



The New Town Crier

Official Newsletter of the Historical Society of Bloomfield



BLOOMFIELD, NEW JERSEY 07003

OCTOBER 2017

SAVE THE DATE

NEXT MEETING

Tuesday, October 24, 2017

7:30 PM

BLOOMFIELD CIVIC CENTER

84 Broad Street, Bloomfield, NJ

Bloomfield 1914-1919: World War One & The Spanish Influenza Epidemic

Presented by Dean Cole

Lifetime Bloomfield resident Dean Cole will discuss World War One and the Spanish Influenza Epidemic as seen through the lens of Bloomfield and its people.

Bloomfield was home to one of the largest armaments factories on the east coast, along with other industries that supported the allied cause.

Like towns and cities all over the world, Bloomfield was overwhelmed



by the Spanish Flu epidemic that followed on the heels of “The Great War”—killing somewhere between 20 and 40 million people globally—and its impact on our town was substantial.

A BOY AND HIS DOG - THAT WAS SENT TO WAR

BY MARK SCEURMAN

It was September of 1966. Donovan’s “Sunshine Superman” was number one on the radio charts and the TV show “The Monkees” had just debuted. That was all cool but I had a bigger problem: being nine years old and in turmoil about our dog Rex, a full-fledged German Shepherd that had just turned 15 months old and weighed about 80 lbs. When he was a pup he got his head stuck in the wooden fence we had in the back yard, which caused his one ear to be flopped. He was the guardian of the family, but aggressive to anyone he wasn’t familiar with. My dad said we would have to give him up, as he constantly barked. He got loose one day and bit a young girl who happened to be walking past our house. I could give you her name; I’m sure she remembers.

I was heartbroken and too young to understand the complexities my parents were going through. Rex was my best friend. I loved him. Now he had to leave me. My brother was about to do a tour of duty with the Navy in a few months. My sister got married two years earlier. Now Rexie Boy was also about to leave our home. *Continued on next page...*



Original newspaper article from The Independent Press, Oct 27th, 1966

Being in the Boy Scouts, I had a subscription to *Boy's Life*, which contained stories of action, heroics, patriotism and the occasional ad telling me that selling greeting cards could get me a new Schwinn bike (if I sold 300 boxes). One article caught my interest: It was a story about war dogs and the heroic duty these canines served to protect our troops that were now fighting in the Vietnam War, something I was kinda familiar with.

My nine-year-old mind suddenly had a light bulb lit over it. I brought the article to my dad and asked, "Could Rexie be one of these dog soldiers?" My father was in military service for over 25 years at this time and our family had always been conscious of being patriotic Americans. I guess my dad figured this was a good thing, and told me he would see what had to be done to make this happen.

At least this bought me some time to be with Rexie before any decisions were made about his fate. I was praying he wouldn't have to leave me, but I knew it was going to happen, one way or another.

My father contacted the Air Force recruiting office in Montclair, NJ. After a few weeks he received a notice that the Air Force would be taking Rexie. They would give him a physical, train him and send him off to war. I was happy that Rexie would be helping the troops, and maybe I could write him once in a while. However, when my father read me the letter, it stated that we had to give up all ownership and we would never be able to have any contact with Rexie again. I was heartbroken, to say the least.

The local Bloomfield newspaper, *The Independent Press*, got ahold of our story and sent a reporter to our house. From the Oct. 23, 1966 edition:

"What are you supposed to do when the cute pup you bought 15 months ago grows up into a huge German Shepherd aggressive to every member of the human race but your own family, and you no longer have the space large enough to keep him without disturbing the neighbors constantly with the sound of barking? This was the problem facing the Scurman family of Clark Ave. with Rexie Boy, a beautiful piece off full-blooded German Shepherd dog flesh, characterized by a flopping left ear. The problem was more intensified for the Scurmans due to the fact that their nine-year-old son Mark was devoted to the dog, and naturally was very upset when they broke the news to him that Rexie Boy would have to leave."

Very upset for sure. At the time this article was published I already knew that I would never see Rex again, but this next paragraph really brought it home for me:

"Since his father is a member of the U.S. Army Reserve and has to go away for summer camp once a year, Mark is wondering why his father doesn't go along with Rexie. Since Mark does not know that he will never see his beloved Rexie Boy again, the Scurmans are trying to keep the news from him until he (hopefully) forgets about the dog."

