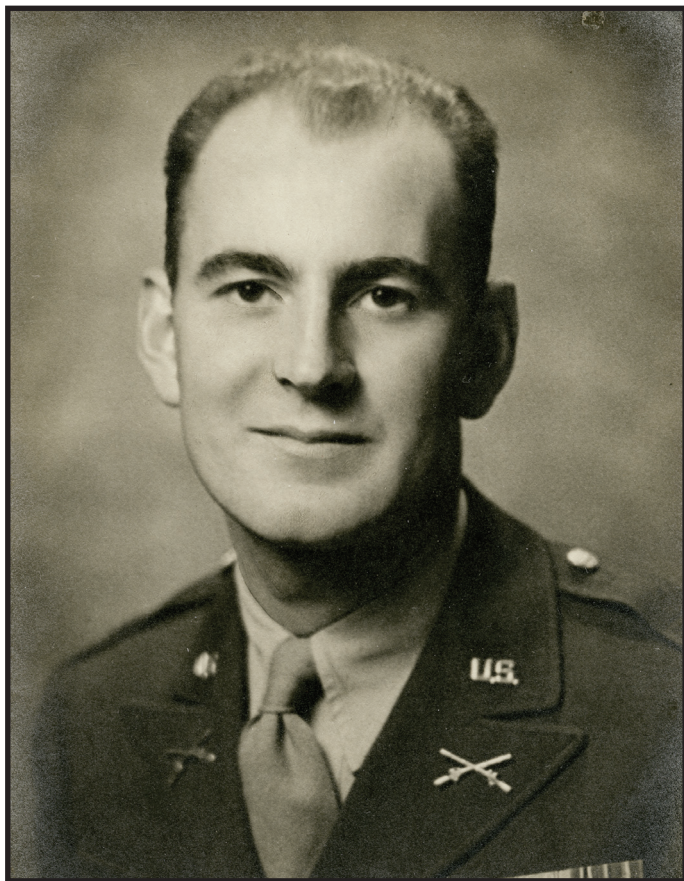


ROCHESTER HISTORY

MR. ABBOTT'S WARS: The Life and Times of Rochester's Leading Cold Warrior and Most Decorated Soldier

by Jeffrey Ludwig



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A family photograph of Robert Abbott and his wife, Winona Abbott. From the Robert N. Abbott Collection, Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.

Front Cover: In this undated photograph, Robert Noe Abbott can be seen in his military uniform. During his emergence as "Rochester's most decorated soldier," Abbott earned promotions from Private First Class to Lieutenant Colonel. From the Robert N. Abbott Collection, Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.

ROCHESTER HISTORY

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Dear *Rochester History* Reader,

The 1950s and 1960s were decades of tremendous change for the United States and for Rochester. While it was a time of great prosperity and growth for the middle class, it was also a time of growing racial tensions throughout the country, coupled with a near-crippling fear of communism. As the Cold War escalated and the poor got poorer, it was inevitable that unrest would grow beyond boundaries. Rochester was hungry for heroes at this time, and Col. Robert Abbott stepped into that role. A decorated war hero and former prisoner of war, Abbott naturally turned to public service after military service. By all accounts a man dedicated to order and justice, Abbott was well-known in Rochester until his death in 1964. Today, he is largely unknown, but this issue of *Rochester History* will serve to introduce this larger-than-life, bonafide hero to his hometown once again.

Patricia Uttaro, Library Director

About *Rochester History*

Rochester History is a scholarly journal that provides informative and entertaining articles about the history and culture of Rochester, Monroe County, and the Genesee Valley. In January 1939, Assistant City Historian Blake McKelvey published the first quarterly edition of *Rochester History*. Subjects researched and written by him and other scholars were edited, published, and distributed by McKelvey with the goal of expanding the knowledge of local history. Studying local history as a microcosm of U.S. history has brought insight and understanding to scholars and researchers around the globe.

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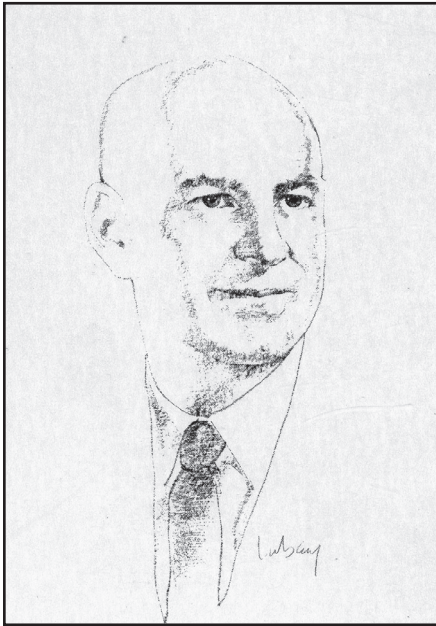
Mr. Abbott's Wars: The Life and Times of Rochester's Leading Cold Warrior and Most Decorated Soldier

by Jeffrey Ludwig

From the lofty vantage point of the early 21st century, historians tend to look at Americans from the late 1940s through early 1960s as quaint anachronisms. On the one hand, the crucibles of the Great Depression and Second World War forged “the greatest generation,” setting an impossibly high standard for posterity.¹ On the other hand, the same generation that sacrificed so much also engorged themselves on unprecedented (and long since evaporated) postwar affluence. These Americans indulged in what Christopher Lasch, a longtime professor of history at the University of Rochester, dubbed “the great barbeque of the [nineteen] fifties and sixties.”² Of all the consumer goods synonymous with the early Cold War period, few are as apt as the barbecue grill, which conjures images of suburbanization, patios, picket fences, young baby boomer families gathering for cookouts, and sublime confidence in abundance and plenty. Shows such as *Mad Men* have glamorized this lifestyle while also suggesting that it belongs to an irrecoverably bygone era. And yet, attractive though it might appear through a haze of nostalgia, this was also a time haunted by unsettling anxieties as the United States entered the nuclear age and a half-century's Cold War. The same people who assembled barbecue grills in their backyards also built fallout shelters, drilled their children to “duck and cover” in case of atomic attack, and worried about communists infiltrating their communities.

The very fabric of these Cold War beliefs has been subjected to derision by modern historians. Scholar Tom Engelhardt observed that “the narrative forms that contained the [cold] war story had always had a childlike quality to them, a certain unchallenged moving simplicity of language and vision.”³ Looking back, it is easy to fall into the trap of discounting the seriousness and authenticity of the many Americans who subscribed to early Cold War thought. Theirs was a rhetoric that seemingly divided the world into a contest of absolute good (American democracy) versus evil (Soviet communism), of global dominoes that required containing lest they fall under the sway of a brutal enemy. Epitomized by demagogic and dangerous figures like the swaggering Senator Joseph McCarthy, the entire anti-communism movement of the period seems absurd.

We do history a disservice, however, when we reduce its complexities to caricature by lumping together a diversity of unique individual perspectives. There were shades of



An illustration of Robert Abbott commissioned in 1984 during Rochester's sesquicentennial celebrations. As part of the anniversary, the city honored distinguished Rochesterians like Abbott through a series of prints. From the Robert N. Abbott Collection, Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.

gray to be found amid the seemingly black and white world of Cold War America. Rochester's own Robert Noe Abbott (1915–1964) furnishes a profound example. On the surface, Abbott appears an anti-communist Cold Warrior *par excellence*. Known as “Rochester's most decorated soldier,” the veteran of World War II and the Korean War directed the Monroe County Office of Civil Defense during a decade of rapid growth, 1954–1964. Abbott was also an outspoken opponent of communism, a man steeped in the language of Cold War policy; many of the speeches he delivered across Rochester echoed the most extreme forms of U.S. propaganda. With the toughness of a soldier and the hawkishness of a true believer, Abbott evokes an era of a young Richard Nixon and the House Committee on Un-American Activities, of loyalty tests and name-naming, of witch hunts, black lists, and secret pumpkins.

But Abbott was no reflexive reactionary formed in a vacuum, nor some armchair ideologue trading blindly in abstractions. He adopted his views directly from personal experience: 33 months as a prisoner of war. Taken captive in the early stages of the Korean War, Abbott witnessed the cruelty and deprivation of a communist regime up close in POW camps. He returned to Rochester determined to protect his home from a threat that he considered very real. More than most, Abbott brought the exigencies of an international Cold War into the daily lives—the living rooms, dens, and kitchen tables—of ordinary Rochesterians.

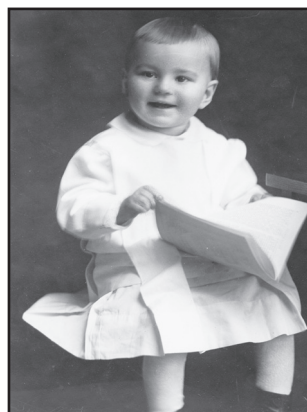
To tell the story of Robert Abbott is to tell the story of the several Rochesters he inhabited. In addition to illuminating the inherent complexity of Cold Warriorism, his biography intersects with key transformational moments in the city's history. Born when the “Flower City” was still home to George Eastman, Abbott lived through the prosperous 1910s and 1920s, the depression-wracked 1930s, and the city's entry into World War II. He then

helmed Rochester's civil defense throughout the Eisenhower and Kennedy years. Finally, Abbott met a tragic end when he died from injuries sustained from a helicopter crash while surveying the Rochester race riots of 1964. If cut short in its prime, his legacy is no less remarkable for its brevity. Alongside Civil War hero Colonel Patrick O'Rorke, Abbott ranks as a leading figure in the annals of Rochester's military history. If his beloved city has not quite honored him to the extent of O'Rorke, it would nevertheless do well to remember Abbott's record of devoted service.

Humble Beginnings in Rochester's Tenth Ward

Robert Noe Abbott, always referred to as "Bob," was born in Rochester on June 19, 1915. His parents, Harry and Ethel Abbott, were themselves longstanding residents of Rochester's Tenth Ward. They raised two sons there, Bob and younger brother Harold, who joined the family in 1918. Growing up in the northwestern quadrant of the city, so close to Maplewood Park, had its advantages. Rather than playing in alleys and busy streets, the Abbott boys could walk or bike to the fields and playgrounds of Maplewood, or even romp through the woods and Genesee River gorge trails near the Lower Falls. As children of the Progressive Era, a period of active government social programs, Bob and Harold could have taken advantage of city-sponsored activities like Maplewood's "Playground Library" series, which brought librarians, books, and story-telling into the heart of the neighborhood.⁴

The Progressive age was a good time for the city in general. It was during the 1910s, as former City Historian Blake McKelvey reminds us, that Rochester emerged as a flourishing modern metropolis with a proud citizenry that "strove for the best schools, the best parks, the best water system, the best medical care, the best welfare institutions, the best city plans, the best government, the best athletic teams, the best musical facilities, the best in every field[,]...aspirations [that] did not seem unreasonable."⁵ It was a period of incredible development for the city, a time of intense optimism supported by the growth of industrial juggernauts like Bausch & Lomb and Eastman Kodak. With George Eastman leading the way, the philanthropic impulse endowed Rochester with a backbone of



A photograph of Robert Abbott as a young child. Born in 1915, Abbott grew up in Rochester's Tenth Ward. From the Robert N. Abbott Collection, Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.



Harry and Ethel Abbott sit before a lean-to structure in Cobalt, Canada. The couple briefly tried their luck with a silver mining venture there in the early 1910s. From the Robert N. Abbott Collection, Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.

still-vital institutions. Under the banner of a “Do It For Rochester” slogan, the 1910s and early 1920s saw the creation of the Rochester Public Library, Memorial Art Gallery, Eastman Dental Dispensary, Strong Hospital, Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, and Eastman School of Music. As commercial prosperity continued in the 1920s, so did the city’s own civic fortune.⁶

Not all Rochester boats were lifted equally by this rising tide, however, and the Tenth Ward provided a telling case in point. The rows of elegant Victorian homes surrounding Maplewood Park were

among the finest and most desirable in the city—popular choices for executives, professionals, and business owners. Yet not far away from the great houses dwelled a large working-class population, including a sizeable percentage of newly arrived immigrants, who could only marvel at such conspicuous splendor. Rochester Progressive reformers like Dr. George Goler and Walter Rauschenbusch were distressed and appalled by the “wretched” squalor associated with parts of the Tenth Ward: crowded tenements marred by poor ventilation and unsanitary conditions.⁷ Although never in quite so desperate a state themselves, the Abbotts had far more in common with these neighbors than the moneyed elites luxuriating a few blocks away.

