

Who Were You Before the War?

Bringing a Persona to Life

by Lynn Kessler

Often, I think reenactors believe they were hatched from eggs on December 8, 1941, garbed in OD wool, sporting M1s and manganese helmets, but poorly versed in drill and tactics, even less so those of daily army life. They all tend to overcome the lack of tactical knowledge, at least – hardly ever acquiring drill and ceremony knowledge unless an ambitious NCO forces it upon them – either through emulation or study of the manuals (whoever reads a manual???) so they can at least minimally portray a WWII soldier, as long as no one actually asks them to *perform* any of these “chickenshit” activities.

NCOs especially come back at them with “Well, you’re here to portray the men you claim to emulate, so let’s at least attempt to do what they do”, which is admirable, and minimally effective (guilt can be an efficient enforcer). Some units institute training programs, which is also very admirable, ambitious, often successful, and fun.

But I’m a masochist, and maybe a bit sadistic. I *like* emulating the army day. I *like* drill and ceremony. I *like* teaching tactics and map reading and RTO procedures and what little I know of operations to anyone who will listen; perhaps, worst of all, I *like* glass-shining my boots (I said I’m a masochist, didn’t I?).

And I *like* emulating the Army soldier. Which means I also like emulating the life, at least mentally, that he experienced daily in the 1940’s, and the life that he had known before he became a soldier. *Waaaayyyy* before.

It’s the mental leap from civilian to soldier that many reenactors are missing, in my view. After all, every soldier in the U.S. Army had a past life, most with mothers (unlike Captain Miller from *SPR*), fathers, brothers, sisters, jobs, educations, hobbies, interests – just like soldiers do today. It’s not a matter of assuming “first person” as the “authentics” from the Civil War world call it – although you can take it that far if you want. It’s more a matter of developing a “sense of background” – that who you *were*, and *where* you came from, colors and shapes the world that you know *today*, and affects the decisions that you make for tomorrow.

Soldiers in WWII were exactly the same as us in that regard. What I would like to suggest is a method for developing a “sense of background” that is easy to apply, although it does require a bit of study – but not as much as you might think.



Uncle Ed in 1940. One of my inspirations for reenacting WWII.

Do and Be What You Are

The best way is to use what you already know – that is, tap into your own life experience. When you finish that exercise, you won't actually have to live it; just keeping it in mind will help steer your behavior, and make sure you mold it to the character of the thirties and forties.

I'll use my own life experience as an example in developing a WWII "persona", so please bear with me while I lay the groundwork:



Farmhouse in Indiana where I was born.

known as "dinner". The garden harvest ended up in the freezer chest in the basement, along with a yearly side of beef butchered by the local IGA and wrapped in look-alike packages of white freezer paper, and any fish my dad might catch on his yearly trips to northern Wisconsin. I went to a school built in 1901 on park grounds that is now a memorial to that school with only the front door edifice embedded as a reminder; there were monkey bars and merry-go-rounds with steel bars and exposed gears that would today be considered dangerous instruments of death or torture. We kids played in the dirt, hunted rabbits with dad's .22LR, fished in the pond when not skinny dipping, and generally ran amok when not beating each other silly.

The game of choice was baseball in the summer and other warmer months; in

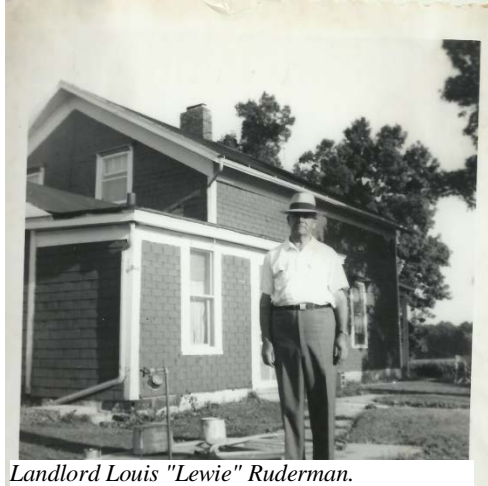
I was born in 1955 on a farm in northeastern Indiana. Daily life had not changed much from 1945, so developing a persona was not a great leap. School was small, roads were dirt, mom shopped at the local IGA or A&P in the little town of Churubusco where there was ONE gas station, worked her kitchen garden (a good acre of tomatoes, beans, radishes, carrots, melons, sweet corn, and her perennial cutting flowers), gathered eggs (we had two-dozen chickens, filthiest animals known to mankind since they eat their own shit), slopped the hogs (which ate the kitchen slop, and, when necessary, we ate them) and generally left me to my own devices so long as I was never more than a "holler" away from suppertime – lunch was



All that's left of my old grade school in La Otto, IN.

the winter, at school, it was basketball, practically a religion at the high-school level – watch the movie “Hoosiers” for a good perspective. As I said, life had not changed much. BB gun fights were common, and surprisingly, no one shot each other’s eyes out. We jumped in “dead man’s falls” from the window platforms way up in the ridge peaks of the barns into piles of hay on the floors below; between that, the BB gun fights, and other crazy things I’m ashamed to admit, I’m amazed I survived whole into 1967.

