

## **A BIT OF HISTORY**

By Eleanor Robinson Nixon and Grace Meader

Late summer of 1943 and the second year of WWII—service men from RAF Base, Pennfield, New Brunswick were a familiar sight on the streets of Calais. Many local men and women were home on leave from military service. The NYA (National Youth Act) vacated Quoddy Village and rumors circulated that the Navy would be taking over the premises for Seabees.

Early September, four young ladies took the train from Calais headed for a vacation in Boston. They were shunted onto a siding at Ayers Junction and shortly after a trainload of Seabees went by on the main track headed east. Eleanor exclaimed "We're headed in the wrong direction!"

Late summer many of the 1300 Seabees now stationed at Quoddy could be seen on our streets every evening. Members of the shore patrol were in evidence to help keep order. It was reported that three more battalions would report to Quoddy as soon as accommodations were available. This would bring the total up to around 4600.

The Elks building in Eastport was converted into a USO center and an official welcome of the Seabees to Quoddy Village was extended by the town.

Rev. Ernest Heywood, guided by remembrance of his own experiences in WWI, suggested the central location of the Methodist Church on Main Street in the heart of the city made it ideal for a service center for the men of the armed services who visit Calais. The church offered the space and heating and appealed for assistance from the community. A quick response in contributions of easy chairs, reading lamps, cots, and ping-pong table allowed the center to open by early October, staffed by volunteers and was an immediate success.

The Gem Restaurant reported they were overwhelmed by the pressure of hundreds of Seabees in town every day, with long hours and not enough help available. They closed down for two weeks to allow their staff to recover from sheer exhaustion.

Over 1000 more Seabees had arrived at Quoddy on two special trains bringing the numbers to 2500 currently training at the village and another battalion or two were due to arrive in the near future.

By the middle of October, to supplement the overtaxed facilities of the Border Transportation Co., the Navy brought in buses to transport the Seabees from the base to Eastport and Calais.

Chaperoned by Mrs. Clarence Beckett, 35 local girls went to Eastport to attend a dance at Shead Memorial High School given for the Seabees. It alerted Calais they would have to provide means of entertainment for the visitors to our city.

Near the end of October Seabee officers were guests of the Calais Rotary Club and were told 4000 Seabees were expected to be in residence at the base in the near future.

A dance held in the Calais gymnasium on Tuesday night sponsored by the newly organized Calais USO proved to be a very pleasant affair. Excellent music was furnished by the 112<sup>th</sup> Battalion Orchestra who was right in the groove for this event. This is one of the top bands in the Seabee organization under the leadership of Jack Kelley (Y1C) and featured an outstanding singer. Hostesses for the affair were Mrs. Frances Beckett, Mrs. Marion Densmore, Mrs. Mary Peterson, Mrs. Helen Gay and Miss E. Lou Hill.

### **USO dance at Academy Street gym- Seabee Dance Band-1944**

This set the pattern for Tuesday night dances at the gym each week. A special formal dance was held once a month, sponsored in November by the Women's City Club, with jitterbug music by the 119<sup>th</sup> Battalion Orchestra. The 112<sup>th</sup> Battalion had shipped out. The formal in December was sponsored by the wives of the Rotary Club members. A Christmas tree decorated the hall and Santa distributed chocolate bars to our guests.

The USO was invited to a Christmas dance on Thursday, December 23<sup>rd</sup> at Quoddy, now renamed Camp Lee-Stephenson. 33 girls plus chaperones attended. The 119<sup>th</sup> Battalion had left and music was by the 103<sup>rd</sup> Battalion Orchestra.

The Thursday night dances became a weekly event and we caught a Border Transportation Co. bus on North Street. We became accustomed to the sight of Lois flying down the street to hold the bus while sister Jean calmly strolled behind, knowing we would never leave without her. The trip down river didn't seem long as our girls touched up their nail polish and singing of all the latest hit songs echoed through the bus. We were carefully escorted directly to the door for the dance and back again to the bus. One exception remembered was the wedding of a USO girl and a Seabee in the camp chapel. Several friends were allowed to attend the ceremony, wave the happy couple off on their trip and then rejoin the group for the dance.

The USO was permitted the use of the Legion Hall on Lowell Street as a drop-in center for small dances on the second floor.

January 1944, the President's Birthday Ball was a special event with Arthur Unobskey, chairman. The USO was invited along with distinguished representatives of Maine and New Brunswick governments, as well as mayors of several towns commanding officers from military camps in Maine and New Brunswick also present.

The Grand March was underway at 8:30 P.M. directed by John Trimble and Phil McGarrigle. Music was provided by the 103<sup>rd</sup> Battalion Orchestra which played until 11 P.M., when the Ambassadors of Swing took over and played until 2:30 A. M..

The USO was invited to a dinner and formal dance at the RAF Base at Pennfield. Government officials of New Brunswick and their wives were in attendance and it was a festive occasion.

1944 reflected a change of Camp Lee-Stephenson from a training facility to a convalescent hospital for returning Seabees. Spring brought an influx of wives, some with families, looking for housing to be near their husbands while they recovered their health, and a support group for Navy wives was started. The attendance at the May Day Formal at the gym broke all records and included many Seabees and their wives. Music was by the Station Force Orchestra.

Early in May, 285 German prisoners-of-war arrived at Woodland by special train and were quartered in the former CCC camp in Princeton. Sometime that summer the USO was invited to a dance and spent a pleasant visit with U.S. Army staff in charge of the camp.

By Fall, one year from it's beginning, USO activities were at a standstill. Money still at hand was donated to the service center at the Methodist Church.