

## WOMPATUCK NEWS

Volume 1, Number 3

Freinds of Wompatuck State Park

Spring Edition, 2007

## UPCOMING EVENTS AT THE PARK

May 21 - Friends of Wompatuck meets at 7:00 pm in the park's Visitor Center.

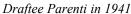
September 8, 9 - "The FOW Mountain Bike Festival" including "NEMBA Fest" (9/8).

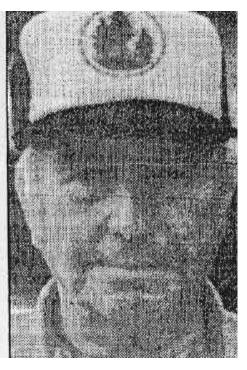
September 9 - "The Landmine Classic Mountain Bike Race" sponsored by "Bike Barn."

"We need project leaders and volunteers to beautify the park and kiosks. We also need many volunteers for our big fundraiser, the 'Landmine Classic Mountain Bike Race' in September."

ERIC ODDLEIFSON FOW Secretary







Parenti as park employee in 1980

## Leo "The Legend" Leaves Us

By Jim Rose, FOW Historian

Leo Parenti died in his sleep at his apartment in Hingham on January 9th, two months prior to his ninetieth birthday. Leo worked at Wompatuck State Park and Boston Harbor Islands State Park as a laborer and assistant supervisor from 1974 to1980. He also worked with my father at the Annex, now Wompatuck State Park, from 1951 until it was shut down in 1962.

Without a doubt, Leo was the most colorful character I've ever met. I interviewed him in 2003 for the Library of Congress Veteran's History Project. I'll share with you some of his unusual stories; most are funny, some tragic.

In World War II, Leo drove an ammunition truck in Europe for the 26th "Yankee" Division. Leo landed in Normandy, France on September 7, 1944. On the way to the front, Leo would heat

cans of beans by wiring them to the manifold of his ammo truck for a quick hot meal. Well, one morning he heard a loud explosion coming from under his truck. Scared out of his jump boots, he thought he might have encountered a German minefield and pulled over. When he gingerly stepped out of his truck, he didn't find any mines but noticed the road was splattered with baked beans or, I should say, refried.

During the Battle of the Bulge in the winter of 1944-45, a German Messerschmidt Bf109 fighter strafed Leo's convoy of ammo trucks. Unfortunately, the attack managed to detonate one of the trucks ahead of Leo and kill the driver. Leo was okay, but somehow word got back to his parents that he was the one who was killed. At war's end, his parents thought they saw a

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"Leo the Legend" continued from page 1 ghost when he showed up at the door. The U.S. Army is full of administration snafus. This was a happy one for the Parentis.

Besides driving a truck, Leo also helped fire 155-millimeter artillery. During one shelling, he saw his friend standing too close to the breach of a cannon killed by the gun's recoil. While assisting another barrage, he noticed that the shells he was using came from the Hingham Naval Ammunition Depot. Small coincidence, he ended up working there.

During the height of the Battle of the Bulge, Leo was blown out of his foxhole by an 88- millimeter shell while eating pork chops. When the barrage ended, he wiped the mud off his chops and finished his meal. He said he had nightmares from shell bursts after the war (I'm sure it wasn't the U.S. Army gourmet pork dinner). As a result, he received disability compensation from the government that he referred to as his "cuckoo check."

In one battle, Leo met General George Patton. He said Patton wore a pair of pearl handled pistols...cowboy style. He said Patton "had an awfully dirty mouth." However, he admired the way Patton's tanks went after the bigger and deadlier German Tiger tanks. Leo told me Patton said, "Let's see what this Yankee Division can do." After a vicious battle, the YD sent the panzer division in retreat.

For war entertainment, Leo enjoyed the USO. He shared a bottle of brandy with Mickey Rooney who he said, "threw them down like a pro!" Plus, Rooney enjoyed making fun of Leo's Boston accent since he was born in Dorchester, Massachusetts. Leo also saw Bob Hope perform in a field in front of the troops.

As Leo's division entered Germany, he discovered a pit containing 19 Jewish



Parenti, seated left front, and GI friends in Germany with a captured Nazi flag.



Park tracks where Leo flipped hurdy-gurdy.

girls murdered by the town's Bergermeister or mayor. All were shot behind the head. Leo's friend gave him his photos of the scene. They are now on display at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. Further into Germany, his unit ended up liberating the concentration camp at Gusen. He told me he would never forget seeing the piles of dead bodies and smelling the putrid air of death.

As the war came to an end, Leo managed to capture an SS major who was later executed for war crimes. He also captured a German lieutenant on horseback. After the surrender, Leo took his horse, camera and Berretta pistol and rounded up more prisoners. When finished, his GI buddies killed the horse and ate it.

As Leo gathered more POWs, he met a Wehrmacht lieutenant doctor who had studied medicine at Tufts University before the war. Leo gave him hell for all those atrocities he came upon. The doctor claimed he didn't know any of "that" was going on and just followed orders.

After the war concluded, Leo's division was camped in Vienna, Austria along with the Russian army. One moonlit night when returning from a "hot date," Leo heard Russian jack boots following him. Fearing an impending mugging (the Russians were notorious thieves), he ducked behind a wall. When the Soviet soldier rounded the corner Leo smashed him in the face with his pistol and hit him over the head with the Russian Tommy gun, then bolted for his barracks. The next morning the Russians raced by in an armored car and shot up his quarters. Luckily, no one was injured.

When Leo returned home, he was proud to have served his country. He never shot anything except a cow...right between the eyes. He said the meat was stringy, tough and needed Italian marinate.

Leo started work at the Hingham Naval Ammunition Depot in 1950 as a heavy equipment operator. Leo paved most of the back roads of the park. His father poured and finished the cement work for all the ammo bunkers. Working for the Transportation Department, Leo always managed to get into hot water, especially at the Annex.

For example, one day he approached a curve too fast driving a small utility train called a "hurdy-gurdy" and flipped it over. He left the vehicle on the spot and blamed it on "some damn Marine!" He also "borrowed" an 80-ton Navy locomotive to travel down to the Mine Anchor building at the Annex and drink a cup of coffee with my father. Leo said my Dad was rather upset with the caper.

Here is another incident divulged by his friend Ron Meade (Ron transported the ASROC missiles). One frigid winter day, Leo backed his dump truck up to deliver his load. However, due to the low temperature, all the material he was dumping got hungup in place as a frozen clump and did not slide out. As a result, his cab lifted up high enough from the ground that he had to be rescued by the Transportation Department from his high perch. When I mentioned this story to Leo last summer, he was still embarrassed by the event.

After the Annex shut down, Leo and my father worked at the Boston Navy Yard. Leo's former boss told me a typical Parenti story from Charlestown. One day a tourist asked Leo, "Where is the ferry (he pronounced it as "fairy") to East Boston? Leo put his arm around him and answered with a high lisp, "He's right here, dear." That's Leo.

In retrospect, Leo was a Godsend. Park director Steve Gammond linked me to Leo in 2001 during a park hike. Because my late father had a top-secret clearance when he worked at the Annex, he never told me much about his job. Leo filled in all the gaps plus helped make possible the annual reunions with former Annex employees. He'll be sorely missed.