

NORTH COUNTRY NOTES

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JUNE PROGRAM

The great outdoors is both the topic and the scene of our June program scheduled on Monday, June 5. CCHA's members and friends are invited to bring a picnic supper to Point au Roche State Park and dine at the beach picnic area. There will be no admission charge to the park that evening for participants. Restroom facilities will be limited to the orientation area. At 5:30 p.m. a guided nature walk will be led by Dr. Philip Walker, emeritus professor of botany at SUNY Plattsburgh. Pack your picnic basket, bring some friends and join us for a pleasant evening on the shore of beautiful Lake Champlain. (The weatherman has promised to cooperate, but in case of rain, please call 561-0340 for information before 4:00 p.m.)

THE WILDLIFE HERITAGE OF CLINTON COUNTY

We are pleased to announce that the Association has been funded by Council on the Arts for Clinton County to participate in the Imagination Celebration on Saturday, June 10. From noon until 3:00 p.m. Mark Gretch will demonstrate how to build bluebird boxes and for the following hour he will conduct a gallery tour especially for children and their parents. The construction process is planned to take place on the lawn of City Hall or in the Rotunda in case of rain.

On Sunday, June 25 at 2:00 p.m. Mark is scheduled to offer a gallery tour of "Wildlife" for a general audience. Don't miss this opportunity to hear a naturalist describe some of the little-known facts about our natural heritage in the Champlain Valley.

City historian Jim Bailey announces that he has scheduled "City Historian's Public Hours" at the Plattsburgh Public Library on Monday, Wednesday and Friday afternoons from 4 to 5 p.m. Jim is to be commended for the time and effort he has invested in planning walking tours and other events for the general public. The library has a fine local history collection which is frequently used by scholars and researchers.

BRINGING WAR TO THE NORTH COUNTRY (Part 2)

International attention focused on Plattsburgh, New York during August, 1939 at a time when the largest army maneuvers in the U.S. since the First World War were being held. It would be less than a week before this attention would quickly turn to Europe. The dark clouds looming on the horizon finally turned into a storm. Questions of America's preparedness and desire to enter what could possibly develop into another world conflict were becoming ever more real. What were the implications of the attention and activity that had been brought into this area along with the presence of more than 52,000 soldiers?

Plattsburgh was not unfamiliar to the military. Long before the establishment of Plattsburgh Air Force Base, or of the Plattsburgh Barracks and the 26th Infantry, there existed military outposts and related military activities. Military maneuvers were conducted here in the late 19th century and in 1914. Therefore, one would think that residents would think nothing of maneuvers in their vicinity. On the contrary, on Sept. 11, 1914 the Plattsburgh Sentinel printed an article entitled "Magnificent Display of Regular Soldiers and Volunteers." The article expressed the residents' deep interest in the cavalry which took part in the maneuvers. To the residents of Plattsburgh this was something new since there never was a cavalry unit in this area prior to 1914. Similarly, the same interest and awe inspired by the cavalry's presence was raised in 1939 when maneuvers were again held in Clinton County.

Along with horses, the army brought tanks, planes, half-tracks and armored cars. These were the the newest military fighting vehicles in existence. Nearly all of the armored vehicles owned by the U.S. in 1939 were present for the maneuvers. Additionally, there were two Army Air Corps observation squadrons which also had the newest in technology and planes. (Combat planes were not here due to the Army Air Corps expansion program of 1939.)

The basis of these maneuvers has been stated as being multifarious; i.e., to train troops and officers in a combat-simulated environment with newly developed weapons on new terrain. This is true, although it surely was not the most important reason for them.

At a dinner held in honor of General Hugh A. Drum at the Hotel Cumberland on August 1, 1939, he said, "The exercises that we are planning here may be a means of preventing our becoming involved in war," (Plattsburgh Daily Press, Aug. 2, 1939). This statement, and others like it, were probably made in an effort to appease people who did not believe that military maneuvers and the current build-up of military strength were a high priority in 1939. During the 1930s Congress was strongly dominated by isolationists, Pres. Roosevelt was still involved in pulling the U.S. out of an economic depression, and most Americans were apathetic toward international affairs.

Furthermore, the U.S. was in no position to use its armed forces as a deterrent against the possibility of war. The military was understaffed and under-supplied in comparison with its European counterparts. About the time when Poland was invaded in 1939, the U.S. had a mere 400 tanks, excluding the old and outdated WW I models. Meanwhile, Poland itself had 700, and Germany several thousand. Similar statistics apply to airplanes.

