

COMING HOME

Through the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, thousands of veterans were given the opportunity to attend Syracuse University and forever change their post-war lives



By Dick Case



get two images when I think about the GI Bill and Syracuse University.

One is the temporaries that almost became permanent: those metal buildings that used to be as much landmarks on the campus as the trees. "Prefabs," we called them. They'd come by the hundreds as the University pitched its own military camp after World War II. Many remained by the time I arrived as a student in the fifties. I'm told the last one wasn't torn down until 1991.

The temporaries symbolized how the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944—the formal name for the GI Bill of Rights—transformed Syracuse into a major player among American universities. No wonder we held onto those mementos as long as we did.

The other image is personal. It's my friend Don Edwards.

Don and I were mates in the Class of '56. He was a veteran, I was a freshman beanie, just out of high

school and wet all over. We met in a prefab, of course.

I'm sure Don never wore a beanie. He went to college on the Korean War version of the GI Bill.

Like so many vets in that conflict and others, it's hard for him not to think, all these years later, that he might still be back home, in North Industry, Ohio, if it weren't for those generous educational benefits created by Franklin Roosevelt because he didn't want to see the GIs in the mess they were in after World War I.

Don didn't go home, as it turned out. After a long career in Syracuse television broadcasting, he joined the faculty of the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, where he's chairman of the broadcast journalism department.

"In high school I was only interested in playing sports," Don explained recently. "My parents couldn't have afforded to send me to college if I'd wanted to go. So after graduation I went to work in the local steel mill. In a year I decided, 'I can't do this.'"

He joined the Army for four years so he could use the GI Bill. "At the time I didn't consider there was a war going on," he says. No one in North Industry had a TV set when Don lived there. The Army let him nurture his hobby, photography. He became an officer in a film unit in the Far East.

"My company commander was from Syracuse," he recalls. "Knowing my interests, he suggested I take my GI Bill and study television at Syracuse University. He sent a letter to SU. I applied and was accepted. I didn't even know where Syracuse was."

After discharge, Don went back to North Industry, bought a 1947 Plymouth, and headed east—with \$40 and a road map.

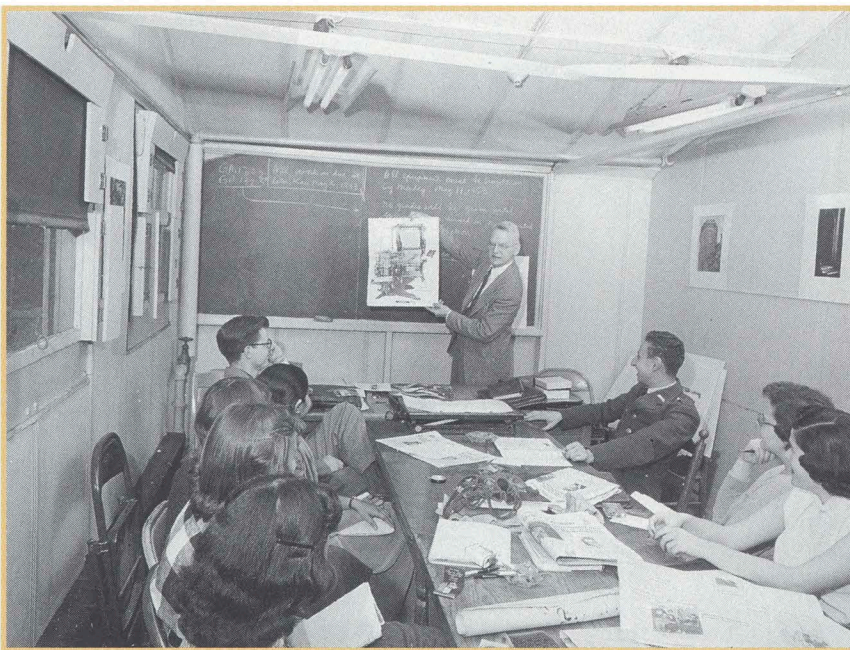
His first year at Syracuse, 1953-54, was spent in a prefab dorm in Collendale, where Manley Field House sits today. Freshmen still lived like the military in the 1950s. Chancellor William Pearson Tolley had welcomed 9,464 World War II veterans to the University and its satellite colleges in 1946. Although most of the GIs from the era had graduated, the building program hadn't caught up with the institution the GI Bill created.

The next year Don was out of there, up Colvin Street to Slocum Heights, another cluster of temporaries set aside for married students. "They called it 'fertility flats,' which it was," Don says with a chuckle. He'd married a fellow student, Nancy Skeele, in 1954.