Dad worked the fields, and I mean *worked*. He was 6’-1”, never over two-hundred pounds and that was all muscle; he had pitched hay for so long in his youth that his hands were



Landlord Louis "Lewie" Ruderman.

hams with a third-finger sporting a Shriner’s ring that you could pass a quarter through. He was born poor (7th of thirteen children) in 1914 in a two-room shack in the next county. He quit school after the 8th grade, very common in the Depression days, to work to support the family. By the time he had his own family (my mother, born in 1918, and my only sister, in 1940; with fifteen years between us, I always insisted *she* was the mistake and I was planned) he was working for a man near Hometown named Louis “Lewie” Ruderman, a Jew who owned a couple thousand acres around the area. This was common. There was another Jewish family, the Levin’s,

who owned a similar spread near the town of Kendallville, twenty miles to the north. Dad “cropped” for Lewie on a large tract that had produced so well during the war and afterwards – Dad’s share by 1949 was worth \$1.2 millions in our dollars today – that he was able to buy the farm where I was born (this was back when you could make a living as a farmer). The farm was three-hundred acres, two-fifty of which was tillable soil.

It was cobbled from three other foreclosed farms that, in the Depression era, had been their own stand-alone farms of one-hundred acres or so, with decrepit houses and ramshackle barns still standing. One barn contained a massive two-vat mint distillery, still in functioning condition; we grew fields of peppermint that was harvested in the hottest days of the summer. Otherwise, along with mint, we grew corn and potatoes, dad’s lifelong specialty, besides onions which he grew as a child. My parents were both Roosevelt Democrats – how could you not be when “the guvment” provided jobs in the Thirties through the CCC and the NRA and even *paid* you not to grow certain crops? Life was good, especially after the war.



My parents after buying their farm in the early '50's. I was born a couple years later.



The mint "still" in the mid-'50's.

After the harvest was done in the fall, we waited for spring. It was *cold*. You've never known winter winds like those that blow across the barren fields of northeastern Indiana. And dad went fishing in northern Wisconsin, which was even colder on the barren lake ice.

My sister, noted earlier, was fifteen years older. By the time I was twelve, in 1967, she was married, living in Pontiac, Michigan, about twenty miles northwest of Detroit, teaching high school and

married to a man who, with his father, owned a bowling alley and lounge not far from a GM Truck and Chassis Assembly Plant, which was financial godsend. Between the leagues (10-pin bowling had become immensely popular post-war), and the influx of union laborers after each shift to guzzle brews, my sister and brother-in-law did very well.

I loved the life up there. It was quite different from the farm, as you can imagine – Detroit was a sprawling metropolis, with malls, shops, playgrounds, pools, lakes, high speed highways, and of course, Detroit Tigers baseball.

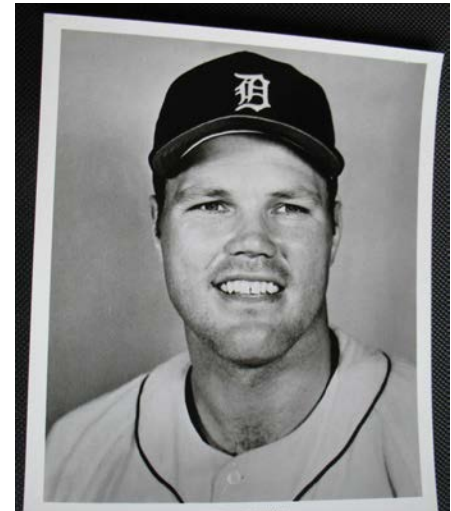
My brother-in-law loved sports – played almost everything imaginable, and had season tickets to the Tigers, the Lions, and the Red Wings, back when season tickets to the Tigers were affordable and a first baseline seat cost five bucks. One of my favorite memories is sailing down the John Lodge Expressway in his 1965 drop-top Cadillac Seville on the way to a Tigers game, choking on diesel exhaust fumes while *The Who* blasted “My Generation” from the dashboard speaker (in fact, popular music from '65 – '69 became a passion – Beatles, Stones, Cream, Hendrix, Jefferson Airplane, Led Zep, Motown, you name it – which lasted well into my college years). My favorite player – a personal connection – was Bill Freehan, catcher for fifteen seasons with the Tigers who played in eleven All Star games. My sister dated him when they were at the University of Michigan – she brought him home to the farm in 1961, which meant he was marriage material (a quote from my grandmother – “He sat *right there!* In *that chair!*” – and “that chair” in my grandmother’s farmhouse was memorialized with an 8 x 10 framed “shrine” photo of Bill that hung on the wall above it even after she died; she never



Bill Freehan and my sister at -- well, college.

missed a Tigers game on TV). But it didn't matter. Bill was a year younger than my sister, and she couldn't quite wrap her mind around that, not when Bill's second baseman had a brother who was handsome, rugged, loaded (somewhat) *and* older. They married the next year. They divorced in 1970. To her death I reminded her regularly that "You know, you could have . . . but no-ooooo . . ."