Life was a struggle for Harry and Ethel Abbott. According to family accounts, Harry in particular found it difficult to replicate the success of Rochester’s upwardly mobile class. More of a schemer and dreamer than a worker, Harry never held a steady job for long. Before becoming a father, he had alighted for the Canadian town of Cobalt during an early 20th-century silver rush to try his luck as a mining prospector. When this venture failed, he returned to Rochester where he occasionally dabbled as a lackluster salesman. The sporadic nature of his employment meant that home ownership eluded the Abbotts. There were perilous times when their budget ran so tight that the family would relocate, generally elsewhere within the Tenth Ward, because they could not afford to pay the landlord. Bob Abbott’s daughter, Roberta, recalled her father joking later in life that “we moved every time the rent was due.”⁸ Less funny, perhaps, were the secret nocturnal foraging trips Harry led his boys on to help

stock the pantry. Under cover of darkness, Harry, Bob, and Harold hid guns under their jackets and hunted pheasants in Maplewood Park; any bagged birds were likewise spirited away inside an Abbott coat. If contraband game eluded them, the Abbotts turned to clandestinely fishing in city hatcheries.⁹

A remarkable woman and a source of strength to her boys, Ethel Abbott proved to be the stabilizing bedrock of her family, and its breadwinner. As her grandchildren later recalled, during a time when few married women held administrative white-collar positions, Ethel earned promotion after promotion at the B. Forman Company, the iconic downtown Rochester department store formerly at 46–50 Clinton Avenue South. Ethel’s strong work ethic, combined with her intelligence and reliability, caught the eye of store owner and founder Maurice Forman, who eventually named her head of his customer service division. The entire Forman family admired Ethel, so much so that, when Bob approached college age, they offered to cover the costs of his higher education. Although she must have been sorely tempted, Ethel was too proud to accept and ultimately refused a gift that smacked of charity.¹⁰

Alas, the Abbotts were in great need despite Ethel’s best efforts to keep them afloat. The onset of the Great Depression in 1929 brought a precarious situation closer to the brink of ruin. According to McKelvey, somewhere in the range of 10,000 to 24,000 Rochesterians lost their jobs during the onset of the recession; more than 15,000 residents had applied for federal relief by the start of 1933.¹¹ For the Abbotts, the economic downturn meant an even leaner standard of living and more nomadic house-hopping to escape overdue rent notices. A teenaged Bob—almost certainly against competition with grown men—received a break when the *Rochester Times-Union* hired him as a paperboy in 1932. His wages helped the family stave off the worst ravages of destitution.¹²

With so much turmoil unsettling his household, Abbott can hardly be said to have enjoyed a happy upbringing. Nonetheless, the young man discovered outlets to transcend the



The B. Forman Company Department Store, 46–50 Clinton Avenue South, as it appeared during the holidays in the early 1930s when Ethel Abbott worked in its customer service division. From the Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.

daily worries of insecurity. Sports proved his refuge of choice, and the Maplewood YMCA became his safe haven. A gifted athlete, Abbott excelled at basketball, starring in games on the YMCA courts and playing one season—his senior year—for his high school team. On the strength of that single season alone, he had a place awaiting him on the team of Springfield College (where basketball was invented). He longed to attend, envisioning not only the excitement of basketball filling his days but also studying to become a gym teacher. The realities of the Depression intervened. The need to work interrupted his high school career, while family finances forced him to cancel college enrollment plans. “The Maplewood YMCA and basketball were his anchors,” Abbott’s daughter Roberta Buckle recalled. “Yet like with so many people back then, the Depression put an end to that. Putting food on the table trumped everything else.”¹³



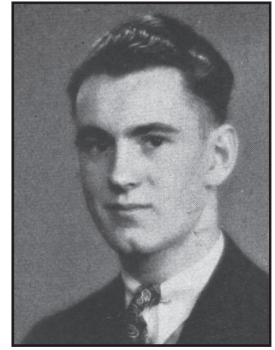
According to his daughter, the Maplewood YMCA was an “anchor” for young Robert Abbott, who enjoyed playing basketball on its courts. From the Albert R. Stone Negative Collection, Rochester Museum and Science Center.

In addition to sports, Bob delighted in the company of his fellow Tenth-Ward youths. One pretty brunette in particular stood out from the crowd. Vivacious and bright, Winona McConnachie grew up alongside the Abbott boys. Although four years his junior, making her the same age as Harold, Winona became Bob’s sweetheart. It was left to Harold to serve as emissary for the budding courtship. He delivered love letters between his older brother at home and Winona, his classmate at school.¹⁴

Abbott’s own education occurred first at School No. 34 on Lexington Avenue, for his elementary grades, and then at Madison High School, which once occupied the corner of Epworth Street and Wilson Park. Perhaps owing to the distractions of holding down a job, Abbott was a solid, if not spectacular, student. He had time for few social clubs other than student government. Foreshadowing his future in politics, Abbott was elected cabinet member and class secretary. Although economic necessities hindered his contributions to school athletics, Abbott’s peers nonetheless recognized his untapped talents. His senior yearbook, *The Madisonian*, paid tribute to his gifts in poetic verse next to his portrait:

*A strong and healthy fellow we'll all agree,
A physical culture teacher someday he will be.*

Strength and health were wonderful enough. But, as Abbott graduated from high school in 1934, his hopes for a college degree in physical education dashed by the Depression, he needed more than just bodily fitness. If he was to have any kind of future, he needed opportunity and direction.¹⁵



Robert Abbott's senior picture in his high school yearbook, The Madisonian. From the Robert N. Abbott Collection, Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.

The Making of a Rochester War Hero

Wars rarely lead to any kind of salvation. And, although it is glorified more than most, the Second World War was no exception; 405,399 Americans died, and another 670,846 were wounded over the course of a bloody conflict that disrupted homes, destroyed lives, and introduced the world to holocausts both nuclear and genocidal.¹⁶

However, in victory the United States defeated more than Germany and Japan; the massive mobilization of wartime resources from 1941 to 1945 jumpstarted a sluggish economy, ended the Depression, and inaugurated a wave of unprecedented prosperity. Robert Abbott, too, experienced a stunning status reversal after the war, resulting from his heroism abroad and the sudden economic resurgence at home.

To understand how dramatically Abbott's stock rose, one must begin by tracing its lowest point. Along with so many other Depression-era Rochesterians, Abbott languished



Madison High School, 1935. Robert Abbott's alma mater was located on the corner of Epworth Street and Wilson Park. Abbott graduated with Madison's class of 1934. From the Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.

throughout the 1930s. Following his graduation from Madison in 1934, he spent much of the remaining decade bouncing between jobs, frantically trying to cobble together a livelihood out of infrequent work. Abbott clung to his paperboy position until 1938, combining it with part-time employment at the Maplewood YMCA, in B. Forman's shipping and receiving departments (courtesy of Ethel), as a furrier, and in the chemical and packaging divisions of Eastman Kodak, which prompted him to take a few courses in photography. Abbott even briefly enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1936, hoping to earn an appointment to West Point. When that chance failed to materialize, he returned to civilian life in 1937.

As the 1930s drew to a close, Abbott paid careful attention to the spread of war across Europe and Asia, as well as to President Franklin Roosevelt's overtures to Allied leadership. "It sounds crass," Abbott's daughter recounted, "but Dad knew that war was coming and that the armed forces meant a job."¹⁷ In November 1940, convinced that U.S. entry was inevitable, he reenlisted in the Army at the age of twenty-five. What began as a raw gambit for opportunity became a vehicle for Abbott to discover his natural leadership abilities. Abbott's intelligence



In this undated photograph, likely from early in his military career and before his service in the Second World War, a young Robert Abbott poses in his uniform. From the Robert N.

Abbott Collection, Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.

and physical prowess enabled him to fly through the non-commissioned ranks, and he advanced from a Private First Class through First Sergeant within a year. Although West Point was no longer in the cards, the looming war created openings in the military unlike any Abbott had seen in the private sector. In need of an expanded officer corps, the Army tapped Sergeant Abbott for advanced training at Fort Benning, which he completed in June 1942, earning him a promotion to Second Lieutenant. Assigned to the Infantry, the newly-commissioned Abbott was also given his marching orders for active duty. With the December 7, 1941, Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. officially declared war and readied itself to fight on two fronts. Lieutenant Abbott was deployed to the European theater as an Infantry platoon leader. He bid farewell to Rochester and family in the summer of 1942, unsure when (or if) he would return.¹⁸

By the time Abbott shipped out, most of Continental Europe lay under Nazi Germany occupation. American liberation plans hinged upon a two-prong invasion, from Africa in the south and a landing on the beaches of France in the north. Serving under General Omar Bradley, Abbott saw action in each staging zone. He was first stationed in North Africa, arriving in November 1942. During the subsequent Tunisian campaign, Abbott fought with the First Infantry Division, 26th Infantry Regiment, displaying exceptional bravery. “He was never satisfied to be at the back directing things—he had to be out there on the front lines,” one of Abbott’s comrades marveled. “He was up there pushing all the time.”¹⁹ Abbott paid a price for his courage. Constantly bombarded by machine gun and artillery fire, he was wounded twice in North Africa and then shot again in Gela, Sicily, as his unit advanced into Italy.

Abbott’s heroics caught the attention of his commanding officers. He was promoted to First Lieutenant and then Captain in 1943, before becoming a Major the following year. His responsibilities increased in proportion with his rank. Dispatched as an Executive Officer to General Bradley’s London headquarters in January 1944, Major Abbott was placed in charge, as he described it, “in the overall administration of approximately 1,800 men.”²⁰ He was further tasked with safeguarding military files and supplies in the lead-up to the American invasion of Normandy. Abbott demonstrated remarkable valor once again over the course of a terrifying March 1944 German air raid. According to Army records, “Major Abbott, as Duty Officer, performed valuable and extremely meritorious service. During the emergency he was active in guarding valuable papers and equipment from Group Headquarters.”²¹ What this citation did not indicate—owing to its then top-secret nature—was that this cache of “valuable papers” included plans for D-Day. Whether he knew it not, Robert Abbott helped save the blueprints for the turning point of World War II from being obliterated by incendiary bombs. The magnitude of his efforts would be impressed years later. “Near the twentieth anniversary of D-Day, General Eisenhower called Dad out of the blue and thanked him for saving the plans,” Roberta Buckle recollected. “What he did apparently made a significant difference in the success of Operation Overlord.”²²

Not surprisingly, when the D-Day invasion occurred on June 6, 1944, Major Abbott was in the thick of the fray. After the amphibious landing, which provided a foothold in Europe for an American offensive against Germany, Abbott followed the Army’s path towards Berlin. He participated in missions in northern France, the Ardennes, the Rhineland, and central Germany as the U.S. slugged its way closer to securing the fall of Hitler’s Third Reich. On VE-Day, May 8, 1945, Major Abbott joined his fellow soldiers in celebrating

Germany's defeat. A few months later, on September 2, 1945, Japan's surrender brought the Second World War to a close. Abbott and the majority of American military personnel were headed home.

