

The Day Before the Day of Infamy

By William Beachly



William Beachly holds M.S. and Ph. D. degrees in Behavioral Ecology from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He has been a professor of Biology at Hastings College since 1997.

His interests and hobbies include trail riding, sharing nature with students, watching spiders, geology, and scuba diving.

He has published articles for general audiences in *Nebraskaland*, *Prairie Fire*, and *Humanimalia*, and wrote an introduction for the recently-reprinted *Trail of the Loup*. He is currently finishing a book about Nebraska's Outback.

He is Past President of the Ardyce Bohlke Torch Club in Hastings, Nebraska, where "The Day Before the Day of Infamy" was presented on December 6, 2016.

He may be reached via email at wbeachly@hastings.edu or by phone (269) 953-3946.

In the harbor, a dark cloud of smoke towers over the wreckage of many great ships of war. Over two thousand sailors and civilians are dead, and nine thousand are injured. It is December 7th, 1941, and the world has changed.

The Second World War is a watershed in American history, a dividing line. In ways no one could have grasped beforehand, the United States was going to emerge as a different society. This paper seeks to provide a snapshot of the American heartland on the day *before* the day of infamy.

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December 6th, 1941. It's a warm Saturday. The week before, twenty thousand fans watched the University of Nebraska Cornhuskers nip Oklahoma in a nail-biter, 7 to 6. Head Coach "Biff" Jones would be called to active duty soon after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Dad might go hunting pheasants and the rising sun would feel nice through his flannel jacket—the crisp autumn air, the sound of stepping on fallen stalks, the immediacy of a burr in his socks—but soon the sun would also rise in the west. Mother may have been still dealing with the aftermath of the previous week's

Thanksgiving dinner, and the feeling may have been there—when world events lent a serious backdrop to this year's gathering—that we should be especially thankful for what we have. For things can change so quickly.

Or, you could escape the world's woes by reading the *Sea of Cortez* by John Steinbeck and Ed Ricketts.¹ It was wilderness adventure, philosophy, and science all rolled up in the journals both men kept as they sailed around the coastline of Baja California, wading in tide pools and fishing or, as the River Rat said "just messing around in boats." One reviewer called it "one of those rare books that are all things to all readers." Just consider this quote:

[...] it is a strange thing that most of the feeling we call religious, most of the mystical outcry which is one of the most prized and used and desired reactions of our species, is really the understanding and the attempt to say that man is related to the whole thing, related inextricably to all reality, known and unknowable...the knowledge that all things are one thing and that one thing is all things. (Steinbeck and

Ricketts 178)

It's Saturday. For the kids, why not a matinee? You could choose from Douglas Fairbanks Jr. in *The Corsican Brothers* or Johnny Weissmuller in *Tarzan's Secret Treasure*. Or, for the grown-ups, try Humphrey Bogart in *All Through the Night* (though it was destined not to surpass the popularity of *The Maltese Falcon*, released in October). The Best Actor Oscar would go to Gary Cooper for *Sergeant York*, based on the moral struggle of a true hero of the Argonne Forest battle. Orson Welles' directorial debut *Citizen Kane* critiqued the media mogul William Randolph Hearst and went on to be a classic, but the Best Picture Oscar went to director John Ford and producer Darryl F. Zanuck for *How Green Was My Valley*, showing the struggle of Welsh coal miners to strike and unionize—a film that was challenged as unpatriotic in the 1940s as U.S. coal miners unionized. A front-page story on December 6th, 1941 states Senator Harry Byrd was furious at FDR's administration for not approving tough anti-strike legislation passed by the Senate and House.²

In Hollywood's "buddy comedies," masters of mayhem parodied capitalism, fascism, and the clash of military discipline and the incorrigibly dim. Abbott and Costello romped as *Buck Privates* to the Andrews Sisters' "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy." Bob Hope and Dorothy Lamour poked fun at the first peacetime draft in our history in *Caught by the Draft*. There were other enduring entropic teams

still recalled—Hope and Crosby, the Marx Brothers, Laurel and Hardy—but do you know of the "wise guys" Beadle and Tatum?

