

## War's end makes Christmas '45 extra special

On Dec. 22, 1945, President Harry Truman switched on the twinkling lights of the nation's Christmas tree. This White House ceremony, now 72 years in the past, held special poignancy for the reason that the tree had remained unlit the previous four holiday seasons, ever since the United States entered the Second World War in December 1941.

Victory in Europe (V-E) Day came on May 8, 1945, while Victory over Japan (V-J) Day followed September 2, 1945. "This is the Christmas that a war weary world has prayed for through long and awful years," President Truman said on the snow covered south lawn of the White House during the tree lighting ceremony.

National news stories in the days before Christmas 1945 included the Dec. 21 fatal automobile accident of George Patton, one of the more charismatic and popular American generals of the war.

Back in Central Illinois, most everyone was eager and ready to get back to the real business of life—earning a living, paying bills and raising a family. Yet the war could not be so easily forgotten, what with hundreds of local men and more than a few women still serving overseas.

Many returned home by way of Operation "Magic Carpet," an enormous logistical effort to transport some 8 million military personnel from the European and Pacific theaters of war back to the states. Local residents benefitting from the "Magic Carpet" included Sgt. Delmar C. Martens of Bloomington, who arrived in Seattle, Wash., around Dec. 17, aboard the attack transport USS Windsor.

It's not known, though, if Sgt. Martens made it to the family home on West Oakland Avenue in time for Christmas. Some 168,000 Pacific Theater soldiers, sailors and marines were back in the U.S.—many for the first time in several years—though they found themselves stuck at west coast ports due to the rail bottleneck moving discharged veterans eastward.

Four months after the war's end, home front rationing of everything from gasoline to food staples remained a fact of life. Welcome news arrived several days before Christmas with the announcement that those holding sugar rationing stamps would be allotted a five-pound bag at the start of the New Year. With all the holiday cooking and baking, many folks had already used up their current sugar allocation, which threatened to make for a bitter (or "sugarless") January. "As we go into 1946, housewives will still have to guard the sugar bowl," declared Ben J. Becker, acting director of the Peoria district's Office of Price Administration. "And so will industrial users. There is no increase in allotments to the bakers, candymakers and other such users. They have to count their spoonfuls, too."

Tire rationing was set to end with the arrival of the New Year. Even so, the pent-up demand far exceeded supply, which meant local tire dealers would become the default gatekeepers when it came to who would, and who would not, receive new tires. "A lot of people are going to lose

their heads and we tire dealers are going to have to sneak down alleys in order to get safely home,” said one local “tire man.”

The slow return to normalcy in late 1945 included an uptick in holiday shopping in downtown Bloomington. In fact, department store sales in the city were up 20 percent over the previous year.

There were two big local retailers on the north side of the square, W.H. Roland’s and C.W. Klemm’s. Roland’s was the fancier of the two, catering as it did to the city’s wealthier and more fashion-conscious set. The store promised handbags by “top-name” designers, including those by David’s Fifth Avenue running as high as \$28.50. There were also genuine alligator bags from \$24.50 to \$65. To put these prices in perspective, \$65 in 1945 would be the equivalent of \$880 in inflation-adjusted 2017 dollars.

There were dozens and dozens of other retail stores located downtown where area residents could shop for holiday gifts, from stocking stuffers to that extra special something for under the tree. Holder Hardware Co. on North East Street had Swing-a-Way can openers for \$1.79, and 1½ quart Pyrex Ware casserole dishes for 65 cents. Biasi’s drug store, located on the square’s east side, advertised Schick electric shavers for \$18, and Airflow brand tobacco pipes for \$6.50. Woolen Mill Store on North Main Street sold heads scarves from \$1.39 to \$3.98, and blouses from \$3.19 to \$4.95.

On Dec. 23, the Louis E. Davis American Legion post staged its annual Christmas party for the children of veterans from both world wars. Held at the McBarnes Memorial Building, the afternoon party included an appearance by Santa Claus and several of his elves who distributed candy, nuts and oranges. The entertainment included performances by members of the Russell Brothers Circus wintering in Bloomington, including Bebe Siegrist, a trapeze artist.

On Christmas Day, Home Sweet Home Mission served the community’s neediest residents—no matter their “race, creed, or color”—a dinner of roast pig, baked duck, chicken and all the Yuletide fixings.

The Pantagraph devoted its Dec. 25 1945 editorial to the deteriorating relationship between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, an indispensable wartime ally already assuming its belligerent Cold War posture. “We have just ended the bloodiest war in history. Already we are talking about the next war,” declared the editorial. “Today, while we shout ‘Peace on earth, good will toward men,’ we hate.”

The editors called on Americans to shed their mistrust and fear of those unlike themselves. “We hate the Jews. We hate the Negroes. We hate the [Japanese]. We hate the Germans. We hate the Russians,” the editors wrote. “We often hate because we do not understand. Not understanding, we fear. And being afraid, we hate.” Only with a “sincere effort to understand,” concluded the editorial, will we begin to accept that others—whether our neighbors next door or those living on the opposite side of the globe—have the right, just as we do, “to see things differently.”

A hopeful Christmas message for 1945. And for 2017 as well.