Rochester had not been idle while Abbott was abroad, nor was the city unaware of his contributions on the fields of battle. Patriotism and support for the war effort gripped the home front throughout World War II. Some 42,000 Rochesterians joined the armed services during the war, and the city and county responded to the national call to arms by manufacturing nearly \$1.2 billion dollars worth of goods for the military. Even while employment and disposable income increased by leaps and bounds, Rochester residents observed wartime strictures for public selflessness. Many invested in war bonds, gladly obeyed rationing protocols, and donated personal possessions to scrap metal drives. A stream of newspaper and radio reports elevated morale and kept the community apprised of events overseas,

especially those involving the city's own sons and daughters.²³

Few local names dominated the headlines like Robert Abbott's, whose litany of promotions and brave deeds made Rochester proud. "His war record reads like a compilation of several," one newspaper account crowed. Another admired Abbott's "courage, talent, and moxie," which, the reporter noted, allowed the Major to "get ahead" despite his modest background "from what the Army considers scratch."²⁴ Indeed, Abbott's star had never shined so brightly. He distinguished himself as a soldier and an officer, garnering a staggering number of awards and honors: four Purple Hearts, the French Croix de Guerre, three Bronze Stars, and two Silver Stars. Perhaps more impressive still, Abbott received the Legion of Merit for what the military commended as his "exceptionally meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding



A World War II propaganda poster from 1942 encouraging Rochesterians on the home front to collect scrap metal for the war effort. From the Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.

duties.”²⁵ General Clarence Huebner, commanding officer of the First Infantry Division showered even higher praise upon the Rochester Major, boasting that “If I’d had a Division full of Bob Abbotts, America would have won the War earlier.”²⁶

Clearly, the arc of Major Abbott’s career was in high ascent. Within a few years, the young man who had once struggled to hold down remedial part-time jobs found himself winning the accolades of French President Charles de Gaulle and New York Governor Thomas Dewey, the latter of whom presented Abbott with a Cross for Conspicuous Service.²⁷ No matter what else he expected, as Abbott prepared for demobilization, he knew that life back in Rochester would never be the same again.



An undated photograph of Major Robert Abbott receiving his French Croix de Guerre. For his service in the Second World War, Abbott also earned four Purple Hearts, three Bronze Stars, and two Silver Stars. From the Robert N. Abbott Collection, Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.

A Brief Return to Civilian Life

A throng of 50,000 Rochesterians spontaneously partied in downtown streets at the announcement that World War II had ended. The joyous crowd celebrated peace with impromptu parades and a deafening revelry of “shouting, cheering, blowing on horns, banging on tin pans and ash cans in an ‘ears-splitting’” surge of patriotism and relief.²⁸ For the first time in years, the city could also feel optimism about its future. Not only were thousands of GIs returning to American shores victorious, but they were casting off their uniforms and stowing away their firearms for civilian life on the cusp of what historian Lizbeth Cohen has called “an historic reign of prosperity.” The national output of goods and services doubled between 1946 and 1956; employment rates and wages spiked; marrying and starting families—deferred for years by the hardships of depression and war—became the leading order of the day, propelling a “baby boom”; the GI Bill made college and suburban housing suddenly affordable. Entry into the burgeoning middle class no longer appeared illusory; admittance seemed universal.²⁹



Major Abbott briefly returned to Rochester in February 1945 to marry his longtime sweetheart, Winona McConnachie. After the newlyweds honeymooned in New York City, Abbott returned to the battlefields of Europe for the final months of combat. From the Robert N. Abbott Collection, Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.

Robert Abbott reaped the benefits of this propitious moment before re-entering the civilian world. A little older than the average GI, he got an early start on postwar trends by marrying in February 1945 during a brief furlough (his only leave of the war). Even though he had been away for nearly three years, Abbott still felt the pull of home. He returned to the Tenth Ward to see his family and to visit Winona McConnachie, who had grown up while he had been away. During their separation, Abbott and McConnachie “had drifted apart and even dated other people, but they somehow always managed to come back together,” according to their daughter.³⁰ The two former teenage sweethearts reunited amidst a backdrop of war-torn uncertainty that led millions of other couples to seek the comfort of matrimony. Abbott proposed, and wedding plans fell quickly into place for a service at the North Presbyterian Church. A newspaper story, “Major Abbott Takes Bride,” recounted a “pretty ceremony” notable for “a setting

of white gladioluses, snapdragons, stock, and lighted tapers.”³¹ The betrothed Mr. and Mrs. Abbott honeymooned in New York City before the Major shipped out for more grim fighting in Germany.

Happily, this time Abbott was only gone for about six months. The highly decorated veteran returned to Rochester in September 1945, establishing a home with Winona at 658 Melville Street. Nine months later, on July 5, 1946, the Abbots announced the birth of their first and only child, daughter Roberta Lee Abbott. Good news continued for the family. After his honorable discharge from the Army, the New York State Division of Veterans Affairs hired Abbott to counsel soldiers seeking pensions and GI benefits. In July 1946, he took an even

more coveted job as Director of the Monroe County Veterans Information Bureau, which placed Abbott in charge of services for 50,000 area veterans.

For as much as civilian life agreed with Abbott, something about active duty still appealed. Following a short guest-teaching position as an Assistant Professor of Military Tactics and Science for Syracuse University's ROTC program, Abbott reentered the U.S. Army in November 1947. Retaining his rank of Major, Abbott assumed the duties of a peacetime officer. He accepted an administrative post to manage a large reserve unit, passing on his battlefield wisdom and applying his organizational acumen. "As the Senior Regular Army Instructor it was my responsibility to man and train reserve units," Abbott reminisced in an autobiographical sketch. "I was required to plan and supervise the training of all Army Reservists in Western New York."³² His regimen of keeping trained and staying sharp paid off. War came to the United States again in the summer of 1950, and Major Abbott found himself thrust once more into the breach of strange and distant battlegrounds.

Korea and Captivity

In many ways, the Korean War was an inexorable offshoot of mounting Cold War pressures. Justifying their actions in a language, as President Truman described it, devised to "scare the hell out of the American people," postwar U.S. defense leaders tethered national foreign policy to a sweeping global containment strategy.³³ In essence, architects of containment committed America to stopping the spread of communism anywhere on the grounds that they were preventing a sinister Soviet conspiracy everywhere. They likened the loss of a single country to communism to starting a chain reaction of falling dominoes that would end with the world in thrall. Since both the U.S. and the Soviet Union possessed nuclear weapons, a direct or "hot" war between superpowers was tantamount to suicide. Chastened by the risk of mutually assured destruction, the two sides settled for a "cold" war of belligerent language, espionage, propaganda, and limited military engagements in contested territory.

Divided into a communist north and (ostensibly) democratic south, the Korean peninsula became one of many proxy war zones in lieu of direct U.S.-Soviet conflagration. American intervention in this civil war on foreign soil began in June 1950 when North Korea, buoyed by apparent Soviet support, invaded its southern neighbor. "We'll have a dozen Koreas if we don't take a firm stand," General Dwight Eisenhower, who would go on to win the 1952 Presidential Election, declared approvingly when Truman escalated the "police

action.” Of course, calling Korea a “proxy war” or “police action,” or considering it a single Cold War domino, detracts from its deadly severity. The Korean War lasted from June 1950 until July 1953, resulting in four million casualties, including 33,629 Americans.³⁴

As with the Second World War, Robert Abbott numbered among the first American soldiers to arrive on the scene, landing in South Korea in September 1950. The Major was 34 years old when he left his wife and daughter behind for the harsh mountainous climes of the Asiatic peninsula. Korea’s weather fluctuated from near 100-degree temperatures in hot weather to nights capable of dropping to negative 30 degrees. Drenching rains soaked American personnel, created impassable muddy conditions, and collected in dysentery-infected pools. Biting winds often froze weapons, rendering them useless.³⁵ With the Army under-equipped for such severity, Abbott’s earliest letters home requested mittens and other gear for himself and his men.³⁶

Technically, Abbott’s role in South Korea called for him to stay well below the 38th parallel—the line demarcating Communist and Democratic Korea—in relative safety. Granting him the title of “Military Advisor,” the U.S. Army primarily intended Abbott to export his success by training reservists. Abbott recalled of this initial period: “Advisers were charged with the responsibility of supervising the tactical disposition, logistical support, training and administration of Korean Units.”³⁷ In short, Abbott was supposed to prepare South Koreans for combat rather than fight on their behalf.

Plans change. Abbott’s willingness to serve along frontlines combined with an aggressive push by General Douglas MacArthur to send the Rochester Major and his 7th Korean Division into harm’s way. Throughout the fall of 1950, as part of a “home by Christmas” campaign, an American-led coalition drove northward into the peninsula, crossing the 38th parallel and approaching the Yalu River—the border between North Korea and Communist China. On November 1, 1950, alarmed by an invasion so close to its territory, the previously neutral China launched a counter-offensive that caught the U.S. off-guard. As historian James Patterson observes, “The fighting that followed for the next few weeks was among the bloodiest in the annals of American history.”³⁸ Stranded in a hostile country and overrun by Chinese soldiers, Abbott’s company attempted a “fighting retreat,” reversing course through unforgiving terrain while maintaining a battery of fire.³⁹

Major Abbott and his men fought to the last. The final letter Abbott sent his family from the front, dated November 25, 1950, painted a bleak picture: “We are lying in a hole watching a battle of hand grenades.”⁴⁰ Two days later, on November 27, Abbott surrendered

CLASS OF SERVICE	WESTERN UNION	1201	SYMBOLS
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The filing time shown in the date line on telegrams and day letters is STANDARD TIME at point of origin. Time of receipt is STANDARD TIME at point of destination.			
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> SYA168 DEC 6 AM 9 10 </div>			
SY.ITA011 GOVT RX PD=WUX WASHINGTON DC 4 VIA SYRACUSE NY 5 VIA ITHACA NY 6=			
MRS WINONA C ABBOTT. REPORT DELIVERY= 6 ALDERA PL ROCHESTER NY=			
<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;"> THE SECRETARY OF THE ARMY HAS ASKED ME TO EXPRESS HIS DEEP REGRET THAT YOUR HUSBAND MAJ ABBOTT ROBERT N HAS BEEN MISSING IN ACTION IN KOREA SINCE 27 NOV 50 UPON RECEIPT OF FURTHER INFORMATION IN THIS OFFICE YOU WILL BE ADVISED IMMEDIATELY PD CONFIRMING LETTER FOLLOWS= EDWARD F WITSELL MAJOR GENERAL USA THE ADJUTANT GENERAL OF THE ARMY= </div>			
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> 27 50= THE COMPANY WILL APPRECIATE SUGGESTIONS FROM ITS PATRONS CONCERNING SERVICE </div>			

The December 6, 1950, telegraph informing Winona Abbott that her husband was missing in action in Korea. Major Abbott had been part of a "Home by Christmas" offensive campaign deep in North Korea, and would later be confirmed as a prisoner of war. From the Robert N. Abbott Collection, Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.

to Communist soldiers rather than allow his company to be annihilated. This was a last resort, he made clear, accepted only after munitions and all hope of escape were extinguished. "When we saw it was impossible to fight our way out," Abbott recorded, "and we'd expended our ammunition, we surrendered."⁴¹ One of his confidants remembered it similarly, telling the *Times-Union* that "Bob was captured because he was out in the front lines pushing his troops to fight. He was caught on a limb and they [the Chinese Army] cut it off."⁴² Taken as a prisoner of war in Tokchon, North Korea, Abbott was held captive until September 1953.

