World War II Comes to Davenport

by George William McDaniel

WHEN PEOPLE in Davenport, Iowa, awoke the morning of December 7, 1941, they had little reason to suspect that this day would be any different than countless other Sundays in their lives. Picking up the morning *Democrat and Leader*, a Davenporter would have smiled to read that the weather was forecast to be fair and warmer with fresh, southerly winds. The high temperature would reach thirty-eight degrees, not unusual for the beginning of December. In a box in the lower corner of the front page, the newspaper continued to count down the number of shopping days until Christmas, while urging readers to buy defense bonds and stamps. The minutiae of daily life in early December 1941, gleaned from local newspapers, portray a quiet eastern

Summer or winter, Davenport stores attracted shoppers along busy West Second Street (here, circa 1930–40). In early December 1941 newspapers, the optimism of holiday ads belied fears of war between the America and Japan.

Iowa city anxious about the international situation but largely focused on living peaceful lives.

To be sure, the newspapers were filled with the dangers of war with Japan. Negotiations were under way to avert war, but United States' insistence that Japan pull out of China had proved to be a stumbling block. The banner headline in the *Davenport Democrat and Leader* that morning announced, "F.D.R. Sends Note to Jap Emperor." But the paper had carried banner headlines about the continuing negotiations all week.

Inside the paper the editor urged that there be no compromise with the Japanese on the issue of China. Hoping that Japan would be guided by wise counsel, the editor warned, "Any other course will bring the military strength of not only the United States, but also Britain, to her door. What that will mean,

Japan had better ponder before it is too late."

The front page mostly comprised news of the 829th day of the war in Europe. One story noted that Great Britain had declared war on Hungary, Finland, and Rumania. Another told how the British Royal Air Force had used American-built Tomahawk warplanes in the Libyan offensive. On the Russian front, German troops battled the Red armies in deep snow and "paralyzing cold."

Stories hinting at war were sprinkled throughout the paper. Two days before, Leon Henderson, head of the federal Price Control Administration, had told 550 Quad-City business leaders that Davenport and neighboring cities on the Mississippi would likely play an important role in the coming war. Industrial manufacturing was sure to prosper with the need for war machinery, and increased food production would benefit the farm implement industry. Already this was reflected in figures released by the Work Projects Administration. In the last year, the number of Iowans employed by the New Deal program had dropped from about 23,000 to 15,000. As industry geared up for the war, fewer Americans needed government relief jobs.

Other stories, too, showed this readiness. St. Ambrose College in Davenport announced that three graduates of the Civilian Pilot Training program had been placed as flight instructors in various branches of the armed forces. Moreover, a long list of students in the program awaited placement with the army or navy. The European war had touched St. Ambrose in yet another way: a feature on music professor Robert Hernried told how he had fled his native Vienna in 1939.

Yet the two events that weekend that had the most profound consequences for history went unreported. On December 6, Vannevar Bush, head of the federal office of Scientific Research and Development, convened the first meeting of a small group assigned to explore the possible use of uranium 235 as a weapon of war. From this group would come the Manhattan Project and the atomic bomb.

And on the night of December 7, seven hundred Jews arrived in the Polish village of Chelmno. The next morning the first groups were loaded into closed trucks and driven to a nearby woods. There, the exhaust system was redirected into the back of the trucks, and the Jews were gassed, their bodies dumped into pits. Hitler's SS was beginning to find efficient means for the final solution, the mass extermination of Jews and other "undesirables." The Holocaust had begun.

THE SOCIETY PAGES said nothing of the war, but announced typical social events. At 4:00 that Sunday afternoon Janet Anne Heim would marry Harold Dethlefsen at the First Presbyterian Church. Also that afternoon Catherine Harney, born in 1855, would celebrate her eighty-sixth birthday. Her party would coincide with the beginning of the fifth American war in her lifetime.

