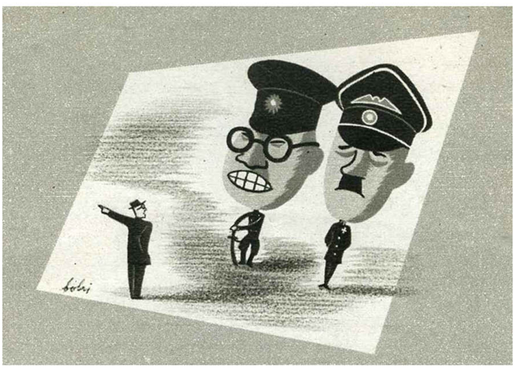
WHAT THE JAPS DID TO OUR TOWN



IF I had five minutes with either Hitler or Hirohito and wished to convince him that he didn't have a chance of winning his war, I would not talk about the enormous war machine we are building to crush him. I would simply tell him what has happened in my home town.

I live in a village built around a salt-water cove forty-five miles from New York. We have a couple of grocery stores, a filling station, a brick schoolhouse, and a little white church. Our population consists of a few farmers and fishermen, a few very poor people, a few who are quite rich, and a couple of hundred middle-class families whose bread-winners commute to New York. A typical cross-section of America, you might say, yet up until December 7 it really wasn't much of a town.

The farmers and fishermen didn't know the rich folks on the shore. The commuters on the 7:45 buried themselves in their newspapers and rarely spoke to each other. Their wives, racing over the roads in sleek cars, lived everywhere but at home. Few of them even shopped in the village.

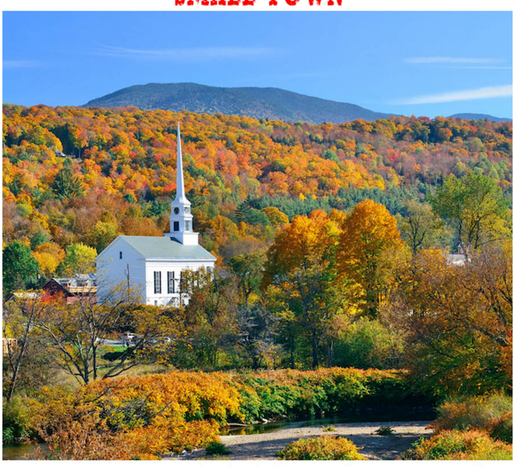
There were some cliques and sets in our town, of course, but for the most part we were strangers. We might have lived thousands of miles apart for all the interest we took in one another.

Then, a few days after Pearl Harbor, I received a telephone call one night from a neighbor I had never heard of before. Would I become an air-raid warden? Feeling faintly ridiculous, I attended a meeting at the firehouse.

There were thirty other men present, looking sheepish, too—a few business and professional men, a clam digger, a house painter, a garage mechanic, a Jewish storekeeper, an Italian gardener.

Most of us were pretty stand-offish at first—we had been strangers so long—but we were drawn together by one of the oldest of human bonds: a resolve to protect our families and property.

SMALL TOWN



As we attended defense lectures and participated in practice blackouts a gradual change came over us. Before we realized it, we were calling each other by our first names. Nick, the gardener, showed Bill, an accountant, how to cane his berry bushes. Frank, a businessman, helped Tom, the clam digger, to get his daughter a defense job.

I came home one night and found Jack, Don, and Gus in my garage, building a little red wagon—a cart to tow fire-fighting equipment in in case of air raids. None of us had even known one another's names before December 7.

Meanwhile, the draft was picking up the young men faster and faster. It knocked at all doors alike.

We were all down at the railroad station on the rainy evening when one batch of boys went away: Tim O'Keefe, whose mother takes in laundry; Sammy Cohen, who helped his old man in the store; Paul Bradford, Jr., whose dad could buy and sell the whole town if he felt like it—these and a score of others. The town lost a lot when those boys went away, but we gained, too.

When the train pulled away in the rain, gray-haired men who had never before had anything in common patted one another's shoulders. Women who weren't crying comforted a few who were. It didn't matter what part of town they came from.

The women of our village, as a matter of fact, have done even more than the men. Sugar rationing brought them all together for the first time at the brick schoolhouse. Soon they formed a local Red Cross Chapter, a first-aid unit, and a canteen group.

The rubber shortage and gasoline restrictions nipped the wings of the gadabouts. Today the girls shop at the village grocery stores and walk home together with bags in their arms.

EVEN the kids are pitching in. The Camp Fire Girls are collecting wool for the Red Cross. The Boy Scouts are tending a vegetable patch for Mrs. Spencer, whose own boy was killed at Bataan. In six months we've turned right back to early Americanism. We've made our town a solidly united community of close neighbors.

No one passes anyone now without speaking. If we've got gas in our cars, we pick up the fellows who haven't any. If enemy bombers fly in from the sea some night, we'll know what to do. If it's a long, hard war, we'll know how to take that, too. We'll help each other.

SMALL TOWN

All this wouldn't be important if it were one town alone, but it isn't. In a hundred thousand towns like mine Americans have kicked out snobbishness and self-interest. By one of the miracles which prove us a great people, we have tightened our belts, closed the stockade, and reached for the squirrel rifle. We're unlickable now, Messrs. Hitler and Hirohito, because the whole nation is like my home town!

CLARENCE WOODBURY

THE American
OCTOBER 1942