

The Town of De Kalb and the August 1940 War Maneuvers by Bryan Thompson

There are only a few times in history when St. Lawrence county and De Kalb have been in the national spotlight, one of those times was August 1940. On September 1, 1939, the Germans invaded Poland and World War Two began. June 14, 1940 the Germans entered Paris and by July 1940, the Battle of Britain had begun.

The Roosevelt administration desperately wanted to help our allies, and improve American preparedness for what they saw as an inevitable looming war. However, their hands were tied by a series of neutrality acts passed by Congress in 1935, 1936, 1937 and 1939.



Photo - Life Magazine August 1941- caption: "A small town at night, during summer maneuvers, lures many soldiers with its bright lights, then bores them with its lack of anything exciting to do. All over the country the Army has the problem of big camps near little towns, with nothing there to amuse the soldiers. Local communities and the U.S.O. are trying to help, but so far have not accomplished enough."

Military maneuvers involving some 25,000 men were held in Clinton County in 1939. Desperate to influence public opinion in support of an expanded military, the Roosevelt administration developed a plan for massive military maneuvers in four locations around the country in the summer of 1940. These maneuvers were to be so massive that they would mimic the stress of a real national military emergency, and clearly demonstrate the need for added military funding.

The 1940 St Lawrence County maneuvers, involved the entire First Army of the United States under the command of Lieutenant-General Hugh Drum. Some 100,000 troops from all the states on the Eastern Seaboard from Maine to Virginia were scheduled to be involved. These were to be the largest peacetime military maneuvers ever attempted.

Military planning personnel began arriving in the area in June. They made arrangements with local landowners, schools and businesses to use their facilities for the maneuvers. The De Kalb Town Board passed special motions to allow the Army to rent the Highway Department Storehouse at East De Kalb (Now the Meetinghouse Museum.) and to set up poles along town roads for communication wires. On August 2nd, a Major Flanders appeared before the Town Board to request they purchase calcium chloride to keep the dust down on the roads during the maneuvers. The board agreed. The troops were to arrive by truck, air and train, with the majority to arrive by train.

In order to avoid massive traffic jams, the troop trains were scheduled to detrain (unload) in the smaller communities of Knapps Station, Winthrop, De Kalb Junction, Lisbon and Gouverneur. De Kalb Junction was the largest detraining sight with over 17,000 troops involved.



Soldiers leaving train De Kalb Jct.

The troops started to arrive on Saturday, August 4, 1940. It was typical hot August weather. The troops arrived clothed in their winter wool uniforms. By Sunday, August 5th, detraining was in full swing in De Kalb Junction. Unloading took longer than had been anticipated and the schedule ran 35 minutes to an hour and a half behind schedule.

The trains backed up on the tracks until at one point they blocked US Route 11 at Redrock (There was no overpass in 1940.) Thousands more troops were arriving by road making the traffic jams even worse.

A First Army Maneuvers tourist brochure had been published by county businesses. Sight seerers in their Sunday best swarmed to all the detraining locations. In De Kalb Junction cars were parked on the roadside for a mile outside the hamlet.



Crowd waiting on Green Street, De Kalb Junction for soldiers to disembark.

The trains continued to unload through the night Sunday and for half the day on Monday, August 6th. The roads were dry and dusty with clouds blowing up as the troops marched from De Kalb to Canton, Pyrites and beyond. Some marched over 20 miles to their encampments. Some 3,000 horses were brought in for use by the cavalry near Canton. An additional 3,000 troops arrived in De Kalb by motor vehicle.



Detraining in the Junction

The troops immediately began to set up tent cities around the township. An officer's headquarters was set up at the De Kalb Junction High School on the hill in the hamlet. The 44th infantry set up camp on Risley Road, The 2nd Army Corps, under the command of Major General Walter C. Short, set up at East De Kalb where Hermon-De Kalb Central school is located today.

Other groups were based on the Floyd Gillette farm on the Rice Rd (First farm on left) and the Earl Walker farm (currently Pratt farm) Outer Depot St., Richville. These encampments included regular army troops and the 27th Division Aviation N. Y. National Guard and the 44th Division Aviation N. J. National Guard. There were also military police companies and units of the Signal Corps stationed in the town.



Army encampment Risley Rd.

For the maneuvers the first army was broken into two rival armies, the Blue and the Black. The Western or Blue Army had its headquarters at Gouverneur and the Black or Eastern Army was headquartered at Winthrop. The scenario was that the Black Army had invaded and conquered New England and was moving through St Lawrence County on its way to the Midwest and Chicago. The Blue Army represented US forces trying to repel the invaders. The games were monitored by a group of 300 skilled army umpires, head quartered at Brewer Field house, SLU to determine the winner of the mock war.