It is not hyperbole to suggest that the next 33 months were hell on earth for Abbott. Upon his capture he was immediately stripped of all personal property and herded into a cow pen with fellow officers. Then Abbott and roughly 1,000 other American POWs were forced to undertake a grueling 100-mile, 25-day march deeper into North Korea. Walking exclusively at night and deprived of food and water, many soldiers fell dead on the roads, where their corpses were abandoned. Stragglers who broke formation were executed. On Christmas Day 1950, the surviving POWs reached a mining camp hidden in a rocky valley. "We came to call



A picture of Major Robert Abbott taken during his captivity in the Korean War. He is visible in the back row, third prisoner from the right. Abbott was a POW from November 27, 1950, until September 5, 1953. From the Robert N. Abbott Collection, Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.

it Death Valley,” Abbott later recalled. “The sun shone in there for about two hours a day. A large percentage—it might have been a third—of the 1,000 Americans there died.... Piles of bodies were reminiscent of pictures of the Nazi horror camp at Buchenwald.”⁴³

Many prisoners proved too weak to work in the mines. Abbott himself was recovering

from grenade and bullet wounds sustained during his final stand. Left untreated, these became infected and eventually led to partial paralysis. Compounding these injuries, Abbott contracted beriberi, pellagra, and dysentery from the camp’s woefully unsanitary state. Among the most vile deprivations: POWs “packed into tiny rooms, so they couldn’t even sit down,” lice infestations, and the complete absence of bathing facilities. “Baths were unheard of,” Abbott testified. “We went for months without water touching our bodies.” Worse, the only available source of drinking water “came, untreated, from a small stream.”⁴⁴ The sole food rations were a daily scoop of stewed corn ladled out into POW hands or hats. Occasionally, malnourished prisoners banded together to catch and eat the dogs that roamed through the camp. As Abbott brooded after his return: “When you get that hungry, you’re pretty hungry.”⁴⁵

The tactics of North Korean and Chinese guards added further to Abbott’s daily agony. His communist captors subjected him to physical and psychological torture. Indeed, Abbott had the misfortune of encountering an especially sadistic guard “who enjoyed mistreating prisoners” and “seemed to take delight in seeing men die.”⁴⁶ Worse than the physical pain was the psychological torment he endured upon being relocated to a North Korean Interrogation Center in November 1951. There torture took a twofold aim: to break Abbott’s spirit through demoralization and to indoctrinate him. The demoralizing program relied upon extreme isolation, long stretches of solitary confinement intended to sever Abbott

from the outside world. He recalled how these torturers repeatedly told him “that the Korean War was unpopular in the U.S. and that ‘we were forgotten men.’”⁴⁷ To reinforce this message, Abbott was denied all mail from home, as well as any newspapers or literature. The only reading material allowed was a mandatory diet of communist propaganda. What Abbott referred to as “brainwashing” sessions were the only interruptions to his solitude. These occurred at periodic intervals in his cell, often lasting “from early in the morning until late at night.”⁴⁸

Throughout the assault on his body and psyche, Abbott suppressed all outward signs of strain. He even managed to maintain a sense of humor. In later years, after the popularization of the 1970s television program, *M*A*S*H*, his daughter recounted how many former POWs interred with Abbott compared him to Alan Alda’s warmly sardonic Hawkeye Pierce character. Like Hawkeye, Abbott played jokes and traded wisecracks to protect his sanity from the ravages of the Korean War.⁴⁹ Yet, if only in private moments, bleakness sometimes crept into his thoughts. Such despair, hidden from the rest of camp, led Abbott to secretly pen a short poem during his imprisonment:

A War Prisoner’s Prayer

<i>War is hell, they heard Sherman</i>	<i>His thoughts will wander every-</i>
<i>say,</i>	<i>where.</i>
<i>But so much worse this</i>	<i>The folks at home and good</i>
<i>modern day.</i>	<i>things to eat,</i>
<i>Jets and tanks as weapons of</i>	<i>A clean bed, with nice white</i>
<i>fire.</i>	<i>sheets.</i>
<i>Make the battlefield a bloody</i>	<i>His daily prayers will always</i>
<i>mire.</i>	<i>say:</i>
<i>Soldiers and Civilians, young and</i>	<i>Oh Lord, please hurry our</i>
<i>old,</i>	<i>liberation day...⁵⁰</i>
<i>Cannot escape the reaper’s toll.</i>	

*A prisoner of war has time to
spare,*

A lament flecked with homesickness and tinged with hopefulness for “liberation day,” Abbott’s verse attested to the fact that a longing for his life in Rochester remained firmly in his mind.

His tormentors’ insistences to the contrary notwithstanding, Abbott remained foremost in many Rochester thoughts and prayers. Far from “forgotten,” the missing Major was remembered frequently in newspaper articles that kept the city apprised of his whereabouts. (This was less true during Abbott’s first year of captivity, when North Korea refused to confirm POW lists.) Pictures of the Abbott family often appeared in print alongside articles about him, reminding Rochesterians that the captured soldier was also a hometown husband, father, and son. Under headlines and captions reading “‘Almost at End of Rope’ Says Father of Abbott,” “Happy for Daddy,” and “Kin Rejoices as War Prisoner Lists Include Loved Ones,” the family invited the entire city to share both their grief and hopes for a reunion.

The “liberation day” that Abbott yearned for in “A War Prisoner’s Prayer” finally arrived on September 5, 1953. Two months after a July 1953 Armistice ended active combat in Korea, Abbott was freed on the very last day of prisoner exchanges in Operation Big Switch. Although he received only remedial medical treatment in the weeks leading up to his release, Abbott walked through the Freedom Gate on his own volition. Still, the 33-month internment took an alarming toll. The 38-year-old’s weight dropped from 200 to 100 pounds, his once rounded face appeared gaunt and sunken, and disease ravaged his body. But the fact that Abbott was coming home trumped all else. Hours after crossing the Freedom Gate, Abbott dashed off an emotional telegram to Winona: “DARLING NEVER SO HAPPY TO BE AN AMERICAN AS TODAY. YOUR PRAYERS FOR ME HAVE BEEN ANSWERED.... EACH DAY BRINGS ME NEARER TO YOU.”⁵¹

Before the happy family reunion could take place, the Army needed to rehabilitate Abbott. Hospitalized for almost a fortnight while he healed and slowly resumed a normal diet, Abbott was also reoriented to American life. The Army provided repatriation material



Taken in December 1951, this photograph of Winona and Roberta Abbott holding a picture of the missing Major appeared in Rochester newspapers, belying the claims of Abbott’s captors that he had been “forgotten” at home. From the Robert N. Abbott Collection, Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.

in booklets entitled “Welcome Back!” and “What Has Happened Since 1950,” which summarized world news, chronicled the history of the Korean War, and enjoined freed POWs to take one last patriotic vow. “Various people may contact you and ask questions—either the press or out of curiosity,” Abbott was warned. “In talking to people, safeguard military information. Protect your fellow soldier, your family and your country.”⁵² In addition to medical and educational attention, the military rewarded Abbott for his valorous service. He was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and honored with another Purple Heart, another Bronze Star, a National Defense Service Medal, and a Unit Citation from the Republic of Korea.

Finally, after so much waiting and yearning, Colonel Robert Abbott received a hero’s welcome when he stepped foot in the Flower City on September 21, 1953. In the words of one reporter covering the event, Abbott returned as “Rochester’s most decorated hero.”⁵³

CLERK OF SERVICE

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WESTERN UNION

W. F. MARSHALL, President

SYMBOLS

DL=Day Letter

DLR=Day Letter Reply

LT=International Telegram

VLT=International Victory Letter

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O.SFB343 46 PD. INTL=O.SF TOKYO VIA RCA 6 2340=

LT WINONA ABBOTT (DLR 7)=

6 ALDERNPLACE ROCHESTER NEWYORK=

DARLING NEVER SO HAPPY TO BE AN AMERICAN AS TODAY
YOUR PRAYERS FOR ME HAVE BEEN ANSWERED RECEIVING
EXCELLENT CARE EACH DAY BRINGS ME NEARER TO YOU CANT
WAIT TO SEE YOU AGAIN LOVE ROBIN REGARDS TO EVERYBODY=

BOB=..

THE COMPANY WILL APPRECIATE SUGGESTIONS FROM ITS PATRONS CONCERNING ITS SERVICE

The telegram Robert Abbott relayed to his wife upon being released in September 1953 during Operation Big Switch. From the Robert N. Abbott Collection, Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.

Rochester's Cold Warrior

Once he was safely ensconced back in Rochester, Colonel Abbott's first order of business was recuperation. As soon as he could, he purchased a home in suburban Gates for Winona and Roberta. He also treated himself to four months of military leave to reconnect with his wife and daughter. Alas, neither time nor distance could ever fully heal Abbott. "I did not recognize him when he walked in," Roberta recounted of first seeing her father again. "I knew he had to be my Dad, but [I] checked with my Mom later that night when she tucked me into bed." Not only was Abbott emaciated following his imprisonment, but, according to his daughter, visibly "older and hardened" as well. In addition to suffering from the lingering symptoms of dysentery and malaria, he showed signs of emotional trauma. "You bet he had PTSD," Roberta noted. "The nightmares never left him."⁵⁴ Unable to rest comfortably in a bed, Abbott slept on the floor curled up in the fetal position during his first year back in Rochester.

Abbott relived many of his grim memories in testimony given before the United States Senate in December 1953. Sworn in before the Senate Committee on Government Operations, chaired by Joseph McCarthy (part of a panel that also included John F. Kennedy, then an obscure freshmen Senator from Massachusetts), Abbott answered dozens of questions about his treatment, as well as the locations of POW camps. While under oath, he confronted nearly every aspect of his long imprisonment, from the physical to the psychological torture he endured. The Senators were particularly interested in violations of the Geneva Convention—grounds for possible war crimes charges—and pressed Abbott for specific details about particularly heinous human rights abuses and wartime atrocities. "They did not recognize the Geneva Convention," Abbott stated of his captors, before recounting the full chronology of horrors visited upon him.⁵⁵ The Senators in attendance could hardly help being moved by Abbott's account. "I only hope and pray that this story could come into the home of every American family," Idaho Senator Herman Welker commended. "It would certainly

cause, in my opinion, an uprising of Americanism throughout this land."⁵⁶

Yet even as Colonel Abbott returned from Washington, D.C., to continue his recovery, many curious Rochesterians wanted to know what would happen when his period of



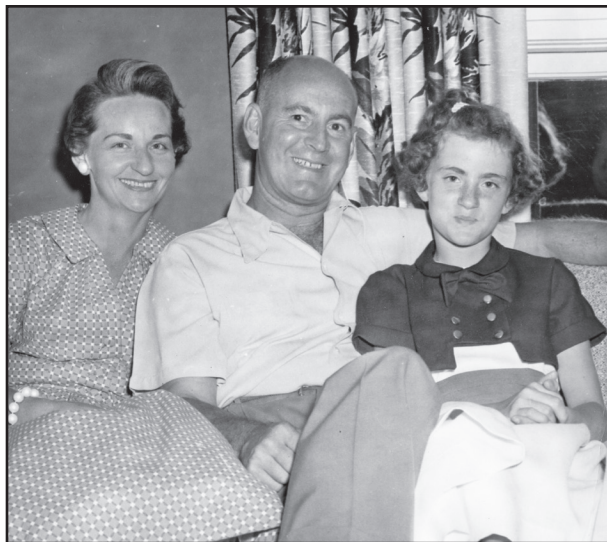
Lieutenant Colonel Robert Abbott was given this and other military-issued pamphlets as reorientation material before his return to the U.S. From the Robert N. Abbott Collection, Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.

convalescence and military leave ended. "I don't know," Abbott admitted during one of several interviews given to the press following his release. "It's even possible that I'll stay in the Army. I like it."⁵⁷ To a different reporter, Abbott confided: "I'd like to work with prisoners, of course, or maybe in psychological warfare. I'm an expert on communism, you know."⁵⁸

Unlike so many of his countrymen, whose knowledge of communism came secondhand, Abbott's expertise was born

from direct contact. His nearly three-year stint as a POW exposed him to communism on an intimate and cerebral level. Indeed, he had little choice but to master the philosophical underpinnings of the subject during his captivity. As Abbott told one reporter: "For lack of other literature, [I] read all the books on Communist theory—Marx, Engels, and the rest—and found they contained some seeds of real peace as well as the seeds which the Stalin crowd sprouted into aggression."⁵⁹ Abbott had also seen the Chinese and North Korean communist systems at close range. "They've succeeded in whipping up a tremendous amount of nationalism in China," Abbott observed of Mao Tse-tung's regime. The soldiers he met "certainly were loyal to communism."⁶⁰

Abbott's harrowing experience as a prisoner did more than educate him on the doctrine and practical workings of communism. It awakened within him a newfound passion. If he did not aim to spread "an uprising of Americanism" across the entire nation, Abbott at least hoped to foster Cold War patriotism in Rochester. In the months after his return from Korea, the celebrated veteran embarked on a citywide speaking campaign to share his opinions on communism. A powerful speaker, Abbott moved his audiences by relaying the sobering details of his POW years, which he then used as evidence to build a general case against communism. Among the stops on the Abbott tour: St. Thomas Aquinas, the Chamber



Upon his return from Korea in the fall of 1953, Colonel Abbott purchased a home in Gates, where he recuperated with his wife and daughter. From the Robert N. Abbott Collection, Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.

of Commerce, the YMCA, and the Veteran's Service Bureau. He also conducted multiple interviews with the *Rochester Times-Union* and *Democrat & Chronicle* newspapers.