Who but FDR would send an ultimatum to a deity? We don't know if the emperor ever read it.

In the first week of December's *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, there appeared a study of sac fungi (ascomycetes) that would answer a basic question about life's workings. These fungi have shaped human history: bestowing brew and bread, penicillin and pestilence, and prized delicacies. Beadle and Tatum's study demonstrated the *one gene-one enzyme* principle that is nearly universal, and for which they were awarded the Nobel Prize in Medicine and Physiology in 1958.³ Thus opened a terra incognita that Beadle and Tatum hinted at when they said: "Since the synthesis of the parts of individual genes are presumably dependent on the functioning of other genes, it would appear that there must exist orders of directness of gene control ranging from simple one-on-one relations to relations of great complexity."

In that week's issue of a less-specialized publication, the *New Republic*, we read: "Will Japan fight? Unless there is some unlikely error in our information about the naval situation, war strategists would never permit Japan to start such a hopeless war. [...] Much has been said of the mystic belligerence of Japan's military caste, which is blind and deaf to rational calculations of interest and wishes only to expand the influence of Mikado's empire. Unwillingness to endure loss of face, even at the cost of destruction, might lead them to plunge ahead" ("What Next in Asia?").⁴

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It is well known that on December 6th Franklin D. Roosevelt sent a telegram to Emperor Hirohito urging a peaceful resolution of developments that contained "tragic possibilities" for all humanity and half in jest told Eleanor, "The son of man has just sent his final message to the son of God" (history.com). Who but FDR would send an ultimatum to a deity? We don't know if the emperor ever read it.

Meanwhile, news magazines on America's coffee tables were optimistic about the stalled Nazi offensive in Russia, hard against the resistance of Russia's determined and winter-hardened defenders (fortified by tins of Spam) as temperatures dropped to thirty below zero. From Libya, there was good news that Rommel's stranglehold on besieged Tobruk was being broken by a new British offensive, but the Brits had no

room for the German and Italian prisoners they took in North Africa, so they asked the U.S. to help. By war's end, camps housing 12,000 German POW's were established at three Nebraska locations: Fort Robinson, Scottsbluff, and Atlanta. Most camps were unfenced, and prisoners helped local farmers for a small wage.⁵

Americans followed the developments of the new world war closely, but many hoped the U.S. would never participate in it. Memories of the last world war were still fresh, and Isolationism had become the latest "ism." It had been German marine biologist Ernst Haeckel who first coined the term "*Weltkrieg*," nobody at the time imagining we would later have to append numerals.⁶ Haeckel was horrified by World War I's atrocities; he wrote in a 1913 appeal to rationalism over nationalism, "Pacifism is a duty of humanity". Many Americans felt the same way.

Of World War I, John Dos Passos, the author of *Three Soldiers* (1921), wrote to a friend: "The war is utter damn nonsense—a vast cancer fed by the lies and self-seeking malignity on the part of those who don't do the fighting" (qtd. in Carr 135). His novel about the horrors of trench warfare set the tone for many to follow—and contrasts to Willa Cather's Pulitzer-winning *One of Ours*, inspired in part by the letters of her cousin, G.P. Cather, who fell in in the Argonne Forest. In that six weeks of General Pershing throwing wave after wave of infantry at a fortified line, there were 120,000 American casualties.

The site of the Hindenburg Line and Meuse-Argonne offensive is now a peaceful forest. One would scarcely imagine the bloodshed there in the fall of 1918, when 16-year old Darryl Francis Zanuck from Wahoo, Nebraska served in the Nebraska National Guard (he had lied about his age) or soon afterward, on December 7, 1918, when a nurse from Lincoln, Nebraska, visited Nebraska's field hospital 49 at Allereye:

Meanwhile the great attack in the Argonne Forest and along the Meuse north of Verdun went forward. Here the losses were greater than expected. The Allereye hospital center was so situated that it received more wounded men during the Argonne battle than any other of the American hospitals. Altogether there were received here over 40,000 casualties.