Don told me Nancy started dating the veteran against the wishes of her sorority sisters. "Vets were *verboden*," he explains, adding that this was the only instance he could recall "when we weren't welcomed at Syracuse.

"I had decided to do four years in three, so I didn't have time for much else, especially after I got married," he says. "A lot of us didn't drink and carouse like the younger students. I worked my ass

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES



Close to 10,000 veterans swelled the student ranks of Syracuse University following the end of World War II. With classroom space at a premium, metal prefab buildings were brought in to help with the overflow.



RETURNING TO A 'WONDERFUL EXPERIENCE'

off. I think the professors appreciated that."

I appreciated that maturity and dedication when I taught a group of service professionals in the Newhouse School's Military Journalism Program years later. These folks were heaven-sent for a part-time teacher with only a few hours a week to devote to teaching.

They even talked to me in class, for heaven's sake.

As a classmate of Don's, I remember the same sense that the man had his feet on the ground. Most of the rest of us were far from the earth at that time of our lives. I had the feeling he knew where he was headed as we sat there in the prefab classroom behind Carnegie Library nicknamed "Radio House."

No big deal was made of Don's military service, certainly not by him. Yet as we studied side-by-side, we knew he'd gotten way ahead of many of his classmates in two of life's milestones: He'd been to war and he'd gotten married.

Before he left school he was a father, too.

The vets were guys I could see myself following in battle. At the least, they were students we wanted to have with us on class projects.

Don and Nancy's small apartment in The Heights was nothing like the cozy pads now in that same neighborhood of South Campus. I suppose it was a palace compared to the trailer park where married students lived when they came to Syracuse to go to school after World War II.

Don picked up extra money by working as a night watchman at married student housing. He'd patrol midnight to 8 a.m., then go to classes.

One of those little fleeting villages had been set in the apple orchard at Drumlins. Apples had no place to



During World War II, Sherwin Glazer '49 served as an aerial navigator on a B-17 bomber.



AN UNEXPECTED OPPORTUNITY

Retired Lt. Col. Maurice Adams, a 1951 College of Arts and Sciences graduate, began his 23-year military career near the end of World War II with a medical supply department in Wyoming. He took advantage of the GI Bill by earning a degree in social studies education at the alma mater of his childhood idol, SU football star Wilmeth Sidat-Singh. In his junior year, he joined the advanced ROTC program and went on active duty in Korea following graduation. At the conclusion of his Army career, which included two tours of Vietnam, he taught special education in the Cincinnati public school system until his retirement in 1994. "I didn't plan on going to college. It was only after I came out of the service that I decided I'd go, since I had the GI Bill," says Adams, who also has served as the president of SU's Cincinnati area alumni club. "It helped me out a lot. I had three years on the GI Bill; so, of course, the last year was a little struggle, but I had saved enough money by then. I think the GI Bill had the greatest impact on me. I don't know what I would have done without it."

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES



Despite the benefits provided by the GI Bill, money was still tight for returning veterans and their families. To assist them with some of their needs, a modest Veterans' Co-Op Food Store was opened at SU in the 1940s.

fall except on the roofs of the huts. Early on, sanitary facilities were boardinghouse style. Also, the roads weren't paved. That part of the campus was known as Mud Hollow.

Still, GIs felt lucky if they were that close to their classrooms. Some of the returning veterans bunked, literally, near Baldwinsville and at the N.Y. State Fairgrounds.

The definitive story about how Syracuse accommodated nearly 10,000 college-bound veterans in 1946 was told by Alexandra Eyle in *Syracuse University Magazine* in 1987. One vet, Theodore Lustig '48, recalled for Eyle how it was to be so close, and yet so far: "The cow barn at the State Fairgrounds. That was my first address at Syracuse in the fall of 1946. I shared a cozy little room with 92 other veterans."

Teaching was another challenge. Faculty couldn't be hired fast enough. Teachers found themselves instructing men and women not much older than they were in spaces

close to SRO.