But, back to the farm. As I said earlier, my father worked *hard*. And he smoked, drank Canadian Club, ate butter and eggs and bacon and all kinds of summer sausages loaded with salts and preservatives, and, with likely hereditary high blood pressure which I have likely inherited myself, his heart exploded on Christmas morning of 1966 while we were visiting in Michigan, which was a stroke of luck. Hospitals there were far above those of northeastern Indiana for health care, and the doctors at Pontiac St. Francis rebuilt the ticker and sent him home at the end of January 1967. But my father, being my father, didn't take the doctors' advice, and so the ticker exploded again a month later, the day after my birthday in 1967, this time for good.



The "shrine photo" of Bill Freehan.

My mother, being my mother, didn't know how to run a farm or live anywhere but beneath her husband's wing. This was 1967, and northeastern Indiana after all, and the women's movement and rights and independence would not hit for about another ten years. She dwindled to nothing and committed suicide three months later.

Thus it was natural that I move to Michigan with my sister and brother-in-law. I didn't experience the trauma of lost parents right away – that happened several months later on a visit to Indiana. There were just too many distractions in the Detroit area, and I was indulged – to a point. I attended school, learned to play hockey, and suffered – not for the loss of my parents necessarily, but for my first name. *Lynn*. In Indiana, I went to school with three other kids named Lynn, one in my own grade. It was a common name. In Michigan, however, in junior high, the taunts *flowed*.

Part of the benefit of playing hockey was that I learned to fight. After a while, the taunts ended. Think Scut Farkus and Grover Gill. Sometimes you just gotta blow up – "Hey kid! I'm tellin' my dad!" "Raza fracka kifa snortin . . . Did you hear what he said??? Oh no . . ."



Over the next couple years, I worked at the bowling alley, restocked beer in the lounge, got in trouble at school, took up smoking, stopped playing hockey, and my sister and brother-in-law divorced. My sister had infant twin girls, and she decided that since I was the greater of three evils, that I should attend a military academy (Howe Military) in Indiana to straighten my ass out. It worked; military discipline was good (remember my masochistic streak?) and it



formed a strong grounding for the rest of my life. The intent became to go to college afterwards, then join the military, go through OCS, and put in twenty-plus years as an officer and retire with a nice pension while I pursued a second career.



College years -- what a fright.

However, the Vietnam Syndrome intervened. College came right as U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War was ending; a military career was not seen as socially desirable (unlike just ten years earlier); no one was joining the “volunteer army” since the draft was ending; I had a recruiter chasing me all over campus, promising anything if I would just “sign here” (I wanted armor and OCS, but I could just see this turning into a Greenland radar station assignment); plus I had a girlfriend who was dead against it . . . you get the idea.

I’ll stop this part of the narrative here at about the age I would be when “The War” caught up to me in 1941. Now I’ll start the narrative of my U.S. Army persona. Again, bear with me . . .

Do and Be What You Know

You will see how pieces of my own life are interwoven into my “wartime” life. This is something you can easily affect for yourself with a bit of forethought, study, and creativity:



My parents' wedding portrait in 1920.

I was born in 1921 on a farm in “upstate” New York west of Albany near Amsterdam where the flatlands begin along the Mohawk River. “Upstate” New York wasn’t known by that name then. It was just “New York” as opposed to “Manhattan”. People understood.

My father was thirty-four years old then, a farmer all this life from a family of farmers of German extraction, which was common in that area. His first wife had died from the Spanish Flu in 1919. He had an eight-year-old daughter and, being a farmer with a need for a farmer’s wife who knew the life, and who could help care for the young daughter, he married the twenty-year old daughter of the farmer he worked for in 1920.

Dad was a “cropper”. That is, he didn’t own his own farm, but rented a plot of land and a small un-electrified and un-plumbed house and worked for the land owner, Louis “Lewie” Ruderman. Lewie was also German, but a first-generation German Jew originally named Lemuel Samuel Reutermann. He “Americanized” his names in 1917 after the anti-German reaction to the Great War. Everyone knew he was German, but no one cared, because everyone did well by Lewie. He owned a thousand acres of the best black dirt around. We grew corn, potatoes, and particularly, onions, a cash crop that sold well in Manhattan. Eventually, my father was able to buy his share of land from Lewie, since dad did so well with the onions especially.



The house that Lewie built -- and rented to my father.



Farm life was hard, hot and very dirty. We kept a cow for milk, a dozen chickens for eggs, hogs to eat the kitchen slop, and an acre garden for the veggies. Mom canned (actually “glassed” since she used Ball jars) at the end of the summer. Much planting was done by hand, as was harvesting. That gradually changed with the McCormick-Cyrus sowers and reapers, which were first pulled by horses, then by tractors; threshing was still performed by separate machines connected by a long belts to steam engines. Grampa had one that we used well into my childhood. Our own Oliver tractor was



Two of the steam tractors we used.

started by a flywheel that you spun by hand. Farm tractors were frequently still steam powered, or you used horses, which we also used up to 1925, when dad bought a used Oliver. We didn't get rubber tires for it until 1929, and a newer Oliver came later, *with* rubber tires. Horses