Each Army had its own daily supply train. One of the deciding events in the war games was when the Blue army managed to intercept the Black armies supply train. An Army really does travel on their stomach!

All St Lawrence county milk pasteurization plants were on three shifts, twenty-four hour operation to keep up with the demand for milk. The army estimated that they would consume 1,242,187 pounds of bread during the 21day maneuvers.

With the population of the county suddenly doubled, business boomed at all local taverns, stores, and restaurants. Snack bars and refreshment stands were on lawns everywhere. The army was empowered by the board of health to inspect all snack bars and forbid their soldiers access if they deemed them unfit. No alcohol was to be sold to soldiers after 10:30 PM Monday through Thursday and after 1 AM on the weekend. Any premises violating these rules were to be closed to all military personnel for the duration of the maneuvers. At the close of the games it was estimated the soldiers had spent \$6,000,000 while on maneuvers. (This would be \$89,200,000 in today's dollars.) These figures did not include the massive amounts spent by the army proper.

The maneuvers consisted of a number of daily skirmishes. By August 14th the boom of heavy artillery and the drone of constant airplane surveillance were a daily occurrence. Roads were designated one way only and it was not uncommon for long detours when bridges were "blown up" as indicated by signage and a guard to make sure no one used the missing bridge. Some soldiers walked around with signs indicating, wounded or dead. Pontoon bridges appeared and disappeared through out the countryside.



It was not all inconvenience; large crowds flocked to the army camps to trade for trinkets and souvenirs. An Army band of 300 pieces performed at communities through out the area. Military religious services were held at St Lawrence University attended by thousands. Many other soldiers attended the church closest to their camp, filling them to capacity.

The maneuvers were a learning experience for both sides. Local citizens got to see army equipment up close, including trucks with logs for guns labeled "tank" and soldiers carrying sticks for side arms. In exchange the largely urban soldiers experienced farm life and rural living. One platoon was marching down Maple Ridge Rd in the town of De Kalb as oats were being bound on the Weatherup farm. The curious soldiers couldn't keep step. Their wise officer allowed the men to fall out to "See how real work was done. "

From the outset of the maneuvers NYS Governor Herbert Lehman was scheduled to visit the maneuvers on Saturday, August 17, 1940. Rumors flew that perhaps Roosevelt would also visit that day but due to security nothing was confirmed.

The morning of August 17 was hot and muggy; Roosevelt arrived in Norwood on his private Railroad car, the "Roald Amundsen". Here, he was joined by Governor Lehman, US Secretary of War, Henry L. Stimson and General Hugh Drum. Together they traveled in Roosevelt's specially equipped limousine through out the maneuver area. The motorcade passed through both De Kalb Junction and Richville. People lined the roads to catch a glimpse of the president.



Roosevelt Motorcade Passes Benson's Garage De Kalb Junction

Finally the President arrived in Ogdensburg, where his private Railroad car had been transferred. Here Roosevelt was met by Canadian Prime Minister McKenzie King. They dined in the railroad car, but the night was so muggy the train was ordered to leave Ogdensburg to find some air. The train stopped on a siding near the Heuvelton train station. Here Mr. Roosevelt and Mr. King signed the famous Ogdensburg Agreement governing relations and security between the two nations.

The main fight of the maneuvers was held August 19 to 22nd. At the end of which, the Blue army was declared victorious. The Blue army members were consequently allowed to leave the maneuvers first beginning on Friday, August 23rd. By August 25th the troops had left St Lawrence county. In 21 days of maneuvers only one man died, of meningitis and two others were treated for appendicitis. Amazingly there were no highway fatalities.



Military Band at the intersection of Green St and US Route 11 De Kalb Junction

In summarizing the activities General Drum made a special point of thanking the farmers of St Lawrence County for their patience and special assistance with the maneuvers. For local farmers the hard work was just beginning. The fields used for campgrounds had to be plowed and reseeded. This was no easy task as the army left behind miles of in camp communication wire and other debris.



Tent goes up on Risley Rd.

A year later, in August 1941, Life magazine ran a photograph of bored men lounging on the steps of the Town Clerk's office in De Kalb Junction during the 1940 maneuvers. The town was not identified in the magazine. (See photo at the beginning of this article.) By that point the maneuvers were just a distant memory for a nation and army preparing to enter World War II.

Sources:

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