William Fleming, centennial professor emeritus of fine arts, told Eyle he had to spell out names of artists

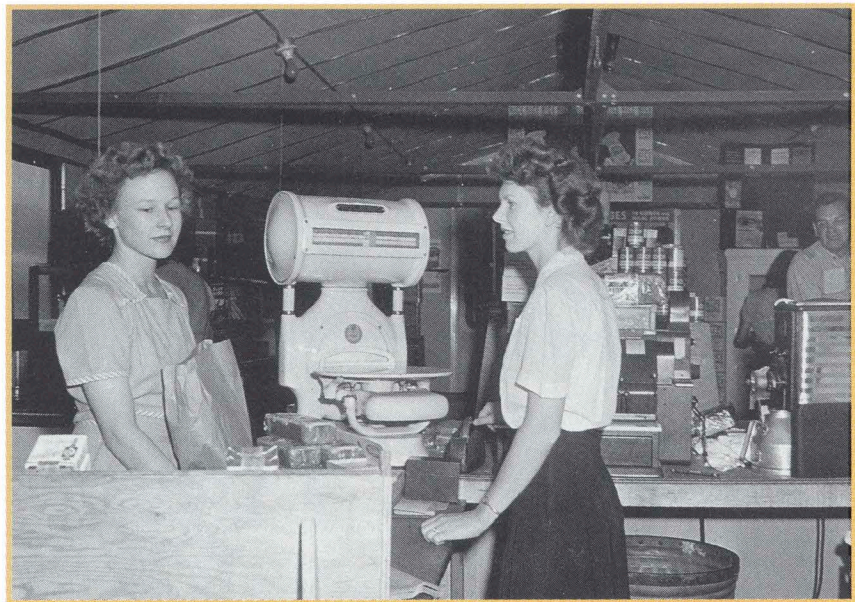
and composers because he couldn't get to the blackboard to write them down during overflow classes.

Syracuse improvised with transportation, also. Far-flung students got around in commercial buses, a special railway line from the fairgrounds to the city, and six campus buses. SU's buses were painted the school colors, orange and blue. Folks named them "blue beetles."

It's interesting that another student of the GI Bill, who was there in 1946, doesn't remember crowded classrooms. Thomas Aloï '50 does recall veterans being isolated from the social life of the campus. He came to college a married man; he worked and accelerated his academic program. When was there time to sit around yakking at the Corner Store?

Judge Aloï, like Don Edwards, probably would have had a different sort of life if it weren't for the generosity of FDR and William Tolley. SU required only that veterans pass an entrance exam. They didn't need a high school diploma.

This native of Syracuse retired in 1987 after a distinguished career in



Inside the Veterans' Co-Op Food Store, a clerk helps the wife of an SU student-veteran.

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law, most recently on the bench of the New York State Supreme Court in Onondaga County.

Before he enlisted in the Army in 1940, the future justice was headed for a career as a gym teacher. Judge Aloï trained as a pilot and flew military aircraft all over the world during the war. At discharge, he wanted to be an airline pilot. His wife, Marie, changed his mind.

"She reminded me about the GI Bill," he said when we talked a while ago. "She said I ought to go to school. Somehow I'd lost the idea of being a teacher. In the Army, I saw the difference between enlisted men and officers. I saw education made a difference. So, in the end, my wife won out."

Judge Aloï started out to earn a degree in business. He'd never thought about being a lawyer, but a friend talked him into applying to Syracuse's College of Law. In the end he took his undergraduate degree cum laude and completed seven years of college in five-and-a-half.

He drove a cab and served legal papers for lawyers in town to fill in the difference in income from what he needed for his family and what the government provided.

He improvised. Just like everybody else.

The Great Improvisor was, of course, William Pearson Tolley—the scholar, gentleman, and tough-minded visionary who was Chancellor during Syracuse's greatest spurts of growth, intellectually and physically.

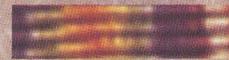
In 1987, he told Eyle that New York's wartime governor, Tom Dewey, had asked the state's college presidents to answer a national emergency—the return of thousands of GIs who wanted, and needed, an education. Would the school help?

Some weren't receptive, Chancellor Tolley recalled. In effect, they were saying, "We don't give a damn for the welfare of the nation," he said.

Not the Chancellor. Not SU.

A SECOND CHANCE AT COLLEGE

Mari Longwell Walker, a 1950 College of Arts and Sciences graduate who majored in sociology, enlisted in the Navy and was stationed in Washington, D.C. The GI Bill inspired her to attend college—first at a junior college in New Haven, Connecticut, and then at Syracuse. "I always regretted not having gone in the first place and I had a taste of working, so I decided I wanted to go to school. I was a little more mature, and it helped my dad out—he didn't have to pay as much money," says Walker, a Long Island, New York, resident who retired after 17 years as the anthropology department secretary at SUNY Stony Brook. "I thought sociology was interesting—it broadened my life; I looked at things differently, more tolerantly perhaps. I always wanted to be a secretary, and that's what I did when I got out of school."