The ingenious devices of the surgeons to hold together a shattered human being while nature restored the broken bones, recreated the tissues and knit together the mangled flesh, commanded my continuous admiration.

War and fighting death in the hospital transform a woman. Handling the broken flesh of soldiers stirs depths in her nature never revealed in the ordinary walks. So I shall never think of the Nebraska women I saw in Base Hospital 49 in any other way than with a kind of medieval reverence, such as the old

painters put into the pictures of the women they painted upon the cathedral walls of Europe.

So wrote Miss Belle Beachly.⁷ Armistice Day, November 11, 1919, was celebratory, but World War I left Americans with so bitter a taste that the reluctance to participate in WWII is understandable.

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December 6th, 1941. In Washington, OSRD director Vannevar Bush organizes a meeting of top nuclear scientists. From this would come the Manhattan Project. Through our long history, and even our nation's short history, there had been war and peace in spurts. Yet some dared to dream of an end, either in a communal society or the all-consuming weapon. Indeed, some scientists watching the first A-bomb test at Trinity calculated if a nuclear chain reaction on that scale would propagate without end. It was improbable but not impossible.

A reporter for the New York *Sun* named W.C. Heinz is on board the U.S.S. Nevada. Later, he would publish *When We Were One*, his compilation of news reports as a war correspondent and reminiscences when he returned to Europe afterwards with his son. His stories about the early death of a racehorse and the trials of a boxer won him acclaim as a sportswriter and novelist. His timely encouragement to a young unknown writer named Richard Hornberger would play a role in the eventual publication of a well-

known story about another war—*M*A*S*H: A Novel about Three Army Doctors*, published in 1968 under Hornberger’s pen name, Richard Hooker. The film based on the novel would reflect national feeling about yet another war, the one in Vietnam.

By fall of 1941 exports to Europe had helped rebuild our economy, and crop prices were good. Nebraska farmers experienced a 25% increase in disposable income and, in December, Congress announced that commodity prices would not be cut should the U.S. enter the war.

Government activity in the economy was still a relatively new phenomenon, but it was changing the face of the landscape. Six years earlier, Nebraska businessmen C. W. McConaughy and George Kingsley, who held water in a sort of reverence, planned their own edifice, a system of dams and canals from the Platte to drier plains. One of the enticements for FDR’s Public Works Administration to funnel over 20 million dollars into this project was rural electrification. Water diverted in canals from “Big Mac” cooled the coal-fired turbines at the Sutherland power plant and several small hydro dams were built along other canals. One of the best places to watch bald eagles is from the inside one of these hydro dams south of Lexington. In the 1980’s Kingsley Dam was modified as a hydropower source, and now ospreys nest where they can watch the plume of outlet water and pick-off stunned fish.

Exactly two years before the day before the day of infamy, on

December 6th, 1939, work on filling the vast earthen dam that would be named for Kingsley was nearly finished, and Robert McCoy was in a boat supervising the flow of clay slurry pumped from south of the river. Excess water was drained by a two-foot diameter corrugated metal pipe opening at the crest of the dam. Suddenly, McCoy found himself overboard and being sucked into the opening. He descended 300 feet into the dam, somehow slipped through a ninety-degree elbow, and was spat out 500 feet away at the outlet. His companion in the boat feared he must have been trapped in the elbow, but McCoy managed to stagger back up to the worker’s shack. For McCoy, Dec. 6th was a day of infamy, but to his coworkers he was like the disciples’ visitor after Calvary.⁸

December 7th, 1941 had made Hastings a boom town, in more ways than one.

Lake McConaughy itself is a resurrection, the reappearance of an ancient and much, much larger body of water that has been designated Lake Diffendahl, which was created by a sand dune damming the same valley 12,000 years ago.

