

The History Corner
Richard Sill
November, 2001

September 11, 2001 Tragedy

September 11th started out a beautiful fall day. Sadly, it just didn't last that way very long. I imagine none of us will ever forget where we were that morning or what we were doing when we got the terrible news of what was happening. I was outside when the phone rang. It was Terry asking if I was watching the Today Show. "No", I said, "I'm working on your rock garden". "You better go in and watch the news", she said. I turned on the television just after the second tower of the World Trade Center had exploded into a ball of flame. What I watched could only be described as surreal. I stared at the screen partially mesmerized by events seemingly impossible to comprehend, and partially in shock by the immensity of the tragedy unfolding before me.

There was nothing in my past that I could quite compare it to. The assassinations of President Kennedy and Rev. Martin Luther King come quickly to mind. Yet, the compounding of so much personal loss and grief makes September 11 somehow different. The only event in my life that seemed in any way comparable occurred nearly 30 years ago when, as a teenager, I sat frozen in front of another TV as fuzzy pictures of Soviet missiles were displayed across the screen. That too was a time dominated by fear and uncertainty for our future. But as significant and crucial as the Cuban Missile Crisis was, its revelation to the American public was not accompanied by such incredible devastation and so staggering a loss of life as was witnessed last month. Only Pearl Harbor, an event that occurred several years before I was born, seems similarly to have both stunned and rocked our nation so completely.

If the events of September 11 are "our Pearl Harbor" as some have called it may be helpful to look closer at how the real Pearl Harbor affected us. Nearly overnight the stability, security, and isolation that rural life had provided for the people of French River and Clover Valley were shattered. Almost immediately local men were either leaving the area for duty overseas or were being put to work here at home on jobs relating to the war effort. Women as well soon found themselves providing support, working in local shipyards and alongside men in a number of plants and factories. Some joined branches of the Armed Services such as the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps where their positions as cooks, clerks and mechanics freed up more men for combat. As consumer goods and materials vital to the war effort became scarce, rationing was imposed. The rationing of certain items such as meat and butter, which could be locally produced, was not so critical but the restrictions placed on imported items such as sugar and coffee were more severely felt. Limits imposed on the purchase of tires and gasoline also impacted the area with trips to town becoming few and Sunday drives all but being eliminated.

The war effort depended heavily on raw materials being supplied by the iron mines of the region. Since much of that iron ore was being shipped along the Duluth Missabe & Iron Range Railroad, extra efforts were taken to insure the safety of the shipments. Every bridge along the rail line between the cities of Duluth and Two Harbors was protected by an armed watchman, including several sites here in our community. Even children altered their activities, announcing their presence to watchmen before entering swimming holes near the guarded bridges. For four years we drastically changed our way of life to meet the demands the war placed upon us. By the time it had ended in 1945 our community and our country was forever changed.

Now 60 years later we face another challenge. Clearly, no one wishes this present threat would force as many changes on us as did Pearl Harbor. Yet, the impact of September 11 certainly has shaken us all and given us pause to reconsider a number of things in our lives. We keep hearing that the most positive response we can give in this crisis is to get back to "normal" as soon as possible. Yet, I'm finding that somehow hard to do. Certainly we want to lessen the fear we feel in our lives, and to as great a degree as possible, bring "normalcy" back for our children. But, getting back to normal also suggests that we somehow can put behind us what has happened, and I don't think that will ever be possible. In fact, if in the last few weeks we have hugged our kids more, waved to our neighbor, told our spouse we love them, taken less for granted in our everyday lives, and begun to consider the commonalities we share with others instead of the differences separating us, then we have not gone back to normal but we have already begun moving forward. And if that be the case, maybe something hopeful will come out of all this sadness.