

One Teenager's War, Part 1

High School Days

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According to a Google search, the term "teenager" was first used in the US in 1944. I was born in the UK. When World War II began in September 1939, I was yet to reach that "teenager" status but later became familiar with the term through correspondence with my American pen friend. My High School history teacher had taught in California on an exchange programme and generously agreed to use her US contacts to find pen friends for a group of us pre-teens who expressed such interest. My Californian pen pal and I corresponded for many years. We eventually met and spent time together in the 1980s on a two day tour of Canada's Capital when she and her husband included a visit to Smiths Falls in their retirement tour of Canada.

When WWII was declared, I was 11 (almost 12) and about to start my second year in High School. I had been fortunate to get a County Minor scholarship to High School at the age of 10. Back then in the UK, certainly in West Yorkshire where we lived, elementary school education was free but secondary school education had to be paid for. I have very vivid memories of sitting with my Mum at the kitchen table as she cautioned me about the need to work hard in school to be able to pass the scholarship exam because we did not have the necessary money to pay for High School. She listed the otherwise limited employment alternatives for girls and women in our area. I knew we had moved around a lot as Dad got temporary jobs after the company in which he held a supposedly solid position went bankrupt and we lost everything except the furniture in the Great Depression in the early 30's. I certainly knew we were not rich but I don't think I truly understood the serious implications of that reality even in that conversation. But I did work hard and I passed the exam for the scholarship!

Like many High Schools when war broke out, my girls only High School, quickly developed processes to encourage the participation of students in extra-curricular activities in support of the war effort, typically and somewhat grandly referred to "war work." Some such activities were even built into the school schedule, particularly for the extra three weeks (cut from our annual summer vacation) that we were in school each year. We were always encouraged to find ways to contribute and we did so by whatever means we could, one very obvious example being knitting scarves, mitts, and balaclava helmets for the "Comforts Fund" for the Armed Forces. My closest and life long friend was a prolific knitter. Although I came from a family of knitters it was never my favoured activity. One effort that I did enjoy was picking sheep's wool from fence lines and hedges. Sheep leave bits of wool behind as they move around

particularly on prickly bushes. Typically, it goes to waste but in WWII, the UK government collected it and one assumes, put it to good use.

We also had school field trips to collect sphagnum moss from some of the boggy areas in the hills surrounding town. The highly absorbent moss was used in wound dressings. Another contribution, depended solely on penmanship skills. Some of us spent many hours at the local district Food Office filling in the names, addresses and Identity Numbers of citizens in the district on government Food Ration Books.

Every Friday evening, from the age of thirteen to leaving school, I collected for the Red Cross Penny a Week Fund. That simple but brilliant concept raised millions of Pounds for extra comforts for members of the Armed Forces and for survival parcels for prisoners of war, yet was affordable for most people to contribute. It was a valuable learning experience for me. I was fascinated by the fact that even the poorest families in our village willingly contributed. I tried not to notice how many pennies people put in my box. Once a month I would walk to one of the local mansions with my collection which had been counted that evening by a volunteer in the village. I would be taken by a servant to a gorgeous room with a beautiful marble fireplace and invited to sit as I waited. I would soon be joined by the very wealthy owner and philanthropist who had volunteered to manage the Penny a Week collections in the area. She would greet me by name as I handed her the money. She would thank me for my efforts and offer me tea which I was always too embarrassed to accept. She would then say that she looked forward to seeing me again next month and escort me to the splendid entry hall where, in turn, the servant would escort me to the door.

Rather than join the Girl Guides as was expected of girls in my High School, I chose to join the Girls Training Corps where we learned the Morse Code and aircraft recognition and did lots of military drilling, marching everywhere as we were introduced to different elements in the community war effort. We were allowed to join with Air Raid Wardens (ARP) in training to put out small fires with stirrup pumps. We had lectures about protecting essential community services, for example the drinking water supply. I remember a particular march to a reservoir and water treatment plant a few miles out of town where we were taken through the plant in small groups as we learned about the waste collection and water purification system. I always felt very privileged as these were places the average citizen only ever saw from the outside. It was instructive and fascinating.