People who lingered over the paper that Sunday morning before church probably checked out the ads for holiday gift ideas. Hills Dry Goods store advertised a "Santa Claus Special" — a chair, ottoman, and table for $19.95, or fifty cents a week. M. L. Parker department store suggested buying "impeccably tailored" gabardine and flannel robes for men and "flattering, swirling-skirted" housecoats for women. Penney's offered handkerchiefs ("The Always-Welcome Gift!") at a variety of prices. Shoppers could also add pieces to their Fostoria dishware for prices ranging from twenty-five cents to $7.95. On sale for $167.50, the Philco "Music on a Beam of Light" would bring Christmas music into the home.

Reflecting the optimism of the holiday gift ads, retail sales were good nation-wide, up about 35 percent from the previous year. In part this was because of a rising industrial payroll and an increase in farm prices due to defense spending. But another reason for a rise in holiday consumer spending was voiced by a New York merchant who said that many people feared that 1941 may be the "last chance for a real Christmas for many years."

The sports pages still carried a few college football scores. That evening at the St. Ambrose College Bees football banquet, a

sell-out crowd would hear Notre Dame coach Frank Leahy praise the Bees and show films from Notre Dame's undefeated season.

If there was still time before church, the comics provided a momentary diversion, with the adventures of Superman, Popeye, Joe Jinks, Etta Kett, or Brick Bradford, who was engaged in mortal combat with a giant frog. Before the day was over, many may have wished for a man of steel or a spinach-eating "sailor-man" to set the world aright.

PUTTING the paper aside, many Davenporters went off to church. According to a Gallup Poll that weekend, Americans in overwhelming numbers did not want to hear about war from the pulpit. This trend had started in 1939, shortly after the beginning of the war in Europe. "Stop talking about the war," one man had pleaded. "I wish ministers knew how sick and weary college students are of hearing the war dominate sermons." Another man said it was the duty of clergy to present "eternal spiritual values."

Davenport pastors apparently followed the trend. At the Central Baptist Church the Rev. A. R. Strasen spoke on "Partnership with God," and his colleague at Third Baptist preached on "The Steadfastness of Faith." Rev. E. Wesley Perry, at St. John's Methodist asked "What Is Christianity?" Churchgoers at the Zion Lutheran Church would hear Rev. Louis G. Krebs speak on "Happiness of Hunger" at the 10:30 service, and on "Hunger Nach Gerechtigkeit" at the 11:30 German-language service.

Following church the family might have planned to go out for dinner (a sixty-cent beef tenderloin dinner at the Mississippi Hotel Grill), and later take in a movie. The Capitol theater featured Gary Cooper in *Sergeant York*, the story of the Kentucky mountain boy who became a World War I hero. Adult admission was forty cents before 2:00 and fifty-six cents after. For only eighteen cents, one could see Cary Grant and Irene Dunn in *Penny Serenade* at State Theater. Those wanting even lighter fare could consider a double feature at the Garden: *Life Begins for Andy Hardy* with Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland, and *Dr. Kildare's Wedding Day* with Lew Ayres and Loraine Day.

But most people probably stayed at home for a quiet afternoon with family. If they wanted entertainment, the radio would offer the Chicago Bears/Chicago Cardinals football game, or Sammy Kaye's Sunday Serenade. WOC's "Wake Up, America" program had scheduled a lecture on "Can There Be a Substantial Reduction in Non-Defense Expenditures of the Federal Government?" Music lovers could hear the New York Philharmonic with Polish pianist Artur Rubenstein.

It was, in other words, an ordinary Sunday in December.

IT WAS ALREADY past noon in Davenport when people in Hawaii began to stir. Intelligence officers already at work translated coded messages routinely received at various listening stations throughout the Pacific. Most felt that if Japan did attack it would be to the south, in French Indochina or the East Indies. At the big naval base of Pearl Harbor ninety-four United States battleships, cruisers, destroyers, submarines, and auxiliaries were lined up on Battleship Row. At the four air bases, hundreds of American planes were lined up wing tip to wing tip, the easier to protect them from expected sabotage. There was little reason to think that Americans in Hawaii would not spend their Sunday as normally as Davenporters were spending theirs.