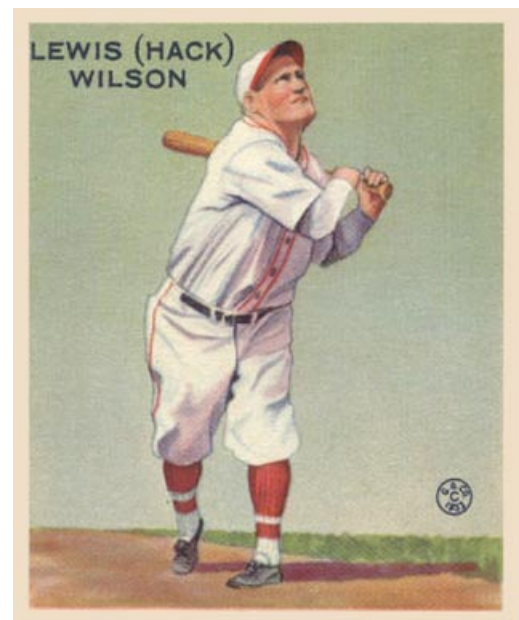
Dad's newer Oliver tractor -- which came with rubber tires.

required feeding, but a thresher only hot water, and a tractor only gas, which was cheap then and drawn from a gravity tank that was refilled monthly. Necessities were taken care of in the outhouse; bathing was performed, weekly, in a galvanized tub with water drawn by hand from the pumphouse and heated on the huge cast-iron kitchen stove. You used what you had.

As I said, our house was not electrified, but we had a small radio that was powered by a battery from our new 1928 Dodge Brothers "Fast Four", the first year it was built; dad did well that year. We swapped out the battery out weekly for recharging. The radio was a godsend after a hard day of work. We frequently sat around the kitchen table, drinking coffee and cider and listening to scratchy 78 rpm music piped over crackly airwaves, and also the news of the day followed by the

local farm reports ("Corn selling at five-cents a bushel . . . Chicago hog futures . . ."). The music was "country" because there was no "country and western" then, or occasionally ragtime, but rarely. Radio "shows" were unknown, except for "The Grand Ole Opry" which came through when the atmospheric conditions were right. And occasionally, again, when the atmospheric conditions were right, we could hear a rebroadcast of a Yankees or a Red Sox baseball game from New York or Boston, whichever was clearer.

I loved listening to baseball. Horseracing was for bluebloods in New York, Boston and Baltimore; boxing for stiffs in Chicago and Kansas City; but baseball, that was for *The Everyman*. There were few kids around when school ended for the summer, since kids were needed as farmhands, so we could never get up a game with a team like you could in New York City. We had to fantasize our way through with what we could get from the radio, and the issues of the Amsterdam and Albany newspapers, which came but once a week regardless, and not to us specifically. You'd think I'd have admired Babe Ruth, or Lou Gehrig; but mostly, from 1928-on, my man was Louis Robert "Hack" Wilson of the Chicago Cubs.



My bubble-gum card of Hack Wilson, 1929.

He was sort of an underdog, like farmers. He played center field but was only five-foot-six inches, a barrel at 195 pounds with an eighteen-inch neck, and feet that fit size five-and-one-half cleats. A real bulldog. He was that way because his mother, who never married his father, was an alcoholic, and he himself was a heavy drinker. He was once arrested in a speakeasy (remember this is Prohibition days) but was released on only a \$1 fine. However, in 1928 he led the league with 21 home runs, 36 doubles, 109 RBIs, and ended the season with a .321 batting average. Not shabby. And he was colorful, and combative. He once bounded into the stands to confront a heckler, and for other reasons several other times. His best season was 1930 with 56 home runs, a .356 batting average and a .454 on-base percentage. But he was, as I said, a big drinker, at spring training in 1931, he was twenty pounds overweight and went downhill from there. He was traded to the St. Louis Cardinals, then the Brooklyn Dodgers, and finally the Phillies in 1933, and retired in 1935. I wanted to be like him, but only in his glory days, and for being combative when the chips were down.



Which is how our lives started turning out after 1930. The Stock Market had crashed in 1929, but nobody we knew really felt it until 1931, when local banks started closing, town jobs started disappearing, and new money became nonexistent. The “Depression” was getting full-on. With people in the cities thrown out of jobs, our primary markets for grain and produce dried up; markets *were* the big cities. No grainery was buying crops on the scale as before. A lot of our crops, like the onions, just rotted in the field.

But we were combative, too. Farmers were fortunate in that we never went hungry, since there was always some food to eat. But generally there was little beef; you couldn’t slaughter your cow since you needed milk, nor eat the chickens since you needed eggs; the hogs were therefore the first to go. After that, we hunted rabbits, squirrels, opossums, anything for the protein. And tightened our belts.

My sister was fortunate. She hated the life of the farm (no surprise) so in 1928 my father’s aunt, in a little town called Winsted in northwest Connecticut, gave her a place to live, and a way to learn how to teach in one of the several schools in that bustling town which had several of its own industries. The Depression had not yet hit heavily there since the town was somewhat self-sufficient, so her life was good, especially after she met and married a fellow who owned a small bowling alley downtown. She bore twin daughters in 1930.