At first glance, much in Abbott's anti-communist speeches appears to belong to the alarmist hysteria of the McCarthy-led Red Scare moment, which reached its crescendo in the early 1950s. Senator Joseph McCarthy, a vicious demagogue, ginned up Cold War fear mongering to its utmost extreme. He accused presidents and generals of treason, staged terrifying hearings on the thinnest of pretexts for scores of allegedly "subversive" citizens, and took to the stump to denounce communism as "a conspiracy so immense and an infamy so black as to dwarf any previous venture in the history of man."⁶¹

Abbott, too, dabbled in theatrical excess, at times espousing an equally hard anti-communist line. Certain excerpts from his speeches might easily be misattributed to McCarthy

or a similar Cold War zealot. In the fall of 1953, for instance, Abbott thundered: "Communism is like a creeping disease. If you once come in contact with it, even lightly, it will consume you."⁶² He counseled hyper-vigilance to an audience at the Arnett YMCA branch, warning that "Communism grows stronger in the face of feebleness."⁶³ Ramping up his call for a united front against the spread of communism, Abbott cautioned another crowd not to dismiss the gravity of the "red menace," either at home or abroad. "History," Abbott railed, "is littered with the graves of civilizations that assumed all was well."⁶⁴ His personal experience with the "police system" of communist rule lent an acute authority to Abbott's words. His basic refrain that "communism in any form can never be as good as our own capitalism" resonated in Rochester's assembly halls as a result of his unassailable reputation.⁶⁵

LOCAL WAR HERO TO SPARK OPENING BLAST-OFF AT TNT

By Tom O'Brien

Lt. Colonel Robert N. Abbott, Rochester's most decorated war hero, will speak at tomorrow's initial TNT meeting in the Chamber.

The TNT (Tuesday Noon Timers) meetings are open to ALL Jaycees. The meetings are planned and conducted for the benefit of the entire JC organization and are dedicated to "good fellowship."


Colonel Abbott was captured on November 27, 1950, in North Korea when part of the Seventh ROK Division was surrounded by Chinese Communists. Abbott had been attached to the ROK division as a United Nations military advisor on his arrival in Korea in October, 1950.

In World War II, he won three Purple Hearts, the French Croix de Guerre, two Bronze Stars and the Silver Star, the latter for heroism during the invasion of Sicily and in the North African and European campaigns. Awaiting him when he stepped through Freedom Gate in Korea was a promotion from Major to Lt. Colonel and another Bronze Star, his eighth decoration in two wars.

At tomorrow's luncheon, Lt. Colonel Abbott will review his personal experiences while confined in the Communist prison camps. In addition he will present his personal views on National Defense and the Communist threat.


Besides this very interesting speaker, Jack Osborn promises some surprises in the form of additional entertainment to liven up the proceedings. Lunch will be served at 12:15. The program will begin at 12:45 and end at 1:30.

In addition Jaycee president John Gilman will present the man-of-the-month award to a very deserving Jaycee and there will be door prizes for those fortunate enough to win them.



Lt. Col. Robert N. Abbott
Photo by Lisa Duncan

What's Coming



Monday, October 19, 1953
12:15 Government Affairs Committee

Tuesday, October 20, 1953
12:15 T.N.T.

Wednesday, October 21, 1953
8:15 JayNees Fashion Show
7:30 PAL Model Railroad Committee, Edgerton Park.

Thursday, October 22, 1953
12:15 Civic Improvement Committee
7:00 Colecoons Picnic (Ellison Park)

Friday, October 23, 1953
12:15 TRADESHOWS Headline

Monday, October 26, 1953
12:15 Traffic & Safety Committee

Monday, October 26, 1953
12:15 Executive Committee

8:00 LRT

Tues., Oct. 27, Thurs., Oct. 29, 1953
7:30 PAL Model Railroad Committee, Edgerton Park.

From the Robert N. Abbott Collection, Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.

Yet if Abbott parroted some generic anti-communist saber-rattling, he hardly constituted a cookie-cutter Cold Warrior. Nor did he serve as a mouthpiece for the military or the state. Abbott's anti-communism was genuinely his own, and it contained nuances unique to his perspective. It took an open mind, after all, to acknowledge, as Abbott did, the "seeds of real peace" in the Marxist tracts that were foisted upon him during his imprisonment. Abbott's liberalness of thought extended to Chinese Communism, which he took great care to distinguish from its Soviet counterpart. Furthermore, for all of Abbott's talk about the dangers inherent in communism, he adopted a realistic tact when it came to accepting its co-existence in the global order. China held the key. "Living with his captors for three years convinced him that control of world communism could pass from Moscow to Peking," one newspaper summarized.⁶⁶ And the Colonel was, in fact, eager for this transfer to happen. As he attested to a Rochester journalist, Chinese Communism carried the potential for good: "If Mao succeeds in superseding the Kremlin...the basic policy of communism might well be turned from aggression to a peace under which East and West could live together."⁶⁷

One is hard pressed to imagine Senator McCarthy drawing such a fine point to accommodate peace. Neither would he have approved of Abbott's praise for certain aspects of Chinese Communism. In statements to the press, Abbott openly admired some of Chairman Mao's accomplishments, including the "improvement of food distribution," "flood control achievements," and "a more equitable distribution of wealth." The fact that he witnessed these feats under the duress of captivity added weight to Abbott's conclusions. Moreover, he showed a remarkable willingness to give due credit to the merits of Mao's China. "The broad masses of peasants, I'd say, are better off today than they were under the Nationalists," Abbott posited. "The peasant class has more today, and the upper class less."⁶⁸ Abbott did not offer these positive assessments to negate his torturous ordeal or to diminish his obvious disdain for communism. Instead, in his speeches and interviews Abbott demonstrated an uncanny honesty. He leveled with the people of Rochester who gathered to listen to him, supplying a candor all-too-rare in platitudinous public life. The geopolitics of the Cold War were complicated and perhaps contradictory; so, too, was Robert Abbott's understanding of them.

"Civil Defense is Everybody's Job"

Already a war hero twice-over, Colonel Abbott's high-profile rounds on the speaking circuit thrust him squarely into the Rochester spotlight. Rumors of the rising star's inevitable entry into politics swirled through the city in the spring of 1954. Noting his "strong support



Echoing the tones of other Cold War leaders, Robert Abbott gave a number of anti-communist speeches throughout Rochester following his return. This article reports on a speech he delivered to students at the St. Thomas Aquinas Honor Society of Nazareth Academy Cadet School. From the Robert N. Abbott Collection, Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.

from veterans' groups," a March 1954 *Rochester Times-Union* article speculated that Abbott appeared the heavy favorite to land the position of manager of the Community War Memorial, then under construction at Court and Exchange streets.⁶⁹

However, no doubt owing to his strong ties to the city (a native Tenth Warder) and county (now a resident of Gates) alike, Abbott was clearly being groomed for something larger. Rochester City Manager Robert Aex and Monroe County Manager Clarence Smith joined forces to offer Abbott a newly created position.

Effective May 1, 1954, he was tapped to become director of a consolidated city-county civil defense office.

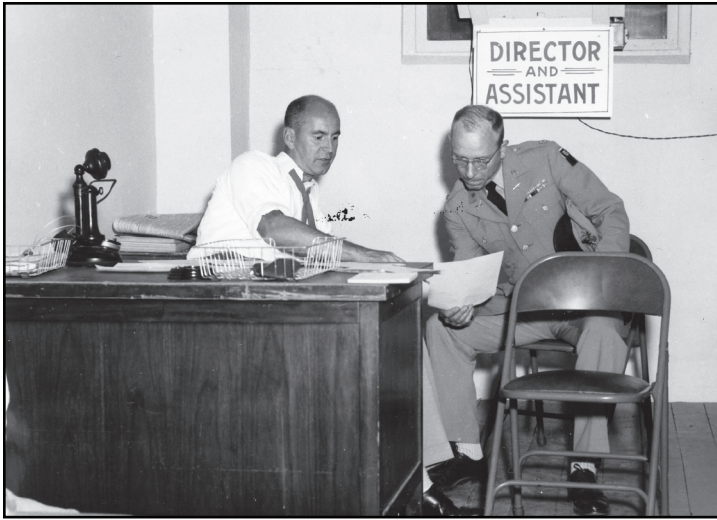
Previously, Rochester and Monroe County had maintained separate and apparently ineffectual departments in

loose adherence to the Federal Civil Defense Act of 1950. Apart, these offices seemed more perfunctory than functional, and received poor marks for their efforts to install an emergency response infrastructure. (In later years Abbott characterized the early civil defense offices as "an infant with an idealistic goal, and little else."⁷⁰) Bringing them together—and bringing their disaster preparedness up to speed—was a big honor, and a big challenge. "Abbott inherits the disjointed organizations that in three years scheduled no cooperative tests," one newspaper observed. "Abbott must not only revive them, but conduct a drive to increase their numbers to meet state quotas."⁷¹ Still, Rochester's media lauded the choice. Newspapers described the battle-tested Abbott as "tough-minded," yet blessed with "a flexible, essentially civilian mind."⁷² In short, according to one editorial column, "The nominee to boss the unified command appears to be literally tailored for the job."⁷³

Predictably, Abbott dove headfirst into the new post, retiring from the Army to fully devote himself to uniting a singular Monroe County Office of Civil Defense. In many ways, he was ideally suited for the position. It required the leadership and organizational skills he displayed throughout his military career; it depended upon Abbott's ability to continue to appeal directly to the public, to rally the community behind the cause of defense; and it demanded a genuine belief in Cold War principles, the commitment and temerity to build a localized version of a national security apparatus in case of a natural disaster or communist attack in Rochester. From his new office at 34 State Street, near the Four Corners and overlooking downtown, Director Abbott succeeded wildly on every benchmark.

Over the next 10 years, Abbott presided over a period of incredible growth in civil defense. Given *carte blanche* to hire a team, Abbott assembled a full-time staff of 22 people with an annual operating budget of \$217,000. The bolstered personnel and resources were necessary. As County Manager Smith put it shortly after the merger of city and county offices, "We still have to take care of the city, 19 towns, and 10 villages."⁷⁴ In essence, Abbott was asked to construct an intricate web connecting a diversity of localities. This meant forging collaboration between the civil defense headquarters in Rochester and every residential center of Monroe County, each of which was asked to name a liaison to coordinate with Abbott's office. "While there could be complete devastation, there is no guarantee that a...[disaster] will hit at the Four Corners," Abbott warned in 1955, urging greater inter-county cooperation. "[I]t might hit in Penfield, or Pittsford, or somewhere else."⁷⁵ Whether in response to a man-made or natural crisis, Abbott wanted to bond every town and neighborhood together. He envisioned an integrated defense grid in which any animosity simmering between various urban, suburban, or rural areas could be subsumed for the common good. "Civil Defense, of necessity, must be a coordinated community effort," Abbott urged. "It must be recognized as reaching every facet of community life—Home, Church, School, Hospital, Government, Rural and Metropolitan Areas."⁷⁶

Implementing a comprehensive plan for a geographically diffuse county of nearly 600,000 people was a tall order. To be truly effective, Abbott's Office of Civil Defense needed a deep roster of volunteers. Abbott recognized this fact immediately, turning his earliest attentions to recruiting and training drives. "When I accepted the responsibility for the Civil Defense in Monroe County, I did with my eyes wide open," he reported in July 1954, two months into the job. "There was a need for a Civil Defense organization. We have organized 17 separate groups with 30,000 volunteers."⁷⁷ Abbott cultivated volunteers of all stripes,



From the Robert N. Abbott Collection, Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.

and from all parts of the region. He cast a wide net into the community, reaching out indiscriminately, as he observed, to collect “a lot of people who help us with their everyday skills—doctors, volunteer firemen, nurses, police, teachers, pilots in Civil Air Patrol, highway