MOST IOWANS remember precisely where they were when they heard the news that afternoon that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor earlier that morning. For some, their radio programs were interrupted. Others received phone calls, or the next-door neighbor ran over to pass on the news. Davenport became part of a national community gathered around the radio for the latest news. Reactions ranged from shock to disbelief to worry for friends or

STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

Poster No. 15 from the U.S. Office of War Information in 1942 shows one response to the Japanese attack of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. After the attack, Davenport newspapers in December 1941 reflect the new focus of a nation officially at war. (The poster is part of a new exhibit on the Pacific theater; see inside back cover.)

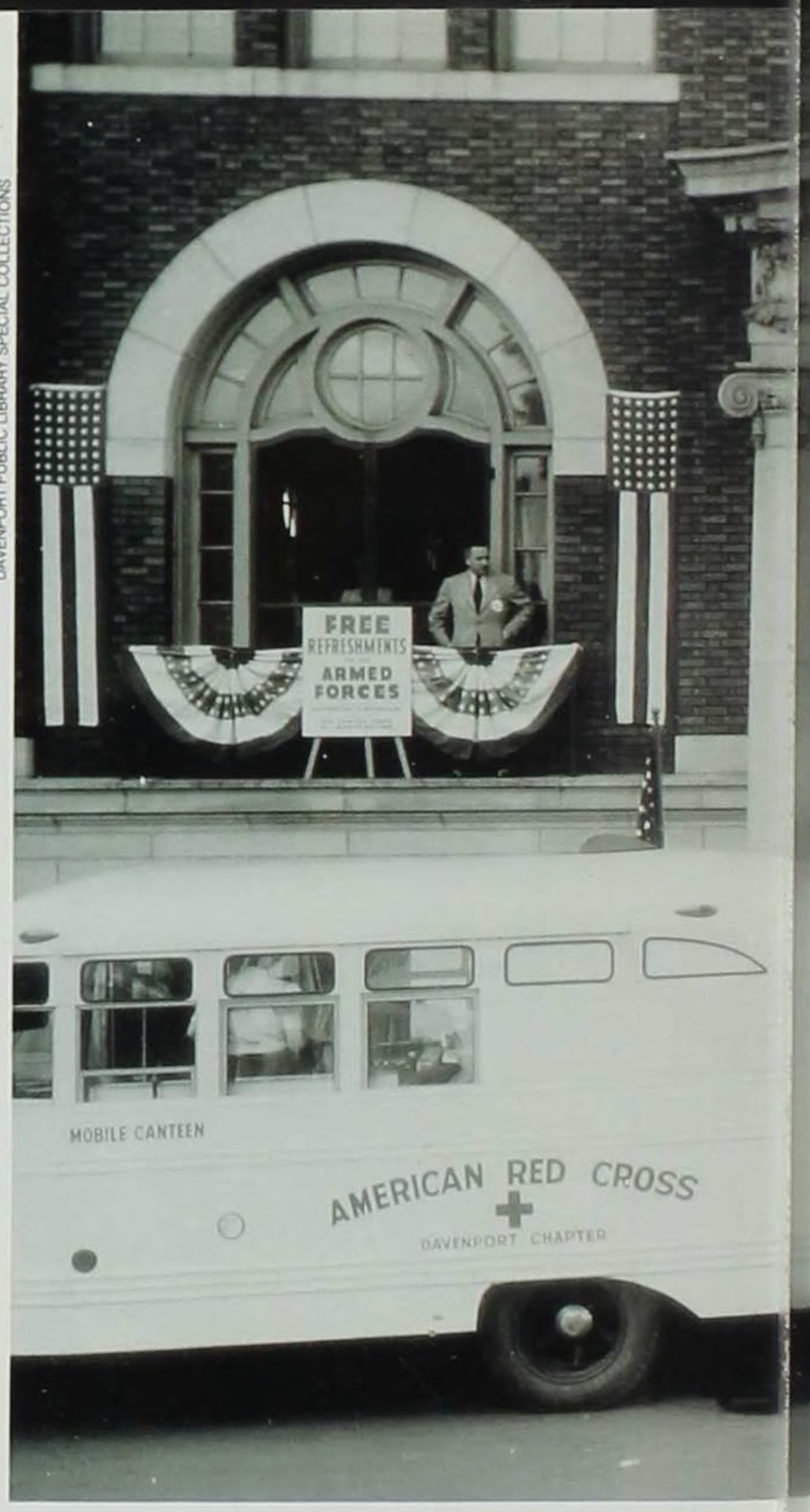
family in the Pacific, including 111 men from Scott County.