The Depression for us, however, after 1931, began to take a toll. We could eat, but not do much else. Fortunately we had corn, and a way to distill the mash (my father had learned as a child – remember the mint distillery?) that became our own brand of moonshine; it brought in some cash with sales confined to our local Ruderman-hired brethren, in spite of the “revenoo-

ers”. My dad, and my uncle, were never caught. In fact, to his death, my uncle brewed his own gin and beer in a tub.

My dad and mom also had to take work elsewhere. Mom cleaned houses in Amsterdam; dad worked as a mechanic for the New York Central freight junction at Fort Johnson. He picked her up late everyday in the Dodge “Fast Four”. One night, during a storm washout, the car plunged off North Main Street and slid into the Mohawk. The car was found a day later, five miles downstream. Neither survived.

I was devastated as you can imagine. Now, in 1933, my whole life had changed forever. My step-sister came for the double funeral, paid for by Lewie Ruderman; in fact, he even offered to buy back the farm, which my sister took up practically in an instant. I was twelve then, my sister twenty-three and married; she needed whatever money she could get to take care of me as long as possible.

And thus I moved to Winsted, Connecticut, in the summer of 1933.

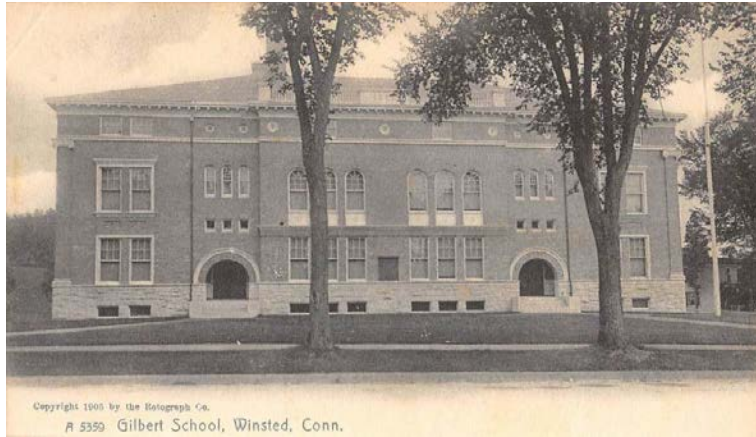
Winsted was quite the change from the farm. Not that it was New York City, or even Amsterdam, but it was bustling by comparison to the farm. There were five banks, four gas stations, a Buick dealer, an IGA, an A&P and several smaller grocers and butchers; three drugstores, two doctor’s offices and even a community hospital; there were two grade schools



and one high school, a community center, a roller skating rink, a music and dance hall, a movie theater (“The Bijou”), several restaurants and diners, plus my brother-in-law’s bowling alley. For employment, there was a massive clock shop, several hoe and blade manufacturers, two hosiery mills, a thread mill, and all kinds of lawyers, accountants, insurance salesman, you name it. Life was good. Or so it seemed.

Winsted’s problem was the same as any other place in America. At first, before the Depression revved up, there was plenty of pocket money, but credit was tight because too many people were not paying their loans. Banks didn’t want to loan money because they might not get it back. If banks didn’t loan money, businesses could not expand, people could not buy homes, appliances and cars, and those businesses that made or sold those items either laid off people, or at worst, closed. With more and more people out of work, no one could buy the products that any other businesses made, and so those businesses cut production, laid people off, or closed all

together, and so it spiraled on and on. No one made money, or took home money, or spent money. The Depression just fed on itself.



My sister was fortunate to have her teaching job at the high school. Fewer kids were there beyond the 8th grade, since at that age (fourteen) you could quit school and work to support the family. Child labor laws were really not much better than they were at the turn of the century. Instead of cutting my sister's position, the town, since the school was run by

town tax dollars, just cut her pay, and she was happy for it. My brother-in-law was not, since that put more pressure on him at the bowling alley. Being a family member, I was not subject to child labor laws (lucky me) so I went to work after school as a pinsetter, for no pay, and my brother-in-law let go one of the other pinsetters.

I was resentful, but I did it. I knew the straits we were in, and like everybody else, I just took it on the chin and kept on going. Pinsetting was a dirty and sometimes dangerous job. You sat on a plank above the pit and waited for the roll; some guys were really powerful, and pins flew, especially when they rolled strikes. I came home with bruises on my shins and arms most every night. My best consolation, at night, was lying in bed and quietly listening to the battery radio that I'd brought from the farm, tuned to a rebroadcast baseball game, and more often, country music stations or western or suspense radio shows, like "The Lone Ranger", or "The Shadow", or even comedies like "Lum & Abner" and "Amos 'n' Andy".



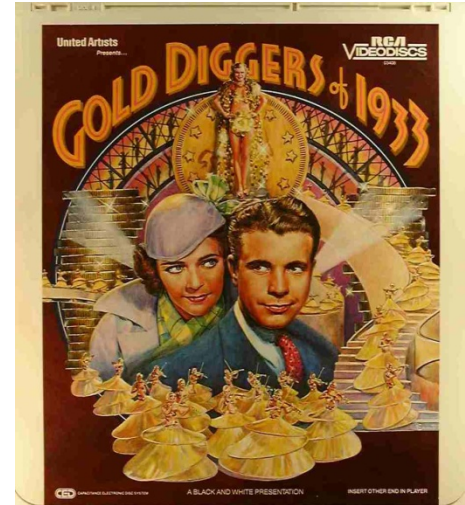
Pinsetting -- hot, boring work.