I actually never forgot about Rexie. After all, he was serving in the Armed Forces as part of our family. But eventually, like everything else, the memory fades most on moments in your life that you try to leave behind. I do remember the day he left. The Air Force dropped a big metal crate in our back yard a week or so before they were to pick him up. It wasn't a wire cage—it was aluminum sheets with 3-inch holes drilled all around it. My father put Rexie inside. I sensed he knew he was leaving by the way I was bawling. I stuck my hand in the holes to try to pet him, but all he could do was lick my fingers. From there on, I have no memory of the cage being taken away or what I did in the weeks after.

That event happened 51 years ago. My mom was the Queen Keeper of Scrapbooks. She saved every piece of paper about her kids and life around her. She died a few years ago. As I was going through her books, I found the article she had clipped about Rexie and me. I also found drawings that I made of Rexie after he left. I didn't even remember that. I thought to myself, "I wonder if I could find out what happened to him?"

I searched the War Dog and K9 Corps websites, which stated that no records of the dogs were kept prior to 1968, but said it was estimated approximately 4,900 were used during the course of the war between 1964 and 1975. An estimated 500 were killed in action. The bad news was that only 204 dogs exited Vietnam. Some remained in the Pacific and some returned to the United States. Of the dogs that remained, most were euthanized and others were turned over to the South Vietnamese Army. It wasn't looking good for my quest to find any records of Rexie. Was he killed in action, put down or turned over? I guessed I would never know. In my sixty-year-old mind I was hoping he was one of the lucky ones that made it back home.

The Vietnam War saw the most concentrated effort of the use of war dogs. It is estimated that over 10,000 lives were saved with the heroic efforts of these dogs that were trained to perform sentry or scout duty, sniff out bombs, and other tasks.

On one website there was a message board set up for people who either served as dog handlers or had connections with the K9 Corps along with people who were inquisitive about the association. In one thread someone asked about the keeping of the military records and they were told to contact William Cummings, whose organization, the Vietnam Dog Handler Association



My father, Leo L. Scurman, my mother, Miriam, me and Rex, 1966.

(vdha.us) might be able to help. I shot him an email explaining my story, thinking I might get a response. Within 10 minutes an email came back: "Mark can you give me a phone number to contact you? This will take a lot of work and more information from you, but I'm willing to try to find your Rex."

Mr. Cummings seemed eager to help me out. I was taken aback that he could possibly find this information, since I thought records weren't kept until 1968. This is when I learned from him that there are thousands of members that are dedicated to keeping the memory of the K9 Corps alive and the importance of the contribution they made during wartime.

We talked back and forth a few times on the phone and also by email. I gave him the address of our home and what other little information I had. Then the email I was waiting for arrived: "Your dog Rex was identified as Rex 78X5. Rex passed all his physicals and was sent to Lackland Air Force Base then transferred to the Air Force base at Blytheville, Arkansas (the 9th Security Police Squadron) on Jan 17th, 1967. He was then called upon to serve in the Republic of Vietnam. His tour of duty was at the 595th MP Company in Saigon in 1970. His handler's name was PVT Joseph Geuke. We are still making an attempt to find more information."

Mr. Cummings then called with more information. He said Rex was a sentry dog who patrolled fences and correctional facilities (prisons). Mr. Cummings was very emotional about it all. He told me I am only the fifth person they know of who gave their family dog for military service, and he wanted to assure me that Rex's service saved the lives of thousands of soldiers.

Another email told me that they tried to locate PVT Geuke to see if he remembered what happened to Rex, but unfortunately, he passed away in August of 1999. He was from Scranton, PA.

I received Rex's war papers in the mail, just as Mr. Cummings promised. All the info was there, just as he said. One item caught my eye: It said that Rex's final separation from service was September 1, 1983. 1983? It stated the cause was "unknown." Could Rex have lived for almost 17 years, fighting in the war and then retiring? I'd like to think that was the case. Maybe he was one of the few hundred dogs that came back to civilian life after his tour of duty. Wherever he ended up, now I know we did the right thing in letting him go.

