



The **AKEY** **BrAKEY** News

a bi-annual newsletter from the Richland County Historical Society

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Recollections of Growing Up in Richland Center During World War II

by Kent C. Houck

This is the second part of a feature appearing in both the April, 2012 issue and this issue of The AKEY BrAKEY News

After my family moved to Richland Center in 1942, I began attending the West Side School as a second grader. The school was located in the same block as the present Jefferson School. All of the games we boys played were war games and the enemy was always the Japanese. Of course none of us had ever seen a Japanese person so they seemed to be fair targets of our brave encounters. We also intensely disliked the Nazis, but since many of us actually knew German people in the community, our games centered on the Japanese. We did fight Hitler and the Nazis, but not the German people.

In one of our war games at the end of one school day, about 10 of us boys dug some pretty incredible foxholes, perhaps as much as 3 feet deep, in a vacant lot in town, using shovels and trowels that the Leyda kids found in their nearby garage. The lot, on Sheldon Street, belonged to Judge Levi Bancroft who lived directly across the street from this war zone. When he came home from the courthouse that particular afternoon he quickly saw what was going on across the street. He came out on his front porch as mad as a hornet and hollered over to us that he was going to send us all to prison if we did not fill up those holes right away. We worked as fast as we could to fill the impressive foxholes, however, it took twice as long to fill them up because about half of the boys ran away when Judge Bancroft shouted his ultimatum. I wonder now if Judge Bancroft looked out his window to watch the progress and even chuckled a bit about the frantic work and dirt flying to fill in the holes.

Production and manufacturing was a very important factor in the war effort all over the USA, and Richland Center was contributing its part. The largest industry in the county was the Carnation Milk plant. It ran 24 hours a day, 7 days per week producing canned condensed milk. The condensed milk was in great demand because it could be shipped safely anywhere in the world.

The Richland Machine Company on Jefferson Street in Richland Center was another industry producing important product. The company worked around the clock manufacturing cylinder sleeves for armored tank engines. Of course, the Co-op Creamery and the many cheese factories around the county produced food for the effort.

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By far the largest war related factory was the Badger Ordnance plant at Merrimac. The plant covered many square miles of land and employed thousands of people during the war. Living downtown above the store I remember hearing the buses for Badger Ordnance workers' travel coming and going from a city lot a block away. The buses ran all hours of the day and night and we could hear the coming and going of the vehicles from our apartment in the Edwards Building. I have never seen any statistics indicating how many people from Richland Center worked at Badger but it must have been in the hundreds. I remember my father saying that working at Badger was sometimes the first real job some of the people had ever had and the best job ever for others.

Another aspect of wartime on the home front was the encouragement to raise your own food. My grandmother, Georgia Bowen, grew up on a farm near Ithaca so she knew about gardening and raising chickens. At their home on Central Avenue she had a chicken house built in the back yard and raised the birds for eggs and meat. It seemed that we had chicken for our meals all the time, and as a result I developed a strong aversion to chicken. The backyard also had a very big garden, as did her neighbor, Mrs. Spangler. There was, of course, a bit of friendly rivalry about whose garden was the best as who had the biggest potatoes, the firmest cabbages, or first tomatoes. Georgia and her friends and neighbors all canned and preserved food from their Victory Gardens.

At school there were drives to sell war bonds. Each student had a war bond book with spaces in which to place stamps. The stamps were in denominations of 10 cents, 25 cents, and 1 dollar. As you bought your stamps they were placed in spaces in the book. When the book was filled with \$18.75 worth of stamps, a war bond was issued that had a 10 year maturity value of \$25.

During one of the war bond drives, as an incentive, a picture of Hitler was put in each classroom in school. The idea was to sell enough bonds to cover the entire picture. Our class was able to cover up Hitler first of all the classes in our school, because Carl Schwingle's mother worked for the telephone company and bought a bond every month in Carl's name.