Paul Whiteman and Jeanie Lang in "The King of Jazz" (1930).

I really didn't like "swing" music, at least not yet. There was the "old-timey" music of the Carters, but I liked Paul Whiteman (with Bing), Eddie Duchin ("Did You Ever See a Dream Walking") or Chic Webb ("Stompin' at the Savoy") until after the middle of the decade, when Benny Goodman made his hits. Otherwise, Tom Mix and Gene Autry were the stars I

followed most, for the country music, naturally, and for their films. Whenever I could manage to get away from pinsetting on a Saturday, I'd go to The Bijou and, for a dime, watch Gene Autry, "The Singing Cowboy", playing "The Yellow Rose of Texas" and "Last Round-Up" followed by another hit, like "Sitting Pretty" with Jack Haley and Ginger Rogers dancing the day away; the best were the Busby Berkely films, like "Gold Diggers of 1933" – because of him I had a long-time crush on Ruby Keeler. There were the serials, of course, like "Dude Ranch" with George O'Brien, any Randolph Scott serial, or Tex Ritter in "Arizona Days", and any Hopalong Cassidy film – and then there was the newcomer, John Wayne, with a list of feature movies too long to remember. Oh, and "the shorts" of the "Lil' Rascals" and "The Three Stooges" that preceded everything. It was time and a dime well spent.



Each year, in the summer, the circus came and set up the big tents on the old fairgrounds at the edge of town. Usually it was Barnum & Bailey, sometimes Ringling Brothers, or just a small-time "carney" show. It was always fun – lions, tigers, strongmen, bearded ladies, trapeze artists, ferris wheels, cotton candy, baseball throws, anything to take your mind off what life was really like.

My tastes were changing, too. Like I said, I didn't care for "swing" until the middle of the decade. Benny Goodman came to town and played at the dance hall and even though I couldn't afford to go, my buddies from A&P and I stood outside and listened. What a sound. There was a trumpeter with him, Harry James, who I swear could blast your ears out. I saw them both



again in a movie called "Hollywood Hotel" – and I was hooked. From then on, no more country – it was Benny, and Harry James when he formed the Orchestra (until he signed on Frank Sinatra, after that I was through with Harry), Bunny Berrigan, Chic Webb, Artie Shaw, and funnyman Kay Kaiser and his "Kollege of Musical Knowledge".



Benny Goodman and Harry James.



But real life still beckoned. I went to school during the day and then pinset at the bowling alley after, until I was fourteen – and then, in 1935, at the end of the 8th grade, I quit school to take as many jobs as possible. My sister didn't like it, but she had no argument, since she knew we needed the money. So I worked as a stocker at A&P, and also in the clock shop sweeping floors, and still pinset at the bowling alley for a while. But I was getting older, and too big for that job; little "pin monkeys" were wanted because they could squirm up and

around faster. And my family didn't mind, since I could make better money elsewhere, for what little money it might be.

That all kept going for a couple more years, into 1938. It seemed like the Depression would never end. Like 1936, when it looked like Roosevelt's WPA and CCC and other plans were bringing us out, the economy dipped again. Not only that, but trouble was looming – the Japs had invaded China again in 1937, and in Europe, Hitler had signed a pact with England after he annexed Czechoslovakia and Austria. Mussolini had invaded Ethiopia as well. None of this had any effect on us, though – too many of us were isolationists and didn't want any involvement in overseas affairs. The oceans would protect us, so we thought. But some of us didn't believe it, and we had talks among ourselves at A&P – what would we do, *if* we were invaded? Big *if*, but seemed possible.



169th Infantry distinctive insignia.

Nobody wanted to join the Army. That was for losers, first of all, and we weren't losers. Plus our families needed us around for the income. But then, well, there was the National Guard, we thought. We could sign up with Company E, made up of Winsted boys, as part of the 169th Infantry, which was the Connecticut National Guard regiment. We'd drill in the top floor of the Town Hall once a week and get paid \$2 for each week. Once a month, we'd go to Hartford and drill there for \$4. That's \$12 a month, more than I made at the clock shop, and I still got to keep the clock shop *and* A&P jobs. Now *that* was making it. So, in 1939, when we were all eighteen, we signed up with Company E, 169th Infantry, all twenty of us. That was protecting your country *and* getting a good deal. Besides, what was the likelihood of being invaded?

Hitler had other ideas. He invaded Poland in September of 1939, Norway in April 1940, France and Holland in May; Britain was being bombed by fleets of Heinkels from June of that same year. The Poles and French had already surrendered but our sympathies were with the Brits

– after all, we had a common heritage, and we liked their king and queen when they came to visit Roosevelt at Hyde Park. Our country itself was divided – half, the “Isolationists”, wanted nothing to do with the war; others were stumping for more arms for our own protection if not outright involvement. We compromised – we sent arms and ships to England, and that was our contribution. We would not interfere otherwise. But, we continued to arm, which actually turned out to be a good thing, and for Winsted – the hoe and scythe companies started making knives and bayonets for the Army, and the thread companies made silk for parachutes. Jobs started coming back, and for the other towns around the state as well.



