and the column usually extended at least three-quarters of a page, if not the entire length. Its information was most likely taken from a larger newspaper, but no citations were ever made. The September 1st

edition featured the positions of each of the major countries. It stated that Germany did not have enough resources to support itself in peacetime, let alone during a war. Britain and France were intending to fully support Poland and it was predicted that Italy would not support its German ally. Instead, Mussolini was portrayed as a politician wanting to resolve the issue. Americans traveling in Europe were reportedly urged to return to the United States, and Japan was apparently leaning towards “magnificent isolation.” The next week’s edition on September 8, 1939, featured one war story on the front page. The headline read, “Business may be in for war boom.” Since there were a few local factories that could manufacture war materials, they were expected to do quite well. However, the cost of living had already gone up, the most important being the cost of food and demand for milk. While the demand for milk would increase the pay given to farmers, feed prices were also expected to rise. The “News of the Week” told readers that the United States, Italy, and the U.S.S.R. were remaining neutral. All of Britain had been militarized, and France had eight million troops ready. Meanwhile, it was reported that Germany was rationing food, and it was expected that they would be defeated by starvation as they had been in World War I.

The September 15th edition discussed the possibility of the United States becoming involved in the war; “Will Shipment of Arms Embroil Us in the War?” The neutrality law was discussed at length. In fact, the article, although not on the front page, took up over two column lengths. The fact that U.S. ships were not supposed to leave to deliver arms was a concern, although foreign ships could come here and pick up arms. Also, travel was being restricted, and because no arms could be on board, all merchant ships were unarmed against any potential attacks. Many people were then quoted giving

their opinions on the neutrality act. A few people wanted to stop the trade of arms, but most were for increased production as this meant increased business and more money. Those that wanted to stop the trading of arms had explanations not tied to economics; “I should like to see the Neutrality law revised to forbid all trade with belligerents.” Only two people were cited with their quotes.

Updates of the war in Europe continued to be featured in one column of the *Walton Reporter*, usually on page seven or thirteen. Then, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The *Walton Reporter*'s December 12th edition reported in a column that ran the entire page's length, that the United States was planning an army of at least eight million. Meanwhile, the Walton branch of the National Guard met and was told the signal for mobilization; “Three peals of the fire bell followed by the whistle.” The guard consisting of Ontario & Western Railroad employees that had been put in place to protect the bridges during World War I was also reinstated. A large county meeting was held to discuss the local defense. All available persons were to volunteer to fill the void left in the police, fire, and other community offices. The main position discussed was that of “aircraft spotters.” The American Legion had been put in control of this task, as well as recruitment. An emergency evacuation plan was instated, as well as plans for other emergencies such as air raids or food shortages. All this was discussed in two articles, each running almost the entire length of the page.

Another full-length, front-page story was of two local boys, Corporal William Merithow and Private Clarence Hoyt, who had been killed in the Japanese attack. Both had been stationed at Hickam Field. Another half a page was designated to “News about Local Boys in Nation's Service.” This would become another regular section of the

paper. Each boy was named along with his hometown, parents, and where he was stationed, if he was currently on leave, or if he was being shipped out. The next few weeks' papers discussed rationing of tires, recruitment ages, the selective service act, and more news about local boys. The war was predicted to go on for at least three years and perhaps as many as "seven or ten." The newspaper then reverted back to its column for the "busy" with the addition of a column for discussing local boys' locations.

The next big event to really shake the people of Delaware County was D-Day on June 6, 1944. One of the front page headlines of June 9th read "Invasion Begins Tuesday Morning." The invasion was discussed for a few paragraphs, but it then turned to the conflict with Japan for the rest of the page's length. This was where "hundreds of Delaware County men were now in battle." The invasion of Europe was certainly a triumph, but it was followed by news that Japan had taken more of China, so the mood was not all celebratory. Especially if one turned the pages. Each local man serving in the army that was listed as missing was given his own half-page column, along with a picture. A heartfelt story about two brothers was also included, perhaps to ease the sorrow of the loss. The brothers were able to see each other for the first time in three and a half years when their assignments corresponded briefly in Hawaii. The other two brothers, also in the military, were not able to make the reunion.

