

LeRoy During the Cold War

by Lynne Belluscio

Quite a while ago, I noticed that there was a fallout shelter sign on the front of the Jell-O building on North Street, and I had asked if it could be taken down and brought to the Historical Society. That never happened, but this last week, Ann Frew dropped off one of the signs from the Wolcott Street School. These metal black and yellow signs are evidence of the Cold War in the 50s and 60s. I learned that the signs were designed by Robert Blakeley for the Army Corps of Engineers and 1.4 million signs were made to mark the way to fallout shelters where millions of Americans were to take refuge from the deadly radioactivity of thermonuclear explosions. They were posted on town halls, schools, courthouses and other buildings which also served as storage areas for canned supplies and water which were to be used to sustain people for weeks, in the event of nuclear destruction.

The Federal Government started the Community Fallout Shelter Program in 1961. President Kennedy wrote a letter for Life Magazine which advised the use of fallout shelters. There were plans for an enormous network of concrete lined underground shelters throughout the United States.

In the meantime, in August 1961, the Russians erected the Berlin wall. I remember that in particular, because my family was on a cross-country camping trip, and our only communication was with the radio. Certainly it seemed like the Cold War was escalating. Although we were supposed to be on vacation, I couldn't wait to get back home where it seemed to be safer. Federal funding for fallout shelters was discontinued in the 1970s. Surprisingly, it wasn't until last year, that New York City began removing the yellow and black fallout shelter signs. There was concern that people might believe that the shelters were still operational and might seek refuge only to



discover that doors were locked and chained. There are stories of fully stocked fallout shelters with food and water canisters - - over 50 years old.

I was in elementary school in Rochester before 1961, and remember air raid drills. The bell that rang was distinctly different from the fire drill bell. The fire drill bell was a series of short rings, but the air raid bell was a long ring. We would file out into the hall or into the basement, where there were no windows and sit on the floor with our arms over our heads. There were also drills where we would climb under our desks. In 1956, the Federal Government attempted to install a warning system with sirens on schools and fire halls. It reminded me of what I had seen on old newsreels of the air raids in London during World War II. There were a couple of practice alerts, but eventually it was decided that it wasn't feasible. It was discontinued in 1967.

I think it was all a false sense of security. As a kid, I don't think I really believed that we would survive a nuclear blast. I had seen the photos of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. I have often wondered what my teachers and my parents thought about the Cold War, but I don't remember a conversation. I think my father once took us down to the basement and pointed out a corner that he thought would be safe, but



we didn't have food and water put away. My brother remembered dreams - - he always survived. I always wondered how thousands of people could live underground for weeks. There was speculation about who in the neighborhood had a fallout shelter, but people did not talk about it because they were afraid people would force into

the shelters. There was even talk of having guns to defend the fall out shelters.

So the Historical Society has in its collection a metal sign, but perhaps more valuable are the stories that people remember. Please, share your stories and memories - historicaleroy@gmail.com