Drilling in Winsted Town Hall, 1941.



Winsted men at Camp Blanding, FL.

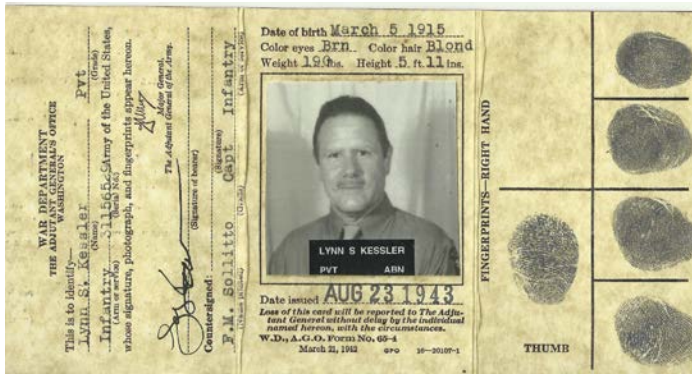
Congress brought back the draft in October 1940. We were told if we signed on for another hitch in the Guard, we would only have to serve one year, should a national emergency arise. Then, in February 1941, Roosevelt and Congress “federalized” all National Guard units for “the duration of the national emergency” – which meant the one-year promise now meant nothing. We shipped down to Camp Blanding, Florida, for more

training, for maneuvers in Louisiana, and then later in South Carolina. But as we got

closer to that October deadline, some guys threatened to go “OHIO” – Over The Hill in October. We saw it written on the walls of the latrines in camp. But not many actually left. We stayed. We wanted to protect our country.

And then, on December 7, 1941, the Japs attacked Pearl Harbor. We were at war.

Many of us had been given leave to return home to Winsted for the holidays from Thanksgiving through Christmas. December 8, we all got telegrams to report to travel stations and return to Camp Blanding as soon as possible. Once we were all collected, we were evaluated strenuously. Older, overweight and physically deficient men were mustered out; younger men – regardless of where they were from – were transferred in; over the coming months, recruits from all over the nation filled out the ranks and we became a full-strength company.



My AGO card when I was reenacting a different unit. The serial number should start with "2" since I'm originally National Guard.

The big problem was, since the U.S. Army was rebuilding itself from a pre-war strength of less than 300,000, to a new strength of over a million and a half in six months, it constantly reassigned the experienced officers and NCOs to form "cadres" for more new divisions. We could never develop a sense of trust and confidence in ourselves, since everything kept changing. But, that's just the way it was; "there it is", we used to say.

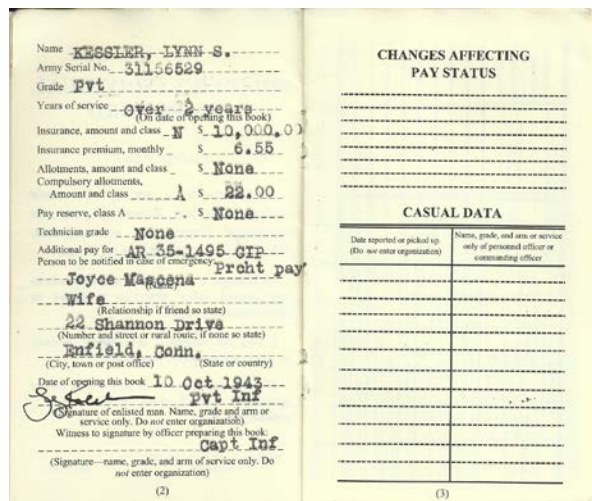
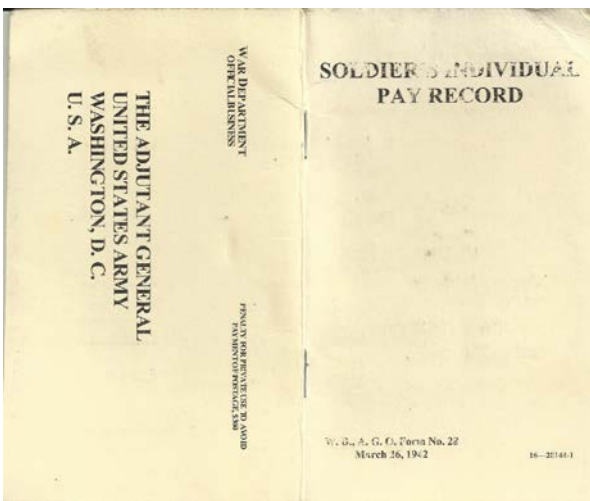
My own affiliation also changed with the 169th Infantry and the 43rd Division. In May 1942, during a training exercise, I broke my right leg and I ended up in the hospital for six weeks. During the recuperation time afterwards, when I was getting stronger, the 169th left Blanding for Fort Ord and deployment; they couldn't wait for me. Consequently I was assigned to a replacement center – a "repple depple" – and transferred to another National Guard unit, the 116th Infantry of the 29th Division, in August. They were originally from Maryland and Virginia, but that didn't matter anymore. You went where the Army assigned you.