The school also had scrap drives. As a result of these drives I have the feeling that a lot of lawn ornaments disappeared as the scrap pile continued to grow. There were scrap drives at each of the schools in the city where large enclosures made of fence posts and chicken wire were set up on the grounds and citizens donated metal scrap to the war effort. I believe that two Civil War cannons from the Richland Center Cemetery were scrapped in this manner, unfortunately.

Radio was very important during the war years on the home front for news and for entertainment. There was news of the war on the radio each evening. Some of the commentators I remember were Gabriel Heatter, H.V. Kaltenborn, and Edward R. Murrow. Kaltenborn was born in Milwaukee and grew up in Merrill, Wisconsin. He began his career as a newspaper reporter, but moved to radio when it began to establish itself as a bona fide source of news. He was known for his highly precise diction, his ability to ad lib and his depth of knowledge of world affairs.

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Gabriel Heatter used the distinctive sign-on, "There's good news tonight," that became his catchphrase and identifier. These radio commentators were relied upon by the public to give them news of the world conflict. Radio entertainment programs I remember listening to were the Jack Benny Show, Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy, the Fred Allen Show, and Fibber McGee and Molly.

Movies were also used for news as well as entertainment. The Eskin Theater in Richland Center ran two shows every night and three on weekends. Newsreels about the war and reminders about buying war bonds were shown before most feature movies, with the exception of the Saturday matinee that began at 1 p.m. where the audience was primarily kids. Almost every seat in the theater was taken for the Saturday matinee by adults and children, but the matinee was definitely a standard activity for kids at the end of the week. I was sent off to the matinee with 25 cents, and, with 12 cents admission for kids under 10 years of age, I had money left for two candy selections. I remember Walnettos being a favorite of mine and my friends. The three feature bill usually began with a detective movie, such as Chester Morris as "Boston Blackie," followed by an episode of a short serial, perhaps Dick Tracy, that always had a cliff-hanger ending to bring us back the following Saturday, and the bill concluded with a cowboy movie featuring stars like Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, and William Boyd as Hopalong Cassidy. We really got our 12 cents worth at the matinee and the Saturday movies kept us and our imaginations totally busy. My friends and I always sat in the front rows and the presence of Sarah Eskin kept things running smoothly at each matinee.

The German army surrendered in May, 1945, but there was not much celebration in the USA. President Roosevelt had died shortly before the surrender in Europe. There was still war raging in the Pacific and everyone thought the Japanese would continue with tremendous resistance.

In August the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan and the war was ended. When word came of the Japanese surrender, the celebration of war ending worldwide began all over the USA. In Richland Center the 5 steam whistles of the manufacturing plants in town blew, each with a distinctive chime tones. The fire siren or fire whistle as we called it, was also blowing in unison with the steam whistles. These loud celebratory expressions sounded for hours, at least it seemed like hours. Church bells rang all over town, as well. It was a kind of pandemonium of sound and people out in the streets cheering with happiness and relief. One of the fire engines was going around town and anyone who wanted to ride could climb right on to the vehicle to participate in the celebration. There was no formal ceremony in Richland Center to celebrate the war's end, as I remember, just spontaneous joy.

Growing up in the war years and seeing firsthand, through the eyes of a child, the sacrifices and amazing creative abilities of citizens working together for the survival and the good of our country continue to be inspiring and truly guiding principles of what small town America is all about.

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For more stories on WW II both the State Historical Society as well as WHA-PBS television have outstanding features or GO TO→ wpt.org/wisconsinStories/worldwar2/

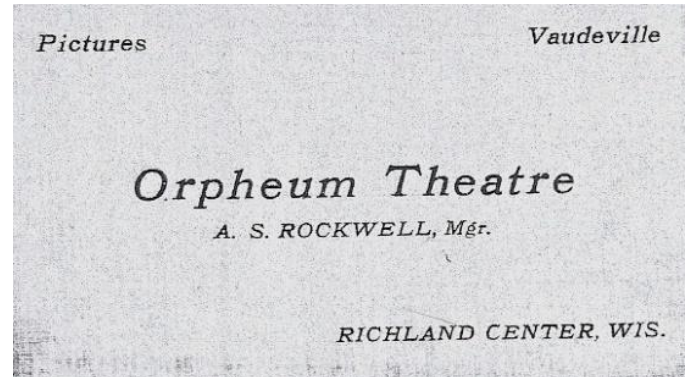
For this issue of The AKEY BRAKEY News a continuation from the April issue was provided by Lon Arbegust from a presentation he made on April 14th in the City Auditorium supporting the Richland County Room & Richland Center Performing Arts Center.