Lastly, if General Drum was so concerned with training his men with newer equipment as

he indicated, why did he not integrate the troops in a way which was more practical for such training? Drum further stated that two weeks in the field was not enough time for proper military training (Watertown Daily Times, Aug, 16, 1939). Could the 1939 maneuvers have been no more than a very large tactical exercise? There is no doubt that the Chiefs-of-Staff of the armed forces knew that the U.S. was basically between a rock and a hard place. The scenario which was developed for the 1939 maneuvers attests to the concern of the military.

The "blue" defending army was composed of small but highly mobile units, including the 1st Division, the 18th Infantry Brigade, the mechanized 7th Cavalry, and all regular army units approximating 16,000 men. The "black" army was theoretically an invading army which had made its way to the foothills of the Adirondacks after landing on the Northeast coast. This force comprised approximately 36,000 men from four National Guard Divisions, and from eight states. It was much larger, but not as well equipped.

The actual test may have been to put forth two opposing sides, one being smaller but highly mobile, the other larger in manpower, simply to test new military tactics. These were the tactics which had engulfed Poland and became known as the blitzkrieg.

The theory of the blitzkrieg originated in the 1920s when it was devised by the German general Hans von Seeckt. It was further developed by such notable tacticians as Charles de Gaulle in France, B.H. Liddell Hart and J.F.C. Fuller in Britain, and the German tank commander, Gen. Heintz Guderian. The blitzkrieg was defined by General Erwin Rommel as "the act of concentrating strength at one point, forcing a breakthrough, rolling up and securing the flanks on either side, and then penetrating like lightning, before the enemy has time to react, deep into his rear." The effect of this tactic is that the enemy is cut off from both its communications and supplies by a highly mobile force.

Supplies and communication also comprised a very important aspect of the maneuvers here in Plattsburgh. Supplying food was, of course, the most important part of the exercise for the soldiers, next to getting paid, that is. Food costs comprised approximately one half of the maneuvers' budget. Most of the food supplies were obtained locally. This surely created a business boom for Clinton County merchants. A small sample of the food needed was as follows: Bread - 468,000 lbs.; Potatoes - 656,000 lbs.; Milk - 700,000 pints, and the list goes on to include other fruits, vegetables, meats and poultry (Plattsburgh Daily Press, July 15, 1939).

Milk was supplied by the Plattsburgh Dairy and put into paper pint containers instead of bottles expressly for the maneuvers. The occasion brought out the entrepreneurial spirit in the citizenry. Mayor Carlton Rennell recalls that, as a young boy, he and his brother loaded the family truck with two or three bathtubs full of ice from their ice house and drove near the line of battle to sell refreshments such as soda, milk, cookies and candy to the soldiers. White ice cream trucks had to be covered with mud because observation planes flying overhead could pinpoint troops by the location of the brightly painted trucks.

Besides planes, there was a group of invited observers interested in the maneuvers. These observers included radio reporters, U.S. senators and governors, the Secretary of War,

and even foreign military attachés. It is the presence of these foreign attachés that lends a sense of irony to the event. With twenty-one nations represented, including Germany, Poland, France and Britain, it was less than a week before Germany invaded Poland. France and Britain declared war on Germany shortly thereafter.

With war having broken out in Europe, Americans were not yet quite ready to devote themselves to external affairs, although the wheels of involvement had already been set in motion expressly by America's push toward build-up of military power. Most Americans could see their nation being pulled into war. The only remaining question was when?

Robert Sloma, Intern
SUNY Plattsburgh

PHOTOGRAPHIC EXHIBIT IN MUSEUM

The research of Bob Sloma and Joe McGrath has made it possible for us to mount a display of photographs of the 1939 maneuvers in the museum's small gallery. It will open on Friday, June 23 and continue into the late fall. Also included will be postcards and other memorabilia. Some of the costs of the exhibit will be covered by a contribution from the Rotary Club of Plattsburgh.

CCHA's SUMMER FUNDRAISER

Although it has been decided to dispense with a "flea" stall this year, we still need a large number of volunteers on July 8 to organize the flea market, donate baked goods, staff the museum and the Macdonough Monument from 10:00 to 4:00, and generally make the event a big success. Please call to volunteer a couple of hours of your time. Thanks!

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