When the Air Force told our family in 1966 that we would never have any contact with Rexie Boy again, they were wrong. Thanks to the efforts of the members of the Vietnam Dog Handler Association, I was able to connect those thoughts about Rexie I had floating around my mind for many years. I now wonder if Rex ever remembered that little kid who had to say good-bye to him all those years ago.

Mark Scurman is the writer of the Weird U.S book series and publishes Weird N.J. Magazine two times a year. He still resides in Bloomfield, NJ.



The last photo we took of Rex on the day he left. I must have carried it around a long time by the way it's tattered.

Letter to the Editor

I truly enjoyed the article [in the May 2017 issue] on the Broad & Bay Bowling Alley. I know right where I was on 7-7-1977: standing in front of the bowling alley with my family while it was on fire. I was about three and a half years old. I totally forgot that they thought the owner was inside until his kids came running from McDonald's to see if he was ok. The crowd was so upset when they thought he was inside and [there was a] sigh of relief when people shouted "The owner is over here—there is no one inside!" The smoke was so thick and it was getting dark. Brookside Park used to have these lights that hung in a row close to the Broad Street side of the park and the smoke was so thick. I remember [my brother] Chuck pointing out how you could barely see the lights in the park because the smoke was so thick.

It clicked another memory of a fire in Bloomfield Center, which I want to say was the Thom McAn Shoe Store. That was in the winter of 1978. I can remember there was a priest from Sacred Heart Church that was on the Bloomfield Fire Department. I'm not sure if he was paid or a volunteer, but I remember him as Father O'Keeffe. He was on scene and when the fire was out, I remember him placing down the hose. He was with several other



General Joseph Bloomfield

THE NEW TOWN CRIER

THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF
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OF BLOOMFIELD
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firefighters and he stopped and started to pray.
~ Christopher DiGuilio, Bloomfield

Dear Mr. DiGuilio,

Thank you your email and taking the time to write to us. We're glad you enjoyed the article.

It was not the Thom McAn shoe store that burned down, but the Federal Shoe Store. In December of 1978, a general alarm fire destroyed the Central Building on Washington Street in Bloomfield Center. More than 70 firefighters from Bloomfield, Glen Ridge, East Orange and Newark battled the blaze, which sent billowing clouds of black smoke over the Center. Tenants of the building included the Federal Shoe Store on the first floor and Beneficial Finance on the second. Spectators gasped when Beneficial's safe crashed through the shoe store and into the base-



Photo found on Tumblr

ment. See the full story in the May 2003 issue of *The New Town Crier*, found at <http://bloomfield-historical.org/towncrier/May2003.pdf>

Regarding Father O'Keeffe from Sacred Heart Church in Bloomfield, Joseph Barry, Sacred Heart parishioner, HSOB Trustee and immediate Past HSOB Vice President, recalls that Father O'Keeffe "was not a member of the Fire Department. He may have been Chaplain. He certainly should not have been touching any equipment."

If anyone has any further information or photos of the fire and/or Father O'Keeffe, please contact the HSOB at info@hsob.org or PO Box 1074, Bloomfield, NJ 07003-1074.

The Welcome Mat

A cordial welcome is extended to the following *new* members of The Historical Society of Bloomfield. We hope to see you at our next meeting:

Judith Hancox
Bloomfield

Lawrence Rachmiel
West Caldwell, NJ

Delisa White
Bloomfield

Deborah Hvizdos
Matawan, NJ

Judith & George Tonjes
Bloomfield

C.R. Vadala
Bloomfield

Louis & Sharon Mancini
Bloomfield

Morris Canal Hike set for November 4

This three mile hike, conducted by Rich Rockwell & Ron Rice, will explore the path of the Morris Canal through Bloomfield using historic maps and photos. A bus ride is included, stopping at the newly reclaimed section at Oak Tree Lane and additional sites, with a return to the starting point.

The excursion is co-sponsored by The Bloomfield Morris Canal Greenway Committee, the Bloomfield Recreation Dept. and the HSOB. 10am-4:30pm. Space is limited. Reservations are required. \$5.00 donation requested to cover cost of the bus and hand-outs. To reserve a space, email MorrisCanal@gmail.com More info: www.HSOB.org