One year later, in the end of April, 1945, two major events led everyone to believe the end of the war was in sight. On April 28th, Mussolini was captured and hung and two days later, Adolph Hitler committed suicide. These events were prominently featured on the front page of the May 4th edition of the *Walton Reporter*, with a full-length column. But practicality was still present. Although celebrations took place throughout the

county, as well as the country, the selective service was still in effect, and it was only hesitantly suggested that the fighting may soon be over. "If by June combat in Germany is definitely ended, it may well be that monthly quotas will be much reduced and filled in most part by youths of 18 years. This is by no means certain." Oddly, a more prominent headline read "Sugar Scarce, Consumers to have Less Sweetening," although it only took up about two quarter-page columns. Perhaps this did have more significance to local readers, as the end of the war was still undecided.

The next week, on May 11th, the war in Europe was over. But there was no celebrating in Delaware County. The schools had special assemblies to listen to the President's announcement, stores and bars closed on the victorious Tuesday known as "V-E Day." Most people went to church and special services were held. The other articles told how war production would slow down, city boys would be coming to help on the farms during the summer, and a full-time U.S. Employment branch would be opening in Walton. This would seem to predict an end to the war, but it was reported that a point system was put into place for those serving, to gauge when they would be eligible for discharge. The draft was also still calling boys in to serve.

That August, two atomic bombs were dropped on Japan in hopes of ending the war in the Pacific. One was dropped on Hiroshima on August 6th and the other on Nagasaki on August 9th. On the 14th, the Japanese surrendered. The August 17th edition of the *Walton Reporter* had a special headline. Instead of the usual block headlines across the top of the front page, all in the same font size, there was a headline in italics, centered on the page; "Blame Atomic Bomb for Unconditional Surrender." While this seems like a hostile attitude towards the bombs, it was anything but that. The double-

column, half-page article described the President's address and the timeline of the Japanese surrender. It also told of the "spontaneous celebration" that occurred everywhere. But, as usual, business continued. The draft was reported to still be in effect for men ages 18 to 25, the rations were no longer as strict, and the daunting task of finding jobs for returning soldiers was seen as a small problem for the area. Most farms and factories were eager to have their men back.

Being from the area, I found one particular fact quite interesting. Throughout the war, no matter how big the news, the Delaware County Fair that took place in Walton in the middle of August, always received front-page coverage of at least a full-page column. It was, and still is, a very important event that brings the entire county together, and always gets a place on the front page for a few weeks. It may seem like a very small point, but it is a very big part of life for an agricultural community, something to look forward to and strive towards all year long. It was important for this community to keep that pillar firmly in place while so many of their friends and loved ones were off fighting.

Throughout the war, the *Walton Reporter* kept its tone not only realistic and focused on local events, it avoided any criticisms or feelings of doubt. Because it was the common source of news for most people in the small area, the paper had to be careful what it printed. There were no reports of layoffs at the factories and any accidents that may have occurred were pushed to one of the back pages. To portray local businesses, or local families of power, in a bad light would not bode well for the small paper. It would also create a rift in the community, something that would be devastating in wartime. Instead, the paper retained its practical manner of reporting in most aspects, portraying anything remotely bad as inevitable or just part of being at war. (Tichenor)

The paper was, however, quite biased towards the war effort. If “our local boys” were doing their parts overseas, then it was naturally expected that everyone back home would also do more than their share to aid the cause. When reporting the “regular” stories about schools, events, and economics, the tenor of the story is flat and pragmatic. When one begins to read about anything concerning the war, the tenor is “boosterish” and proud. (Tichenor) The term “our boys” is used quite often, and some stories would today be considered quite arrogant. It portrays the United States, and the Walton National Guard, as the single best army ever seen and therefore unstoppable. As soon as we entered the war, Germany and Japan never stood a chance. By expressing this common pride in the paper, the community was kept together. Almost everyone read the *Walton Reporter*, so almost everyone would share in that pride, if they had not already. There was a sense of unity, something that they all agreed upon and goals that they all committed to working towards.

The style in which the *Walton Reporter* covered World War II is very typical of the kind of attitude people in Delaware County portray. They are all hard workers, and very patriotic. The patriotism felt in this small community can sometimes border on egotistical or irrational. However, this was never questioned but it did show through quite clearly in the weekly paper. The people did celebrate the victories, but they did not forget that there was more work to be done. The reporting of non-war stories was almost always realistic; the only time it seems foolish was before the United States became involved; when Germany and Italy were greatly underestimated. However, these are reports taken from larger papers; a small town paper could not afford to have its own correspondent overseas. But even with a global war going on, most of the paper

continued to focus on local events and kept the community together with a sense of pride in their country and troops.

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