



Pages in Time



Individual Supporters:
Lyn & Joe Rowden, Fairfield

The country boy called to serve

by Rodney Labbe

The warped cardboard box sat upon an attic shelf, half in shadow, half in dappled November sunlight. Across its top, someone had written 1944. Yellowed cellophane tape clung to one corner, holding tight the remnants of a faded photograph.

I'd seen that distinctive handwriting countless times on birthday cards, Valentines and brightly-wrapped presents. It belonged to Emeria Potelle, known to all of us as simply Memere. When she'd passed away at age 88, the surviving Potelle children divided up her personal effects...and so, this box, with its mysterious torn photo and yellowing tape, was given to my mother, Memere's eldest daughter, Jeannette.

Inside were medals and news clippings, VE mail, a 1944 Lawrence High School (Fairfield) yearbook, remarkably preserved, government certificates and citations. Ration stamps. Murky snapshots. A hardened stick of Wrigley's Spearmint gum.

Sifting through, I found pen pal letters to my Aunt Florence, then 16; condolence cards; a rosary; unused tickets for the Skowhegan State Fair, dated August 1943. Snippets of a life I'd only heard about and dismissed as hazy and unimportant. But as I stood alone, immersed in someone else's memories, I suddenly realized the significance of 1944 and why this box had survived.

1943. The world knew war – an unrelenting, vicious reality, unable to be softened by make believe or wishful thinking. It affected every action and reaction, each feeling, breath, conversation, daydream and nightmare. Under FDR's steadfast leadership, America worked tirelessly to keep the home fires

burning. Citizens planted victory gardens, bought war bonds, saved rubber, string, and foil from cigarette packs. They held paper drives, community suppers, and prayer vigils. Whatever sacrifices necessary to win emotionally, morally, physically, and financially would be made and without hesitation.

The Depression hit Maine's rural areas, Fairfield included with hurricane force, lingering like an incurable disease. Welfare and AFDC didn't exist.

kept them strong, and someday, somehow, they'd triumph. Didn't adversity build character? Yes, and earthly pain paved the way to heavenly rewards.

By 1938, things had improved. Memere borrowed \$1,000 from her older brother, Wilfred, and rented the "big white house" on Nyes Corner. Life there was good, at first, and three years of precious stability followed.

Then, war came knocking. "All the older boys we knew were being drafted," recalled my

Nye's Corner, bearing an official telegram. His words were unbelievable: the Secretary of War listed Lucian as "missing in action." They listened stoically, not really comprehending. What did this mean?

While the Potelle family waited for news of Lucian's whereabouts, unbearable days melted into unbearable weeks. Candles flickered before cold, plaster statues; prayers were whispered in darkness and light. Friends and relatives brought baked goods, offering heartfelt support and much-needed encouragement. The mood stayed optimistic, upbeat. Anything less would have been unpatriotic. But once evening descended, an unnatural silence gripped the big white house, and despair dug its claws deep.

"Oh, we prayed so hard," Aunt Florence told me. "We'd hoped the Germans captured him, or that he might be lying in a far away army hospital. We just wanted Lucian to be alive and safe and unhurt."

On August 1, the same representative returned with grimmer news. "Lucian died July 9," said my mother, and even after 65 years, the memory brings tears. "Mama broke down, worse than when we'd lost daddy and Lauretta. We didn't have a body to identify or any proof from the government. Only this sad-looking man telling us, 'your son gave his life so others could live free.'"

Lucian Potelle left our world at Anzio Beachhead, Italy, felled by stray shrapnel. He'd no time to compose an epitaph, and his last words went unheard. He was barely 19. Not old enough to grow a full beard or drink beer legally. Yet, like so many, he entered Heaven's gate a hero.

The military buried Lucian in Florence, Italy and awarded him the Purple Heart. I found it, untarnished and shining, between two sheets of peach-colored tissue paper.

And Emeria Potelle went on, a Gold Star Mother. World War II

became Korea, Vietnam, Desert Storm and beyond. Other mothers lost sons and daughters, and Memere read of their tragedies, rarely mentioning Lucian, the country boy called to serve.

Of course, I understood she'd lost her first and oldest child, but I never grasped the sheer enormity of that event. Not until I opened a box marked "1944."

A long time ago – 1944. I didn't come along until 1952, a modern boy raised on television. WWII played out in movies and backyard games. My siblings and I experienced neither death nor desperation and dreamed peaceful, uncomplicated dreams.

We lived free.

Thinking back, it seems the grandmother of our younger days was always laughing. She kept herself "done up" and wore Jean Nate perfume. I remember climbing her big weeping willow tree, the tang of black raspberries growing nearby, a flagpole with its ever-present stars and stripes.

Now, there are no more Christmas cards. No Valentines or hugs or summery picnics on patchwork quilts. Her old home has been sold, its familiar clapboard hidden beneath modern siding. Even the willow is gone.

Sometimes, I drive by, trying to recapture sounds and faces of another time. My eyes travel over the green, rolling lawn. Is that me, jumping into a pile of autumn leaves? Do I hear Memere clattering about in her sweet-smelling kitchen? And does that wide sky – the sky I used to study in awe – still crack with thunder and lightning?

It's a comforting diversion, nothing more. Shadows drifted slowly around me. November's sunshine had been deceiving, transforming my breath into white ghosts against splintered wooden beams. Winter was fast approaching. One more look, and I closed the box and quietly turned away.



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Mother's Aid provided minimal assistance. Those depending upon it felt dehumanized, humiliated. Instinctively, neighbors banded together, and the shared gifts of vegetables and orchard fruit

were gladly accepted. Pride suffered, but at least no one went hungry.

My grandmother was widowed in 1936, left penniless and solely responsible for eight children (her baby, Lauretta, eventually succumbed). Given such dismal circumstances, other women might have crumbled. Instead, she canned, baked bread, and sewed, fashioning a home life literally out of ragged scraps. Faith

mother, Jeannette, now 83. "So, we expected that Lucian would go, too. He was sent to Camp Devens in Massachusetts and allowed home for a week after Christmas. I can still see him standing with mama on that last day. So tall and slim; our brother, the leader and mischief-maker. Not a boy anymore, but a man."

"Both of them were crying. He'd just received orders to go overseas. I kissed his cheek, and Lucian said, 'oh, those girls with their lipstick.' Mama squeezed my hand. We were trying to be brave because it was the right thing, the honorable thing, to do."

Duty called, and Lucian Joseph Potelle answered. Those he loved stayed behind, maintaining as best they could. The war wouldn't last forever, and everyone had a tough row to hoe. That next summer, July 1944, an Army representative visited

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