After all, "Don't You Know There's A War On?"

And so ends my narrative. You can build yours in a similar fashion, with a little creativity and imagination. Go for it – it will enrich your reenacting experience.

Below are some sample "bits and bobs" that I carry with me as a reminder of who I am. My wife has a philosophy that she learned from reenacting Civil War: "When you're putting on the correct underpinnings – drawers, corset and all – you feel yourself becoming the part." Hence the stuff below that I carry with me.

And oh, I DO wear period skivvies.



**ARMY EXCHANGE
RATION CARD - ETO**

No. 47-2 Date issued **NOV 10 1944**

Name LYNN S. KESSLER ASN 31156529

Signature [Signature]

Organization 506PIR
101st Abn. Div APO 472

Signature Unit C.O.
FRANK M. SOLLITTO, JR.
Capt., U.S. Army

Anyone apprehended reselling, trading or bartering merchandise to unauthorized persons as covered by AR 210-65 will forfeit all rights to exchange privileges and will be dealt with under appropriate article of war.

ENLISTED MAN'S IDENTIFICATION CARD
European Theater of Operations, U.S. Army

This is to identify
Lynn S. Kessler
whose description and signature appear hereon, as a member of the United States Armed Forces, serving in the European Theater of Operations.

Grade Pvt. ASN 31156529 Race W

Home address Hartford, Conn.

Birthplace Reading, Penn.

Birthdate 3 Mar 1916 Height 5-11 Ins.

Weight 190 lbs. Color eyes Br Complexion Fair

Scars or distinguishing marks Mole on neck

[Signature]
(Signature of soldier)

Item	Oct. 22-28	Oct. 29-Nov. 4	Nov. 5-11	Nov. 12-18
Cigarettes or Cigars or Tobacco				
Book match				
Box match				
Tooth paste				
L. Soap				
T. Soap				
Shave cr.				
Razor B. 5 ^s				
Candy-bar				
Roll				
Ch. gum				

Item	Nov. 19-25	Nov. 26-Dec. 2	Dec. 3-9	Dec. 10-16
Cigarettes or Cigars or Tobacco				
Book match				
Box match				
Tooth paste				
L. Soap				
T. Soap				
Shave cr.				
Razor B. 5 ^s				
Candy-bar				
Roll				
Ch. gum				

Issued 10 Nov 1944
(Ds.) (Mo.) (Yr.) (Signature of Issuing Officer)

Frank M. Sollitto Capt. Inf.
(Name) (Grade) (Branch)

Loss of this card will be reported immediately to the C.O. of the individual named hereon.

The finder of a lost card will please return it to Headquarters, SOS, ETOUSA, APO 871, U.S. Army.

This card is void if altered in any manner, unless such alterations are initiated by the responsible officer.

Identification Card No. **S 321982**

IMMUNIZATION REGISTER 1

LAST NAME Kessler, Lynn S. FIRST NAME Lynn S. ARMY SERIAL NO. 31156529

GRADE	COMPANY	REGT. OR STAFF CORPS	AGE	RACE
<u>Pvt.</u>	<u>E</u>	<u>506PIR</u>	<u>29</u>	<u>W</u>

SMALLPOX VACCINE

DATE	TYPE OF REACTION 4	MED. OFFICER 1
<u>AUG 23 1943</u>	<u>[Handwritten]</u>	<u>[Signature]</u>
<u>19 30 44</u>	<u>[Handwritten]</u>	<u>[Signature]</u>

TRIPLE TYPHOID VACCINE

SERIES	1ST DOSE	2D DOSE	3D DOSE	MED. OFFICER 1
<u>AUG 23 1943</u>	<u>[Handwritten]</u>	<u>[Handwritten]</u>	<u>[Handwritten]</u>	<u>[Signature]</u>
<u>2d. 5-4-44</u>	<u>[Handwritten]</u>	<u>[Handwritten]</u>	<u>[Handwritten]</u>	<u>[Signature]</u>
<u>3d.</u>				

TETANUS TOXOID

INITIAL VACCINATION			STIMULATING DOSES		
DATE	MED. OFF. 1		DATE	MED. OFF. 1	
<u>AUG 23 1943</u>	<u>[Signature]</u>		<u>[Handwritten]</u>	<u>[Signature]</u>	
<u>2d dose. 2-7-44</u>	<u>[Signature]</u>		<u>[Handwritten]</u>	<u>[Signature]</u>	
<u>3d dose.</u>					

YELLOW FEVER VACCINE

DATE	LOT NO.	AMOUNT	MED. OFF. 1

OTHER VACCINES

DISEASE	DATE	TYPE OF VACCINE	DOSES	MED. OFF. 1
<u>[Handwritten]</u>	<u>[Handwritten]</u>	<u>[Handwritten]</u>	<u>[Handwritten]</u>	<u>[Signature]</u>

[Signature], M. C.,
16-20202 U. S. Army

