

HOMECOMING: V-J Day and the G.I.s Return



Rabbi Zachariah Gellman offering a prayer of thanks in Burlington on V-J Day. Courtesy of the James V. Detore Photo Collection, Special Collections, University of Vermont Library.

On Tuesday, August 14, 1945, at seven o'clock in the evening when most Vermonters were sitting down to dinner, President Harry S. Truman announced on the radio that the Japanese nation had surrendered. The war was over. Vermonters left their tables and took to the streets. Church bells chimed and sirens shrieked.

In Burlington, Vincent J. D'Acuti, a soldier just back from fighting in Europe, went to St. Joseph's Church to give thanks when he heard the news. Jeanette Cullins was elated that her husband would return soon. But she remembers looking across the street to a neighboring family. Their son would not be coming home. He had been killed in action. "I felt so sad for them. I can remember going over and sitting on their porch and talking."^{*}

But most Vermonters were rejoicing. V-J Day meant the end of fear for the safety of loved ones overseas. It meant that people could get back to normal lives again. Thousands danced in the streets in Rutland, Montpelier, Brattleboro, and Burlington. And they scattered paper, so precious during the war, in the streets in celebration.

The G.I.s came home to a different world in many ways. The war had lifted the United States out of the Great Depression. With factories and mills running twenty-four hours a day, and paying for overtime work, there had been plenty of good jobs. Servicemen were surprised to see how well-off people were back home.

War had also broadened the outlook of soldiers from the country. Many decided not to stay on the

farm when they returned. In Vermont, the number of farms dropped by 23 percent between 1940 and 1950, while the number of Vermonters living in cities grew by 12 percent.

One of the big changes was the baby boom. After the war, many American couples began to start families. In Vermont, too, the birth rate soared. In fact, there is a good chance that your parents or grandparents are baby-boom children.

The government felt that the country owed G.I.s some help. It passed legislation called the G.I. Bill, which gave veterans money to go to college. Veteran Fred F. Neuberger enrolled in Middlebury College in September, 1946. The campus was full of ex-servicemen, many still wearing their old army field jackets. Neuberger, a mill worker's son, said he could not have afforded to go to college without the G.I. Bill. About 16,000 veterans used the bill to attend Vermont colleges. Under special G.I. low-interest mortgages, thousands of veterans' families achieved the "American dream" of owning their own homes. About 10,000 veterans bought houses in the Vermont under this program, many in the post-war suburbs springing up around Vermont cities.

Today, when Vermonters look back on World War II, many have good memories of a time when everyone was united in a common cause. Others feel that the war led to some of the great problems of the recent years, such as disagreements between the United States and the Soviet Union and the threat of nuclear war. What do you think?