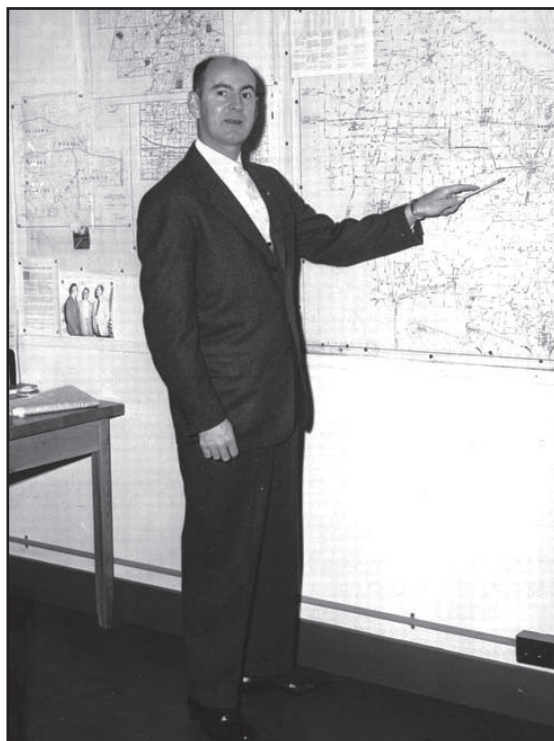
department crews.... We think once they’ve had the training they’ll retain enough so they can help in an emergency.”⁷⁸ The civil defense training matched the background of the applicant, with specializations ranging from first aid to auxiliary policing and firefighting to education in radiology. All of this was by Abbott’s design. As he explained to the *Rochester Times-Union*: “We organize cadres—hard cores of trained people—as the heart of a team that can be mobilized in a disaster.”⁷⁹

Abbott also canvassed the region to establish adequate emergency shelter spaces for the population of Monroe County. He collaborated with approximately 400 different private building owners to construct a network of fallout stations scattered throughout the area. Each site had a Civil Defense sigil affixed to the property to alert citizens of its dual purpose as a shelter. (Many of these signs can still be seen on Rochester buildings today). This was an ongoing project for Abbott’s civil defense offices, which estimated that they added emergency space for approximately 20,000 Rochesterians each month as they strove for the ultimate goal of establishing one bed for every resident. According to Abbott’s standards, each sheltered person would be allotted ten square feet of space and a two-week ration of food and water; thereafter a series of strategically-placed supply depots could feed and clothe Rochester for prolonged emergencies.⁸⁰

Even as he counted all of his logistical accomplishments in expanding the physical footprint of civil defense, Abbott constantly pursued a higher purpose. “Our biggest problem

in civil defense is psychological,” he declared upon his appointment as civil defense director, a statement reminiscent of his professed post-POW interest in communism and “psychological warfare.”⁸¹ Seemingly everywhere he looked, Abbott saw signs of vulnerability caused by naiveté and mass denial, a collective psychological block preventing his friends and neighbors from seeing the dangers lurking outside their doorsteps. “The American people are traditionally devoted to peace and they are disinclined to think of the unpleasant possibility of nuclear war,” an incredulous Abbott chastised in an open letter to the *Democrat & Chronicle*. “This attitude has made it difficult over a period of years to promote a strong non-military defense program in the United States.”⁸² Although the phenomenon was national, Abbott trained his sights on confronting it in Rochester. Ironically, to protect his native city the former soldier had to strip it of assumed notions of safety.

Throughout his decade as civil defense director, Abbott waged a battle for the hearts and minds of Rochesterians. He stressed again and again that “[my] most important job is to educate the general public.”⁸³ Essentially, as he concluded in an interview with the *Times-Union*, “C[ivil] D[efense] has to be made part of everyday life.”⁸⁴ Abbott sought to graft an appreciation for civil defense, along with an understanding of how it worked, into the marrow of the community through a direct promotional campaign. “We do a tremendous job on distributing leaflets, talking, and distributing films,” Abbott boasted to a newspaper reporter. “Some of that is bound to rub off on people, if you can get to large numbers of them.” Referring to this educative function as “the lifeblood of Civil Defense,” Abbott insisted on making it a top priority for his office.⁸⁵



Monroe County Office of Civil Defense Director Robert Abbott stands before a map of the Rochester area.

During his 10-year directorship, 1954–1964, Abbott strove to protect his native region from the dangers of the Cold War, as well as natural disaster. From the Robert N. Abbott Collection, Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.

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SECTION

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Rochester, N. Y.,
Sun., Oct. 20, 1963



THIS STORE
IS PLEDGED AS AN
EMERGENCY FOOD
DISTRIBUTION POINT
OFFICE OF CIVIL DEFENSE
MONROE COUNTY, NEW YORK

THIS FACILITY
IS PLEDGED AS AN
EMERGENCY MASS
FEEDING STATION
IN THE EVENT OF A
CIVIL DEFENSE DISASTER

this
HOME
is prepared for
emergency

TRANSPORTATION
THIS VEHICLE
IS PLEDGED FOR
EMERGENCY USE
WHEN NEEDED
By the
OFFICE OF CIVIL DEFENSE
MONROE COUNTY, NEW YORK

MEDICAL

WIDE RANGE OF CIVIL DEFENSE ACTIVITIES is dramatized by this array of insignia designating representative units.

Where Are We Going With Civil Defense?

By PAT ZISKA, *Dramatist and Chronicle Staff Reporter*

More than 1,000 Civil Defense directors from across the nation, meeting here this week, will be given an opportunity to observe an aggressive, rapidly growing CD organization which is considered one of the country's finest.

The directors are arriving today for the week-long 12th annual Conference of the U.S. Civil Defense Council which opens tomorrow in the Community War Memorial.

Monroe County Civil Defense Director Robert N. Abbott will be general chairman of the conference, which will bring to Rochester defense experts from Washington, all of the 50 states and most of the nation's larger cities.

ABBOTT YESTERDAY took time from his duties as host to summarize the current status of CD locally and nationally and to take a look at his program's future goals.

The 47-year-old director heads a 22-member staff here which operates on a \$177,000 annual budget, authorized by the Board of Supervisors.

He pointed out that in the nine years since he has served as director of the consolidated city-county office, CD has grown from an infant with an idealistic goal and little else, to a mature, coordinated, nation-wide entity which is duty implementing its goals by concrete action.

Civil Defense, he added, grew up only during the past two years.

Under provisions of the Federal Civil Defense Act of 1950, responsibility for the program was to be exercised jointly by federal and state governments.

Without centralized guidance the growing up process came slowly.

THEN in 1961, CD came of age.

First, responsibility for its operation was transferred to the Defense De-

partment by a presidential order of July 20, 1961. The program is now supervised by Stuart L. Pittman, assistant secretary of Defense for Civil Defense.

Pittman will arrive Thursday and address the conference at 2 p.m. In December, 1961 the Defense Department announced a long-range national fallout shelter program geared to establishing 235,000,000 shelter spaces.

The national figure follows for daytime and nighttime population concentration and for projected population growth.

THE FIRST TOOL given to CD to achieve this goal was an authorization for a nationwide survey to locate existing buildings which could serve as public shelters.

"Two years ago when the Berlin crisis occurred, Monroe County had no public

shelters," Abbott said, "and even one year ago when the Cuban crisis flared we only had shelters people had built in their homes."

Within the past year the local picture has brightened, he added.

Once the local survey was finished, Abbott's staff began canvassing owners of large buildings and convincing them of the need for permitting CD to set up shelter spaces.

So far, 200 building owners in the county have agreed to let Abbott's staff set up and supply the space.

The organization first puts up a sign on the building showing that shelter areas are available inside.

Then the staff begins moving in a two-week supply of food and water for each space.

Cost of the food and water supplies per person is less than \$3, Abbott said.

CD experts figure 16 square feet of space is

needed for each person and a two-week supply of food and water takes up 1.5 cubic feet per person.

SUPPLIES are trucked here from Seneca Ordnance Depot in Romulus and placed in the buildings by five laborers employed by Abbott.

Since stocking began last March, 115,000 spaces in 170 buildings have been provided.

Abbott is hopeful the stockpile will continue at the rate of 20,000 spaces per month.

His staff is continuing to contact building owners.

Abbott figures there are about 500 usable buildings in the county with a capacity of 451,000 spaces.

Four of the seven date-approved shelters built in schools around the state are in Monroe County.

They are Saint Pius School with a capacity of

478 students; Harley School with a capacity of 305 students; Putnam Junior High School with a capacity of 985 students and Crane Elementary School in the Rush-Blenheim School District with a capacity of 800 students.

ABBOTT SAYS his staff intends to continue its intensive education program.

The local CD office at 61 Main St. E. has more than 40 films available for use by civic groups.

About 600 persons per year are trained to aid doctors in time of emergency.

They are selected from among the thousands who take basic first aid courses.

Courses are also conducted for registered nurses in disaster nursing.

Auxiliary police have about 2,500 strong in the county are trained in a special 10-hour course conducted at the Rochester Police-Fire Training Academy.

Monroe County is training CD men for the new field of radiological defense.

Volunteers are taught how to monitor radiation fallout with geiger counters.

There are now 72 stations in the county equipped for such detection.

The stations are spotted in town halls, hospitals, and police and fire stations.

BUT WITH ALL THIS, Abbott feels his most important job is to educate the general public.

"We want to give people the facts about the dangers of fallout with the realistic approach that there is something we can do to counteract its effects. We have to offer this 'On the Beach' realism."

To Abbott, civil defense means common sense.

"This is the message," he says, "that we have to get across to the public."



ROBERT N. ABBOTT, Monroe County director of Civil Defense

Survive for What?

By ROBERT N. ABBOTT
Monroe County director of Civil Defense

Speaking before the United Nations General Assembly on Sept. 25, 1961, President Kennedy said: "Every man, woman and child lives under a nuclear sword of Damocles, hanging by the slenderest of threads, capable of being cut at any moment by accident, miscalculation or madness."

The American people are traditionally devoted to peace and they are disinclined to think of the unpleasant possibility of nuclear war. This attitude has made it difficult to elect a president who would hold them responsible for their safety in the event of an emergency.

However, the Berlin and Cuban crises caused many Americans to take a closer look at the state of their individual preparedness program. Finding themselves extremely vulnerable in most instances they raised a hue and cry as to "What is our government doing to protect us?"

Elected and appointed government officials, also overnight, developed a new interest in Civil Defense and learned, to their dismay, in many instances that the public would hold them responsible for their safety in the event of an emergency.

THE CUBAN SITUATION clearly demonstrated that Civil Defense must maintain a state of constant alertness and readiness to respond on a moment's notice. The accepted concept of disaster planning in Monroe County has been based on the theory that "when disaster strikes the disaster forces of the community strike back." As Civil Defense is best described as "Government in Time of Emergency," the word government comes from a Greek word meaning "to steer." It suddenly became evident to governors, mayors, supervisors, councilmen and others that they should chart a course consistent with the complex problems of our times.

As a result, an accelerated Civil Defense program was born at all levels of government.

IT IS GENERALLY CONCEIVED that communities, large and small, must be prepared initially to respond to an emergency with trained fire, police, medical, rescue, radiological, warner and communications personnel who will assume responsibilities directed toward immediate survival. This is the glamorous side of Civil Defense and the picture that has carried through from World War II of rescue and relief operations.

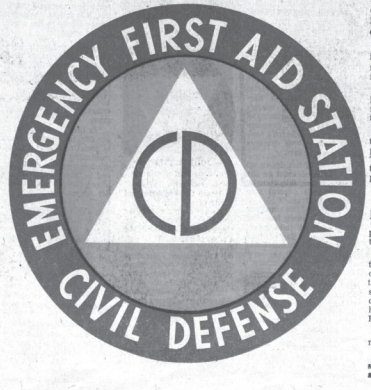
A new and much less glamorous phase of Civil Defense is today obtaining emphasis at all echelons of government. Many persons have been heard to ask, "Survive for what?" The question points out vividly the need for "emergency subjects" a heretofore little discussed subject.

Today "emergency planning" is an area involving highly specialized people both in and out of government who are developing plans for the resource management of food, fuel, transportation and power as well as personnel, the "necessity of government," including established lines of succession and preservation and protection of records.