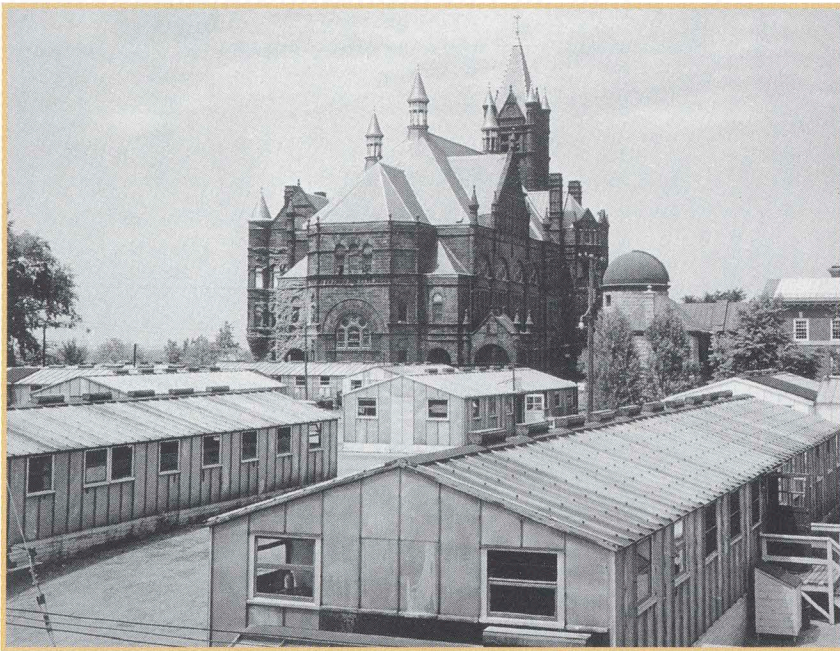
THE RIGHT NICHE IN NURSING

Barbara Novotny Barnett '49 of Warwick, Rhode Island, already had a professional career when she arrived on campus: she was a registered nurse. After serving as an Army nurse at an Augusta, Georgia, hospital, she decided to pursue public health nursing and obtained a B.S. degree from the School of Education. "When I got to Syracuse and studied public health nursing as part of my courses, I decided that was for me. I went into public health nursing for Westchester County (New York), for which you needed a B.S. at the time. Having my degree and taking the proper courses at Syracuse also allowed me to do substitute school nursing, and work for an insurance company and the American Lung Association," says Barnett, whose husband, Alec Collin Barnett '49, also studied at SU on the GI Bill.



Army nurse Barbara Novotny Barnett '49 models her World War II combat gear.

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Crouse College looms over a sea of prefab buildings erected on campus after World War II to serve as classrooms for returning veterans. The last prefab structure was torn down in 1991.

“What most impressed me,” he continued in an interview, “was Dewey’s statement that this was an emergency. I realized that if a veteran didn’t go to college as soon as he came back, he’d never have another chance. It was now or never. Now was not the time to shut the doors. Our doors opened wide in 1946.”

Chancellor Tolley died earlier this year. His biography, and his school’s, is in the latest volume of SU’s history, *Syracuse University: The Tolley Years*. Biographer John Robert Greene G’83 measured the era and found that as the first GI Bill veterans graduated—most were off the rolls by 1950—we were left with something different; a new University had been created.

Don Edwards knows it’s hard for his students, the present college generation, to connect to his. Higher education is a given, a next step, for the 18- and 19-year-olds of the nineties.

His students won’t understand how much the GI Bill meant to

him and other vets. “College just wasn’t a factor in our lives back then,” he says.

A personal note: I walked onto

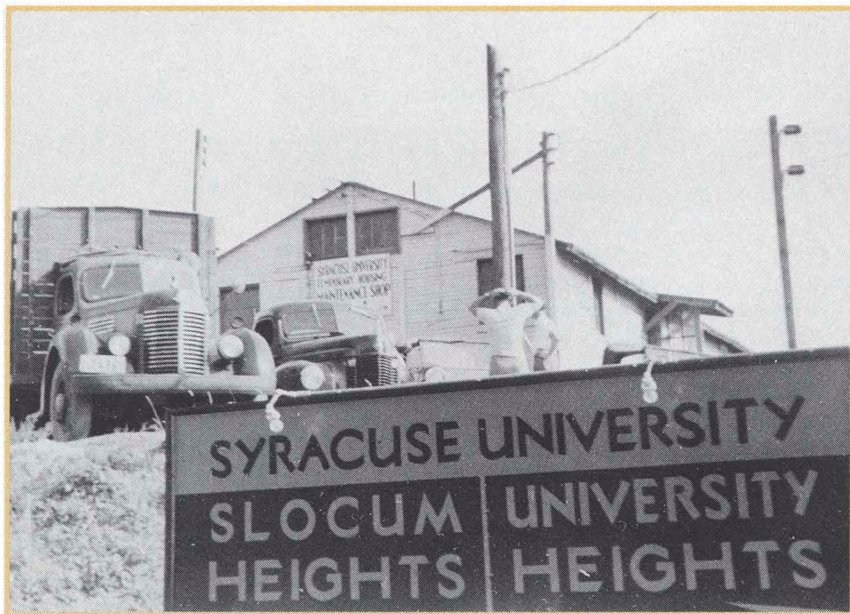
campus in 1952 and found that new University waiting to educate me.