MONDAY MORNING, December 8, was more than the beginning of a new work week; it was the beginning of a new era. Davenport newspapers reported no "hysteria or false enthusiasm," just a "calm realization that the American people had a new job to do." At 11:30 A.M. Iowa time, President Franklin Roosevelt entered the chamber of the House of Representatives and began his war message: "Yesterday, December 7, 1941 — a date which will live in infamy — the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan. . . ."

Although Congress quickly passed a declaration of war that Monday, Davenporters had not waited for the president or Congress. When the navy recruiting office opened that morning, two men were already in line. At the army recruiting office a man on crutches walked in to enlist. Before the day was over more than a hundred men had registered or re-enlisted. Leonard Kinman of Milan, Illinois, had served aboard the *Arizona* until his discharge the previous month. Now he wanted to "avenge the deaths of [his] shipmates who lost their lives on the *Arizona*." Within a week the Selective Service System began to review the status of those classified "3-A, married." Men with "self-supporting" wives were likely to be drafted soon; those with dependent wives, parents or children would be held back.

LIFE IN DAVENPORT changed quickly. All private airplanes were grounded and pilots' licenses were suspended. Armed guards took up posts at Cram Field, Davenport's municipal airport. The pilot training program at St. Ambrose College was suspended until the citizenship of the students could be determined. Most industrial plants posted extra guards to prevent sabotage.

Mayor John H. Jebens issued a statement about the "treacherous acts of Japan" and demanded "revenge for Pearl Harbor." Sacrifice would be necessary if the "dark powers of



DAVENPORT PUBLIC LIBRARY SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

treachery and brutality" were to be defeated. "We are all Americans — first, last, and all the time," he said, and he urged citizens to show their loyalty by flying flags and buying bonds.

All Japanese citizens were placed on curfew, although it was not certain if any people of Japanese ancestry lived in the area. (In Iowa City, however, the police checked up on all Japanese students and told them they must report to the police station daily.) In response to Germany's and Italy's declarations of war on America on December 11, a German alien was arrested in Davenport — one of five arrested in Iowa and sent to Fort Des Moines. A similar arrest order went out for Italian aliens, but no arrests were made in Davenport. The Federal Bureau of Investigation soon took over investigation of aliens and let it be known that any

The Davenport Commercial Club is decked in bunting as a group of supporters sends off departing draftees (1943?). The "Good Luck, Buddy!" banner is signed by various war-related groups in Davenport.

considered "dangerous" would be placed under "constant surveillance."

On Tuesday, December 9, Davenport's Contemporary Club speaker was Unitarian pastor Charles E. Snyder. He took as his topic "When the War Drums Sound," but he spoke mostly of the period to follow the war. A new world order must be constituted, he said, to ensure that there would be no future war. He called for an organization of nations, an international police force, fixed currency, and lower trade barriers.

Most people, however, had more immediate concerns to contend with than a post-war world order. On Wednesday, Company A, 6th Illinois Infantry was called to active duty to guard the Centennial and Government bridges against sabotage.

In Des Moines, Governor George Wilson called a council of war. Leaders of veterans groups, the National Guard, and others with military experience in the state met to determine whether a home guard was necessary. Not waiting for the governor's orders, local World War I veterans had already organized a local defense unit. Spanish-American War veterans across the Mississippi in Rock Island met to renew the oath of allegiance they had taken in 1898.

The following Sunday, the first Sunday of the