THE IMAGE OF CIVIL DEFENSE has changed in the past two years.

It now centers around "shelters" with our homes, schools, churches, public buildings and places of employment prepared as havens for a period of possibly two weeks during which the nation would decay. Slowly but surely the nation would begin to recover.

There is no single answer to the problem of survival in the nuclear age. A balanced program of both defense and emergency is gradually emerging and encouraging being accepted by the majority of the population.



To be sure, leaflets and films occupied a good deal of time for the Monroe County Office of Civil Defense. Under Abbott's supervision, his civil defense television and radio film library became the largest in New York State. By his estimation, every year the Civil Defense office distributed 200,000 pamphlets, including the perennial-favorite, "The Family Fallout Shelter," a staple in the literature that Abbott deemed one of his "most popular" items. Abbott further made his staff available for public sessions, often attending events in person or sending an assistant to represent him at the lectern on the 200 to 250 speaking engagements fulfilled every year. "I think visual aids, plus a hard-hitting talk, will drive home some precautions," Abbott told a *Times-Union* reporter.⁸⁶

Of course, Abbott knew all too well just how effective a "hard-hitting" talk could be. The power of his personality and the gravity of his anti-communist speeches had roused the city for the Cold War upon his return from Korea. As the public face for Monroe County Civil Defense, Abbott continued to occupy center stage, now railing less against the spread of communism abroad than for enhanced disaster preparedness at home. Through television, radio, print, and in-person lectures, he reached into every Rochester household to champion his cause. Regardless of the medium, Abbott's message was clear: he expected fuller appreciation for the need for civil defense, as well as complete cooperation with his office.

Abbott hammered his points across in a newspaper editorial drafted in March 1955. The headline of his piece announced a countywide call to arms: "Civil Defense is Everybody's Job." Representative of the tone and tenor of Abbott's public relations blitz, his editorial lambasted local apathy. Rochester, he warned, was highly susceptible to communist aerial assault:

Not a voice can be heard that will say Civil Defense is not a must; public officials, laborers, industrialists, businessmen, students, housewives, and newspaper editors all fully recognize that the enemy has the capability for waging a successful attack on this country. No one doubts that the centers of population with their wealth of skilled labor are going to be the targets.... Time may be short. Let's not wait for catastrophe to alert us to the need for getting our shoulders behind our own county program that will mean survival for the maximum number of people.⁸⁷

This front page spread in the October 20, 1963, Democrat & Chronicle Magazine, which includes an editorial by Robert Abbott, reflects the promotional outpouring of the Monroe County Office of Civil Defense. As civil defense director, Abbott considered educational public outreach "the lifeblood of Civil Defense." From the Robert N. Abbott Collection, Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.

Perhaps more ominously, Abbott insisted that the city would face such an attack alone. “The state and federal government cannot save our lives if disaster strikes our area,” he noted. “Washington and Albany are too far away to provide help immediately.”⁸⁸ Cut off from outside help, the community had no choice but to turn inwards. As Abbott thundered, “Civil Defense is primarily a local problem, and the citizens of Monroe County are going to live or die by their own efforts.”⁸⁹ Living depended upon Rochesterians banding together to follow the prescriptive advice outlined in Abbott’s editorial: registering as volunteers, learning fallout signals and evacuation routes, memorizing emergency radio broadcast frequencies, and preparing in-home emergency stations. Most importantly, citizens needed to respect the Monroe County Office of Civil Defense. “Be prepared to move promptly and calmly if local authorities instruct you to evacuate,” Abbott stressed.⁹⁰



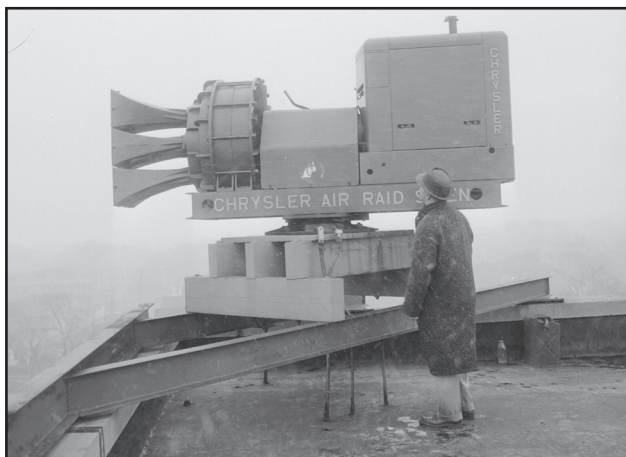
Robert, Winona, and Roberta Abbott in their home fallout shelter. In May 1955, reporters from the Rochester Times-Union depicted the Abbott family as a model for civil defense preparedness. From the Robert N. Abbott Collection, Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.

If the Civil Defense Office’s output occasionally bordered on propaganda, its director strove to avoid outright sensationalism. Despite occasional instances to the contrary, Abbott generally resisted lowest-common-denominator fear mongering. “The flow of information released through Public Information channels to the residents of Monroe County has been based on facts alone,” he dictated in a 1959 organizational report. “No attempt has been made to utilize ‘scare tactics’ as a means of gaining public support of Civil Defense. Instead, the Program has been directed toward SURVIVAL THROUGH EDUCATION.”⁹¹

For Abbott, when it came to civil defense, means mattered just as much as ends. His was a trusted and revered place in the community—not a position to be taken lightly. The same candor and integrity that built his reputation, the same nuanced worldview that brought him to new heights of influence, combined to keep him grounded as civil defense director.

Abbott also tried to lead his community-based civil defense initiatives by example. In May 1955, for instance, he invited *Rochester Times-Union* reporters and photographers into his Gates home to showcase his preparedness measures. As it happened, Abbott had just completed construction of a personal fallout shelter, stocking it with survival supplies. Tying his bunker with broader obligations of family protection, Abbott strategically posed Winona and Roberta for pictures among first aid kits and canned goods. “I based my decision to build a shelter on having viewed the test explosions,” Abbott explained in the accompanying newspaper article. “It was very evident that anyone with a shelter had a good chance of surviving the blast.”⁹² The insinuation here was plain: other Rochester fathers and husbands should feel duty-bound to emulate the precautions of their civil defense director.

When he was not modeling responsible Cold War behaviors, Abbott busied himself by putting his office—and his community’s integrated response system of volunteers—through its paces. Abbott regularly conducted training exercises, staging mock nuclear attacks and simulating natural disasters. In March 1956, for example, Abbott’s office responded to a simulated flood of the Genesee River. Almost as soon as the drill began, Abbott’s coordinated team assembled on the Ballantyne Bridge ready to sandbag the floodwalls and evacuate nearby citizens. They scored high marks for a fast reaction, their efforts heralded for hypothetically “saving” the city from being washed away. Abbott in particular drew praise; in his rush to report for duty, according to one newspaper, he dashed onto the scene “without his rubbers.”⁹³



A January 1958 photograph of the 185-horsepower, 138-decibel air raid siren installed in downtown Rochester under Civil Defense Director Abbott’s watch. Courtesy of the City of Rochester.

More frequent for Abbott's office were a series of atomic blast exercises. Occurring multiple times in the 1950s, these were alarming spectacles to behold: 185-horsepower, 138-decibel sirens blared from the *Times-Union* building downtown while fire bells rang out at every station; civil defense wardens scrambled to take positions downtown, directing traffic and steering people towards fallout shelters; the public was expected to cooperate fully. Abbott could usually be found in the middle of the din, orchestrating the movements of a massive organizational effort fanning out for miles around Rochester. This was exactly how he appeared on the front page of the June 14, 1954, *Times-Union*, his visage locked in calm concentration as he radioed orders to his ground forces. "Mock Atom Raid 'Ravages' 41 Cities," announced a newspaper headline. The story noted that Rochester participated—and acquitted itself well—in a nationwide drill.⁹⁴

Similar nuclear attack facsimiles continued at regular intervals. "Enemy bombers—theoretically—struck from the north to unleash an imaginary torrent of nuclear death," the *Times-Union* reported after another such drill in July 1957.⁹⁵ How did Abbott's office fare? "Pretty well," the director acknowledged after that particular trial. "People voluntarily participated according to all our plans. There was more public awareness than I have ever seen here before."⁹⁶ Still, the system could always be improved. An estimated 227,510 Rochesterians were counted as faux-casualties in the July 1957 mock raid, a number, Abbott fretted, that he hoped to eventually reduce by two-thirds. Clearly, the civil defense director had more work to do.

Over the ensuing years, Robert Abbott made it his business to keep his Monroe County Office of Civil Defense ever-growing and increasingly responsive to all contingencies in the event of an actual emergency. Should Rochester find itself imperiled, he wanted the tools in place to ensure the city's brightest possible future. And a real crisis did come to Rochester under Abbott's watch. Just not the kind he expected.

July 1964

The summer of 1964 was a hot one for Rochester. Even as the 49-year-old Abbott was marking the 10-year anniversary of his appointment as civil defense director, temperatures and internal pressures were boiling over in parts of the city. On the surface, Rochester seemed unlikely to become one of eight American cities to experience a race rebellion that summer. Its proud heritage as a "burned-over" stronghold of 19th-century abolition, combined with its status as the home of a pantheon of reformers in Frederick

Douglass, Susan B. Anthony, and Walter Rauschenbusch, suggested a progressive climate of tolerance and equality. Yet the large infusion of African Americans to Rochester during the midcentury Second Great Migration—which brought millions of black southerners to northern cities in search of better lives—put this self-image to the test and found it wanting. As historian Emily Morry noted:

The majority of these [black] migrants found themselves overwhelmingly concentrated in the 7th Ward and Corn Hill because the de facto segregation then in place prohibited them from living elsewhere.... Newly arrived African Americans ended up paying higher rents than had their immigrant predecessors for smaller living spaces with minimal amenities and often unsanitary conditions. Compounding these difficulties, 7th Ward blacks at mid-century, unlike their white neighbors, were either shut out from, or ineligible for, most jobs at many of Rochester's biggest employers.⁹⁷

In other words, systematic de facto segregation and patterns of discrimination constrained the burgeoning black community even as Rochester's white population increasingly enjoyed prosperity and the lure of fast-growing suburbs.

Hardly exempt from national trends, then, Rochester proved an important early staging area for the racial unrest that swept through the country in the 1960s. The crisis of inequality in the Flower City came to a head over three nights of stunning destruction in late July 1964 as a spontaneous resistance movement erupted in the 7th Ward before spreading elsewhere. Over the course of the uprising, Rochester faced a reckoning with the hard truths of its racial politics. The lesson came at a steep cost: the city was to be occupied by the National Guard, and it sustained over \$2 million in damage, as well as nearly 1,000 arrests, 350 injuries, and five riot-related deaths.



Rochester's race rebellion began on July 24, 1964, when police officers attempted to make an arrest during a neighborhood block party at the corner of Joseph Avenue and Nassau Street. Racial tensions had been simmering beneath the surface in the city for years. Courtesy of the City of Rochester.



A chaotic scene unfolded throughout the weekend of July 25–26, 1964, as rioting spread to Rochester's predominantly African-American Third Ward. Courtesy of the City of Rochester.

Born from years of frustration, the spark that set the blaze of Rochester's race rebellion ignited on the sweltering night of Friday, July 24, 1964. Events began innocently enough. A neighborhood block party and dance, held outdoors at the corner of Joseph Avenue and Nassau Street, attracted hundreds of African Americans from the area. As the celebration—organized by a group of local mothers to raise funds for a playground—unfolded and evening turned to night, Rochester police arrived in response to complaints of a drunken teenage reveler. The sight of a sizeable police presence, quickly augmented by calls for reinforcements and a K-9 unit, jostling through the crowd to reach the teenager struck a raw nerve. A number of people in attendance intervened to prevent the youth's detainment. Tensions ran high on both sides. On the one hand, law enforcement had been perceived as a harassing element in the neighborhood, especially following several unresolved accusations of police brutality against black citizens. On the other, officers on the scene were understandably apprehensive of an agitated throng of people. "It's hard to say what really set it off," one eyewitness from the street party said years later. "All of a sudden it was like a lot of frustration just popped."⁹⁸

Pop it did. Amid rumors that police dogs were biting African-American bystanders, members of the crowd threw glass bottles and stones at police officers and police cars; the vehicle belonging to the Chief of Police William Lombard had its windows smashed before being overturned on the street, where it caught fire. Angry rioters fanned through the 7th Ward, looting local businesses and attacking white citizens. An overwhelmed police force withdrew from the neighborhood, repositioning to contain the violence instead of combatting it, as the rebellion seethed on toward morning.