One of the first places I went, in fact, was a post-war leftover, the prefab (actually a warren of them, banged together) we called the “Hellbox.”

Hellbox is printing slang for a container of waste type. SU’s Hellbox, handy by the venerable School of Journalism building, Yates Castle, was home to student publications like the *Onondagan* yearbook, *Syracusan* magazine, and *Daily Orange* newspaper.

I spent much of my college career in the two prefabs allotted to the *DO*, and later, on campus, near Archbold Stadium, and in Radio House, which WAER called home and where broadcasting classes were held.

Those dirty, crowded, cold, smoke-filled, and patched-up buildings reeked with character. They were built to educate my older cousins who fought a world war and came home. Now they



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The Heights was home to young married students who took up residence in temporary buildings constructed for them. The area was later nicknamed “Fertility Flats,” due to the many children born to couples living there.

became parts of my life, where I often learned more than a professor could teach me in the clean, well-lit buildings of brick with the names on them of rich people I'd never meet.

The prefabs had numbers and the roofs leaked.

Now, fondly, we remember our first love affairs.



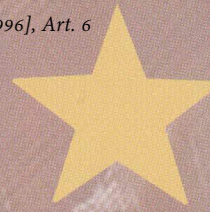
Larry C. Varvaro '49 posed for this photo while at aerial gunnery school in Kingman, Arizona.

One more thing: After graduation, some of us, who had moved straight from high school to college, reversed history. We went into the Army.

I got drafted. I served two years. When I mustered out, I found work at a newspaper. After six weeks I was restless. I decided to go back to school, as a graduate student.

A year later I earned a master's degree. On the GI Bill. ■

Dick Case '56 is a columnist for the Syracuse Herald-Journal, Herald American and author of a collection of his columns, Good Guys, Bad Guys, Big Guys, Little Guys, published by The Syracuse Newspapers. The alumni profiles were written by Jay Cox.



MOTIVATED FOR MADISON AVENUE

After being hospitalized for more than a year with war injuries he suffered as an Army Air Corps bomb squadron member in the South Pacific, Larry C. Varvaro '49 learned about the GI Bill during his discharge interview. He joined the flood of veterans applying to colleges and was accepted at SU. "It was the most thrilling time of my life. I remember my first day, walking up there on the Hill, I had tears in my eyes, and I said, 'I'm in college—holy jeez—the first guy in my family to go through college!' Between the GI Bill, money I was receiving for my disability, and playing trumpet in a band at night, I was able to send money home to my mother, which was really terrific," says the Sarasota, Florida, resident and College of Business Administration (now School of Management) graduate who spent 40 years in the advertising and communications business. "At Syracuse, I really got motivated. Boy, when I hit Madison Avenue, I was charged up."



THE PATH OF PUBLIC SERVICE

The GI Bill helped launch George Marotta '50, G'51, on a path of public service, as well as careers in academia, business, and, most recently, lecturing aboard cruise ships on topics such as political and economic trends with his wife and business partner, June Mortlock Marotta '48. The Army drafted Marotta after one semester at SU, and he served in the Pacific, which included an assignment with the war crimes tribunals in Japan. "Without the GI Bill, I doubt I would've gotten the master's degree in public administration and that wonderful Maxwell training, which helped me when I went into the government in 1951. I zoomed right through all the promotions in the first 10 years to the highest grade of administration," says Marotta, whose 27 years of government service included helping establish the Peace Corps and stints with the U.S. delegation to the United Nations, the state and defense departments, the National Security Council, and the Agency for International Development. Along with being an investment portfolio manager, the Palo Alto, California, resident is also a research fellow at the Hoover Institution of Stanford University, where he has worked for 20 years.