

PEMBERTON

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inexplicable “crash” of a market in New York destroyed economic well-being. They matured when a seemingly insulated America was attacked from overseas. Then faced the realization the world could be eviscerated by a single bomb, the way of life they saved destroyed by their own inventiveness.

It resulted, says Holmes, in the “stirrings of a quest” for the “hipster” on the left and the “young Republican” on the right, each of whom “have had enough of homelessness, valuelessness, faithlessness.” The search for “It.”

It was this alienation that produced the Beats. While much is made of the bohemian aspects of the Beats, if they were so outside the mainstream, what to make of the popularity of Kerouac’s “On the Road,” Ginsberg’s “Howl” and Burroughs’ “Naked Lunch”? Their success illustrates the link between the “hipster” and the “young Republican.”

Like their fellow Beats, my mother and father searched for the “how” of living. My father was a fair-haired boy who lived on the family farm with his maternal grandmother while his widowed mother, Alta, earned a degree as a nurse. They moved from this relative security to Bloomington-Normal, where Alta found work and “Jimmy” went through high school with two front teeth missing. He enlisted in the Army at 18.

“At least the Army fixed my teeth,” Dad said. “That and the GI Bill were about the only good thing they did for me.”

He was shipped overseas after D-Day, survived the Battle of the Bulge (of his platoon of 40 men, seven walked away), charged across Europe with Patton, liberated a concentration camp and survived the European campaign only to be informed he was headed to the Pacific. In August of 1945, Dad read in the papers that the dropping of two “atom” bombs and the threat of a Russian invasion convinced the Japanese to accept unconditional surrender.

“We were thrilled; thousands of GI’s would’ve been killed invading Japan.”

Months later, he stepped off the train in Blomington greeted by silence, unable to notify his mother of his return. It is safe to say 21-year-old Staff Sgt. James Roland Pemberton was “beat.”

“After the war,” he said, “I never had any urge to live anywhere but Bloomington-Normal. Never thought twice about it. I swore I’d never be cold or wet or hungry again. I just wanted to live my life. After everything that happened, I fig-

ured it was all gravy.”

My mother, Betty, lived with her parents, three sisters, aunt and grandmother along with boarders, in a rambling house. She remembered her mother, Dorothy, scurrying to the kitchen while her grandmother visited with Gypsies on the front porch. The Gypsies pitched knickknacks while their children sneaked around back to steal. But the kids were met by a broom-swinging Dorothy, shoohing them away.

Mom suffered from any number of childhood illnesses, brown eyes encased in fragile wire-rimmed glasses. Yet she earned a full-ride music scholarship to Illinois Wesleyan, graduating despite her old-world father’s skepticism. She met and married my father, survived polio, mothered five children, and stayed at home.

“Not because I had to, but because I wanted to. It was a joy to have my own home, just my husband, my children and me.”

My parents’ longing for security was shared. As Kerouac writes in his first novel, “The Town and the City,” young people were in a state of flux which “no one could see ... yet everyone was in it ... grown fantastic and homeless in war, and strangely haunted now.” For some, life became a search for “kicks ... wandering ‘beat’ ... in search of some other job or benefactor or ‘loot’ or ‘gold.’”

The search for “It.”

It is this dislocation, weary and bitter even in victory, which is often overlooked when people think of post-World War II America. Of how each soldier was affected by the war, how their death or return impacted family, lovers, friends and society. The reality of the homecoming did not match the “we’re all in this together” motif many associate with World War II America. For most, like my father, there were no parades or kisses on Times Square. The return of several million men proved as problematical to the many Americans who never left as it did for those coming home.

In his book “Citizen Soldiers,” historian Stephen Ambrose quotes my father recalling a moment at the end of the war. It reflects the relief millions must have felt:

“The night of May 8, 1945, I was looking down from our cabin on the mountain at the Inn River Valley in Austria. It was black. And then the lights in Innsbruck went on. If you have not lived in darkness

for months, shielding even a match light deep in a foxhole, you can’t imagine the feeling.”

My father was 20.

I think the perspectives of Kerouac and my parents spoke for many young people who, having weathered the Depression and the war, were just glad to be alive. They arrived at this conclusion not at middle age, when the realization we have lived the better part of our days hits home, but in their 20s. Imagine being that young and feeling grateful to be alive and free, a circumstance most generations of twentysomethings in this country take for granted. Yet these young people were emotionally and physically spent. Some, like my father and mother, searched for “It” by attempting to create a safe, orderly existence of predictable days where they might “never be cold or wet or hungry again,” content to “have my own home.” Even those like Kerouac, who sought the “how” of life outside the safety of hearth and home, ached for a sense of security.

As Holmes noted:

“Everyone who has lived through a war, any sort of war, knows that beat means not so much weariness, as rawness of nerves; not so much being ‘filled up to here,’ as being emptied out. It describes a state of mind from which all unessentials have been stripped, leaving it receptive to everything around it, but impatient with trivial obstructions. To be beat is to be at the bottom of your personality, to be looking up ...”

Kerouac, the “hipster,” and my father, the “young Republican,” and the millions in between embarked on their individual journeys because they realized that escaping economic catastrophe and the absence of war was not enough.

But the question of what to do next, “how” to move forward and make the most of the gift bestowed upon them — life — was still to be answered. Connected by a confluence of historical events, they began a “quest” for “It.” Some went on the road, others never ventured far from home. As a whole, they were the “Greatest.”

But that is so because a part of each of them was “Beat.”

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