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After Pearl Harbor, the inland remoteness, access to railroads, and supply of electricity attracted the U.S. Navy to Hastings, Nebraska. By the summer of ‘42, the town was booming with new arrivals and construction. The government had acquired 76 square miles of farmland and pasture, largely by eminent domain, and built the NAD⁹, a sprawling complex of factories and bunkers for the making of munitions. Tagged “the most explosive place on Earth”, workers loaded shells and came home with yellow-stained fingers from contact with picric acid, an ingredient that caused some British women employed in arms factories to give birth to “canary babies.” But the pay was three times what one could earn in town, 75 cents an hour, and you could put in 60 hours a week. Over the rest of the war, 10,000 civilians and soldiers would work there, and some would die there. In 1944 an accidental explosion left 9 dead, 54 injured and a crater 550 feet in length. The blast was heard in Lincoln, 100 miles away. December 7th, 1941 had made Hastings a boom town, in more ways than one.¹⁰

As for the NAD, after V-J day much of the land remained as an agricultural research station, and the former prairie around the bunkers was a place where herds peacefully grazed and one of the easternmost prairie dog towns was spared the fate of the surrounding land—the plowing of fields from fencerow to fencerow. Its buffer zone surrounding rows of bunkers remind me of those abandoned

DMZ's, but one that deflected the Corn Belt's dominion over prairies.

Our history is as much a product of torsion and stress as it is of unilinear drive... We think these historical waves may be plotted and the harmonic curves of human group conduct observed. Perhaps out of such observation a knowledge of the function of war and destruction might emerge... The safety valve of all speculation is: It might be so. And as long as that might remains, a variable deeply understood, then speculation does not easily become dogma. (Steinbeck, *The Sea of Cortez*, 218-9).

NOTES

¹ Very few first copies of this book, published December 5th, were sold due to the Pearl Harbor attack. Viking republished it in paperback ten years later but did not note Rickett's co-authorship.

² Dec. 6, 1941 happened to be the 34th anniversary of the Monongah mine explosion, which had given birth to the Bureau of Mines, but real reform in mine safety took a long time to achieve.

³ George Beadle was born in Wahoo, Nebraska; today, the University of Nebraska's Beadle Center for Biotechnology is named for him.

⁴ *The New Republic's* December 8, 1941 issue was already on newsstands. The Hastings College library's copy was received December 5th.

⁵ William Oberdieck, a POW at the Atlanta Camp, got a job 200 miles away in the apple orchards of Nebraska City. After the war, he returned to Nebraska and worked for the Kimmel Orchard. He became an American citizen and eventually bought the company.

⁶ Some say the Nazis used Haeckel's ideas to support Aryan supremacy. In fact, his work was disapproved of by the National Socialists in the 1930s—after all, in one diagram, Haeckel placed Berbers and Jews on the same level as Germans and Italians (Richards).

⁷ Miss Belle Beachly's (no relation I know of) account appears in <http://www.usgennet.org/usa/ne/topic/resources/OLLlibrary/Journals/HPR/Vol02/nhrv02p3.html>

⁸ As reported in the Hastings Daily Tribune, January 1940. <http://www.cnppid.com/from-the-archives-dam-worker-lives-to-tell-story-of-trip-through-pipeline/>

⁹ Naval Ammunition Depot history: <http://www.adamshistory.org> and on display at the Hastings Museum: <http://hastingsmuseum.org/exhibits/naval-ammunition-depot>

¹⁰ Coincidentally, it was on December 6th, 1917 in Halifax Harbor, that a French munitions ship carrying 2300 tons of picric acid and other explosives caught fire after a slow-motion collision with a Belgian relief vessel. The crew was able to abandon the

ship but spectators watched it burn for 20 minutes as it drifted closer and closer to town. When it blew, over 2000 were killed and some 9,000 were injured or burned, along with much of Halifax. So, before Pearl Harbor, December 6th was already an infamous date. ("Halifax Explosion")

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Reflection

“I am the personal. Your world is you. I am my world.”

—Wallace Stevens, “Bantams in Pine Woods”