Rockwell's Photo Studio The History of Richland Center Through Black & White Photography & Vintage Postcards. The "Golden Age" 1898-1918



(Left view: Albert Rockwell as "The Sheriff" appearing in "The Little Mother's Sacrifice" circa 1916)

Albert Rockwell acquired the Orpheum Theatre in 1919, leasing the venue to the Commercial Theatre Company in 1923. Sometime between 1924 and 1927, the Rockwell Photo Studio was sold to John Geertz. Rockwell then went back to operating the Orpheum.



Albert Rockwell was born in Richland County August 14, 1877 and passed away sixty seven years later on March 23, 1945.

He grew up in the Winona, Minnesota area. In 1895 he joined Company C, 2nd Minnesota Infantry; three years later after the battleship Maine was blown up, he reported at St. Paul and became a member of the 12th Minnesota Volunteer Infantry serving in the Spanish- American War. He served in the military for 6 ½ years. After the war Albert Rockwell came to Soldiers Grove, WI where he met Nina Williams. They were married on June 22nd 1904 and then moved to Winona Minnesota. Albert and Nina returned to Wisconsin spending some time in Lone Rock and then locating in Richland Center in 1906. As mentioned previously, Rockwell took over the Leonard Studio in 1906.

A.S. Rockwell was an active member of the Richland Center community; he was member of the Masonic Lodge, the Modern Woodmen, the Sauk County Post of the United Spanish-American War Veterans, and the Christian Church.

Mrs. Nina Rockwell led a long and active life reaching the age of eighty six. She died in the home of her daughter Lenice, Mrs. Peter Kaul, in the town of Buena Vista on October 1, 1969. Her obituary states "few women have reached the pinnacle of admiration Mrs. Rockwell gained among associates for her liberal contribution of time and effort in several organizations, the Eastern Star, Legion Auxiliary, Richland Hospital, the Red Cross Blood Bank, the Third District Legion Auxiliary, the Richland Center Federated Clubs, and the Spanish-American War Veterans Auxiliary." She served as president and a long time worker in the Federated Clubs and the Woman's Club and was a charter member of the original group that worked for the establishment of the Richland Hospital.



(Left view: Albert and Nina Rockwell)
In her earlier years Mrs. Rockwell was a prominent member of Band Mothers under Band Director Peter Michelsen, and during the depression she became a champion of the distressed when she took over the duties of poor relief director. She was a candidate for the position of Register of Deeds in 1930. The Rockwell's had two children, a boy, Gale, and a girl, Lenice. Gale "Rocky" Rockwell was born September 22, 1907 in Richland Center. Gale graduated from the Richland Center High School and the Conn School of Music in Madison, WI. He taught instrumental music in Watertown, Lake Mills, Chicago and Georgia. While in the military during World War II, he was the director of the Military Police band at the Savanna Ordnance Depot. After the war he returned to Richland Center and became a department manager at Sears and Roebuck for twenty years. He then

became a representative for the New York Life Insurance Company continuing until his death at age seventy one on November 1, 1978.



(View left: Gale "Rocky" Rockwell and Lenice Rockwell)
Lenice Rockwell was born in Richland Center on August 11, 1911 and died at age seventy five from injuries resulting from a traffic accident on September 30, 1986. Lenice attended RCHS; she was active in band and graduated in 1929 as valedictorian of her class. She graduated from St. Mary's School of Nursing in Rochester, MN. Lenice married Peter Kaul; they farmed together in the Bear Valley area.