Nevertheless, at school, it sparked a stark example of the UK's "class" prejudices. In my High School, Girl Guides were allowed to wear their GG uniforms rather than the compulsory school uniform (square necked blouses, navy blue gym tunics, long beige stockings and black shoes) on days on which they would be attending a Guide meeting

in the evening. It seemed to me only reasonable to expect that, as a member of the Girls Training Corps, I would be similarly privileged on the days on which I would be attending a GTC meeting after school. So, on one such day, I went to school in GTC uniform. Apparently, I was the only girl in the High School (400+ students) to join the GTC. I was called before the Head Mistress (Principal) to explain why I had declined to join the Girl Guides and, instead had chosen to join the GTC which, she implied, was really for girls who worked in the textile mills and other factories and not for girls with High School education! Coming as I did from a family that despite "qualifications" could barely make ends meet and pay the rent at the end of the week and sometimes failed to do so, I considered that to be a very snobbish comment. I knew better than to say so but explained that I had nothing against the Girl Guides but just as my friends who were Guides had been free to join the organization of their choice, so should I be free to follow my conscience and join the GTC which, in my opinion, was more critically focussed on the war effort. I wasn't forbidden to remain a member of the GTC or prohibited from wearing my uniform on meeting days (an interesting thought in hind sight) but I was always made conscious of my unwillingness to conform. For reasons I will never understand, I remained the only one in school to be in the GTC despite the fact that all of our voluntary GTC officers – lawyers and other professionals in day to day life – were graduates of my school!

In addition, I volunteered to spend time at the Legion Hall making camouflage netting for the Armed Forces. It rates as one of the worst tasks I have ever undertaken. For 3 or 4 hours every Saturday morning, I threaded smelly and chalky strips of blanco coloured green, beige, and khaki strips of (I think) 4 inch wide burlap through netting strung on rows and rows of frames erected in the large and very dusty meeting room of the Legion. I wonder if that practical yet primitive and, I am sure unhealthy process, remains in today's production of camouflage netting. I certainly hope not! For those war related efforts in High School, I recall receiving "points," presumably as an incentive. They added up eventually to a High School "War Services Badge" and to ultimate bars to that Badge. As a life-long volunteer and daughter of life long volunteers, I find myself wondering why that was necessary. Surely, we would have done what we felt we had to do in support of the war effort without such rewards. I would hope so.

As a teenager I was quite happy in High School. At 16 I already had my graduation "School Leaving Certificate" but was staying on in the "Sixth Form" to focus on Art studies with the notion of sitting for a County Major scholarship which, hopefully, would pay for my University tuition. My dream was to study Art at Leeds University's well known College of Art and eventually to teach that subject. My High School teachers were all on board to the extent of arranging for me to take Life Drawing classes one

day per week at the highly regarded local School of Art. On occasion in High School, we drew the hands, faces and clothed bodies of live models but never before had I seen a naked woman or man. I drew them nevertheless. I was fascinated by the ability of the models, one female mostly but occasionally a male model, to hold complicated poses for long periods, take 10 minute breaks periodically and return to assume exactly the same pose. That is discipline! I also seemed to spend much of my school time in senior biology classes where I particularly recall drawing in detail, dissected cockroaches and frogs! Apparently, there was some consideration that medical illustration might possibly be in my future.

But even as I was excited by these experiences, I was also, perhaps unconsciously, maturing. By the summer term in 1944 I was realising that my dreams about University were, almost certainly, just that. Although my teachers felt sure that I would get the scholarship, I was beginning to realise that even if I lived at home, my family would never be able to provide sufficient financial support for my day to day travel to University (30 or so miles away). A scholarship would pay my tuition but it wouldn't feed me, clothe me, or pay for train and bus tickets. I had no money and my parents were already struggling just for our survival. I couldn't find a way to talk about these matters so started to think of other alternatives.

The war situation was of great concern to me. Some slightly older friends and acquaintances were already serving in the armed forces, indeed, sadly, some would never be returning. But age was against me. I then discovered that with parental agreement, I could join the Women's Land Army (WLA) at 17. Getting that parental permission was a bit of a struggle but finally Mum and Dad agreed. My teachers tried to dissuade me and I respected that but when the school year ended I left school. I found a job as a farm worker whilst awaiting my 17th birthday when I could sign on for the Women's Land Army – 76 years ago at the time of writing and the subject of yet to be written Part 2 of One teenager's war.

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