Many thanks to Crystal Foley and Nita Liska, historians at the **Richland County History Room** at the Brewer Public Library for their help in compiling this narrative. A special thank you goes to Danny Sheafor for allowing the use of his colorful "The Town of Towns" and "There Won't Be Anything Left Around" postcards in the presentation.

The **Richland County History Room** is located in the **Brewer Public Library** at 325 North Central Avenue. Our community has a wonderful resource in the **Brewer Public Library** and the **Richland County History Room**. Go take a look!



Pictured above under the tent with the Historical Society table are Eleanor Poole, Dr. Jerry Bower, and Ken Thiede at the 150th Richland County Fair. Other Board members included Lon & Bonnie Arbegust, Jim & Barb Cody, Jay Mueller and this picture taken by Carletta Heide.

CHECK US OUT

the Richland County Historical Society website:
richlandcountyhistoricalsociety.weebly.com/index.html

This is NEW and has wonderful information like the Walking Tour featured by Lon Arbegust, Links and much MORE including how to become a member of our historical society.

THE PRESIDENT'S CORNER

By Jerry Bower

When the board of directors, in their spring 2009 meeting, decided to launch the AKEY BrAKEY NEWS, they wondered whether we would have enough material to sustain it. We shouldn't have worried! We started with a four-page newsletter, soon expanded to six pages, and this issue is our first at eight pages. The response to the newsletter has been great. Thank you!!

As you may know, the Society sponsored a Sesquicentennial Commemorative Fair ornament during Richland County's 150th Fair. We also offered for sale our 1987 Richland County pictorial history book and my *The Richland County Fair: A Sesquicentennial History*. We again offered these items for sale at the Wheels of Time display during the Center Color Fest. We have arranged with Minda Barber, of the Frame Corner, to offer the Fair medallion for sale. It costs ten dollars and would make unique holiday gifts. If you are interested in the publications, just call me at (608) 647-4860.

The Akey School Museum 2012 season has been completed. It was a very successful season, with 268 visitors. That's a little more than twenty visitors per Sunday afternoon. The attendance was boosted by visits of kindergarten classes from Reedsburg, by the third graders from St. Mary's, and by the education class from UW-Richland. A big "Thank You" to all who hosted at the museum this summer.

Thanks to the Thelma Thompson bequest, improvements are underway at the Akey School Museum. We have had new, low maintenance windows installed. These replaced the original 1895 windows, whose sash weight ropes had rotted, meaning we could only open three windows. We'll be able to open all of the new ones. We have also contracted to have the interior painted, for the first time since the restoration in 1975-76. Carletta, our secretary, is working on sprucing up our display items, which had faded. The bulletin board displays will be restored next spring. Finally, we plan to have some concrete work done, to improve access to the Museum. You will want to visit the Museum next summer to see all these improvements and the new displays of artifacts.

"Country School: One Room - One Nation" Documentary Film Garneres Coveted Emmy® Nomination

MOLINE, IL--*Country School: One Room – One Nation*, an award-winning film by Kelly and Tammy Rundle of Moline, Illinois, is one of three films nominated for a Regional (Mid-America) Emmy® in the Historical Documentary category.

"We are deeply honored by this nomination," said Tammy. "And, we gratefully share this wonderful distinction with everyone who helped us make the film," added Kelly.

Country schools took rough-hewn pioneers and multilingual immigrants and transformed them into a literate and patriotic new nation. *Country School: One Room - One Nation* provides a never-before-seen perspective on one-room schools in the Upper Midwest. From the first schools in new states to the demise of their widespread use in the 1950s and 1960s, the visually stunning film takes viewers "back to school" for a dramatic new look at the lasting impact of America's one-room schools.

The documentary premiered in 2010 at the State Historical Building in Des Moines and has since screened more than 60 times in cities throughout the United States. The critically-acclaimed film was released nationally on DVD in 2011. Iowa Public Television (IPTV) will feature broadcasts in late August and September, and broadcasts on other PBS stations will continue through the balance of 2012.

****The Richland County Historical Society helped sponsor this film production and there was a showing this past summer in Richland Center at the downtown Auditorium in cooperation with the Richland County Performing Arts Council.**