Rochester woke up on July 25 in a veritable warzone. Overnight, New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller had dispatched state troopers, who, along with city police armed with tear gas, marched into the 7th Ward after dawn to temporarily quell the uprising. Civil Defense Director Abbott and city leaders scrambled to restore order and to prepare in case of another outcropping of violence. City Manager Porter Homer declared a state of emergency, imposing a dusk-to-dawn curfew and ordering all bars and liquor stores closed until the sense of danger had passed. State and local police heavily patrolled African-American neighborhoods in the hopes of suppressing further rioting. These efforts proved futile. A second front of Rochester's race rebellion opened even before the curfew took effect that same night.



On Sunday, July 26, Governor Nelson Rockefeller summoned the New York State National Guard to Rochester. The violence of the rebellion was ebbing by the time the Guard arrived, however, giving way to sights of wreckage and the need for citywide recovery. Courtesy of the City of Rochester.

Throughout the next two days, the weekend of July 25 and 26, Rochester's predominantly African-American Third Ward convulsed with its own collective outrage. The streets of the community became battlegrounds between police and residents in which both sides applied strong force. Where law enforcement wielded clubs and pressurized hoses, rioters lobbed bricks and shattered glass from broken storefront windows. Though fortunately rare, gunfire was sporadically exchanged. A policeman who saw action on Jefferson Avenue described a nightmarish situation in which the Third Ward "got to be a kind of guerilla-type operation," a chaotic swirl of dangerous projectiles, fires, blaring alarms, and gangs of rioters darting in and out of sight.⁹⁹ More stores were pilfered and ransacked even as some shopkeepers and homeowners brandished weapons to defend their property.

As the race riots entered their third day on Sunday, July 26, Governor Rockefeller mustered the New York State National Guard in Rochester. A convoy of soldiers armed with bayonets and (unloaded) M-1 rifles reached the city in the evening to find the unrest petering out of its own accord as mass arrests continued and rioting groups slowly disbanded. Put simply, most people seemed to be either going home or going to jail, and the city fell quiet at last. The worst of the violent turmoil was over, though the longer work of rebuilding communities and frayed relationships had only just begun.

It should come as no surprise that Robert Abbott had hardly been idle during the rebellion. Whether it was during his service as a soldier or as director of civil defense, in the face of an emergency he had never been content to serve from the safety of the rear. Throughout the weekend, he conferred and coordinated with the police, primarily doing his best to keep his civil defense team out of law enforcement's way until the fighting ceased. Yet Abbott himself could not turn his back on the frontlines with his city in peril. Rochester Mayor Frank Lamb commended the civil defense director for the way "he worked shoulder to shoulder with other local authorities."¹⁰⁰ As always, as was his nature, Abbott was on the ground and squarely in the middle of a volatile situation.

On the afternoon of July 26, after consulting with City Manager Homer, Abbott decided to take to the skies to survey and monitor the riot areas. He had seen enough on the ground level over three days of rage and destruction.¹⁰¹ Abbott argued for the benefits of his undertaking a mission to conduct "on the spot reconnaissance of the troubled areas." "Since the situation had become so widespread," he said, "the authorities were plagued with answering calls on a widespread basis and therefore [I was] hopeful to spot trouble before it started."¹⁰² Abbott, that is, intended to hover over the "guerilla" climate to report areas

in greatest need of assistance and to deter further looting. “Bob simply felt that as the county’s Civil Defense Director he should do it,” one city official later told the *Democrat & Chronicle*.¹⁰³

Abbott contracted a private helicopter to carry him above the rebellion, departing the Rochester airport at 2:45 p.m. that Sunday. His pilot transported him first to view the fallout in the 7th Ward before heading south to the active rioting areas. About forty-five minutes after takeoff, Abbott was watching a minor skirmish in Corn Hill when he felt the helicopter “lurch” and vibrate unnaturally.¹⁰⁴ The next few moments were wrenchingly traumatic.

In Abbott’s own words:

[We] were cruising at church steeple height and were starting a right turn, or a turn in a clockwise fashion as [we]

approached the intersection of Clarissa and Tremont Streets, when, without warning, one of the rotor blades struck a roof top and the helicopter then crashed to the street level, landing on a car which was parked on the east side of Clarissa Street. The car was a 1956 Buick automobile. The helicopter then fell between the Buick and the curb and the porch of the house.¹⁰⁵

Those fleeting impressions were the last things Abbott saw before slumping over and losing consciousness in the wreckage.

The horrors of the crash, often considered the terrible climax of the riots, may have helped the rebellion reach its conclusion as onlookers grew chastened and alarmed by the sight. Eyewitness accounts from Clarissa Street testify to the dramatic power of the tragic spectacle. The following testimonials from Rochesterians who were there suggest a subdued mood:

The helicopter went right over the street. Someone made the comment it was awfully low. Then the fire just mushroomed. We ran down to see. It was an inferno.



Firefighters respond to the blaze caused by the helicopter crash on Clarissa Street. Robert Abbott eventually died from the burns he sustained in the accident. Courtesy of the City of Rochester.

There was something odd about the way it was flying, something erratic. It drew your attention like some giant wounded insect. Everybody stopped and looked. They saw it crash into the house and everything burst into flames. I had a sick feeling. I thought I'd better take the kids home.

I heard the helicopter in the air. All of a sudden, I heard this noise. I looked up. Shingles were flying up in the air. The helicopter was hanging on the roof. It seemed like ten seconds almost. Then, it fell to the street and the gas ignited. You could still see the guys in the helicopter. Everybody quit fighting. People ran to get these guys. Col. Abbott—you could see him. His face was bleeding. There must have been 1,000 people running in the same direction. That whole scene—it was like a carnival.... It seemed unreal.¹⁰⁶

But grave reality set in soon enough. Two men inside the Clarissa Street home, John Riley and Willie Jones, died in the fire; so did helicopter pilot, James Docharty. The blaze spread outwards while a torrent of black smoke from the crash could be seen across the city. The riots effectively ended within hours of the accident.

Incredibly, Robert Abbott survived the immediate impact of the crash. A group of brave state troopers broke through fiery rubble to pull him to safety, though a blast threw Abbott to the sidewalk before he could be cleared. The civil defense director was engulfed



The grave of Robert and Winona Abbott in Irondequoit Cemetery. Courtesy of Roberta Abbott Buckle.

in flames, which were only extinguished after policemen rolled him through a mud puddle. By the time the blaze was banished, Abbott suffered burns over approximately half of his body. The *Democrat & Chronicle* observed that “he was nearly given up for dead at the copter crash scene,” yet “Mr. Abbott remained conscious and fought back with the same tenacity that characterized his Army service.”¹⁰⁷ Still in command mode, Abbott gave orders to emergency personnel despite his pain—“tell my wife to come to the hospital.”¹⁰⁸

Even as their civil defense director was rushed to Strong Memorial Hospital, many Rochesterians were cautiously hopeful that their “most decorated soldier” would survive another grueling ordeal. Indeed, though he was placed on a “danger list” and marked for critical care, Abbott’s life was nothing if not a story of perseverance and death-defying courage. He remained alive for 29 days in Strong Hospital, where he initially showed signs of recovery. It came as an incredible blow then when news broke that Abbott had died of a burn-related infection on August 25, 1964, nearly a month after the riots that prompted his ill-fated aerial surveillance mission.

A city already reeling from the race riots now had to mourn the loss of one its greatest military heroes and public servants. Of course, none grieved more than the Abbott family. Abbott’s funeral on August 27 was an understandably somber procession, set against the stirring tones of Taps as flags flew at half-staff. Yet it was also a moment of reflection on one man’s incredible life. President Lyndon Johnson sent his sympathies and a certificate of appreciation. Mayor Lamb called Abbott’s death “a great loss” and declared that “Rochester will always be in his debt.”¹⁰⁹ Doubtless, however, there was no finer eulogy than the elegiac words of County Manager Gordon Howe:

The death of Robert Abbott is a loss to the community that cannot be measured. It was typical of the man to serve above and beyond the call of duty in whatever he undertook.... He set a standard of public service to his community and nation which few men have equaled and he will be missed.¹¹

The Abbott Legacy

In June 2009, Rochester’s Veteran’s Outreach Center dedicated the Colonel Robert N. Abbott Veterans Community Technology Center at its headquarters on South Avenue. The facility offers Internet access and computer training to veterans. A portrait of Abbott, his medals, and a timeline commemorating his life line the hallway leading to the center. It is a fitting tribute from the VOC and a tremendous resource for Rochester veterans.

Yet it remains a far cry from a public memorial for the city's "most decorated soldier." Other than his headstone in Irondequoit Cemetery, there are no markers attesting to Robert Abbott's many sacrifices. There are no bridges, buildings, or parks bearing his name. Shortly after his death, the Gates Town Board voted to rechristen the town library as the Colonel Abbott Memorial Library, but even those honors are no longer observed.

Although the city has begun to confront its past and the issues that led to the race riots, most recently in the dialogue generated by reflections on the fiftieth anniversary, the subject remains painful and divisive for many. Perhaps this partially explains Abbott's underappreciated place in Rochester's public memory. No account of his life is possible without addressing this tragic chapter in our history.

Then again, perhaps the neglect speaks to the distance between Abbott's Rochester and our own. Fallout shelters and anti-communist zealousness seem like relics of a curious and bygone era with little modern resonance—as faded from public memory as Playground Libraries, B. Forman's, Madison High School, and *Times-Union* paperboys. Then too, many Rochesterians, regardless of whether they actually lived through it, see the postwar period through the sepia tones of nostalgia, as the city's halcyon moment. One is reminded of the historian Richard Hofstadter's warning against this tendency:

In truth we may sympathize...with those who have shared their need to believe that somewhere in the American past there was a golden age whose life was far better than our own. But to actually live in that world, actually enjoy its cherished promise and its imagined innocence, is no longer within our power.¹¹¹

It does Robert Abbott's legacy an injustice to either compress it into a neat narrative or dismiss it as a quirky Cold War byproduct. The truth is far more complicated, and far more interesting. Thanks to a generous gift from Roberta Abbott Buckle to the Local History & Genealogy Division of the Rochester Public Library, the Robert Abbott Collection is available to the public. We cannot live in Robert Abbott's Rochester, but we can visit.

Endnotes

1. This term was popularized by Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 1998).
2. Christopher Lasch, *The World of Nations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), 243.
3. Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation*, 2nd ed. (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 101.
4. For more on Maplewood Park and the Progressive era, see Katie Eggers Comeau, “125 Years of Rochester’s Parks,” *Rochester History* 75, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 6–14.
5. Blake McKelvey, “A Panoramic Review of Rochester’s History,” *Rochester History* 11, no. 2 (April 1949): 16.
6. Ibid., 16–21.
7. McKelvey, “Housing and Urban Renewal: The Rochester Experience,” *Rochester History* 27, no. 4 (October 1965): 4–5.
8. As relayed by Roberta Abbott Buckle, the daughter of Robert Abbott, in an interview with the author, December 18, 2014.
9. This description is informed by Buckle, interview, December 18, 2014. Many of these same memories were also shared by Harold Abbott’s son (and Robert’s nephew), Rick Abbott, in an interview with the author, April 8, 2015.
10. Buckle, interview, December 18, 2014, and Rick Abbott, interview, April 8, 2015.
11. Blake McKelvey, *Rochester: An Emerging Metropolis, 1925–1961* (Rochester, NY: Christopher Press, 1961), 56, 71.
12. Buckle, interview, December 18, 2014.
13. Buckle, interview, December 18, 2014.
14. Buckle, interview, December 18, 2014.
15. *The Madisonian*, 1934, 18. Robert Abbott’s yearbook is part of the Robert N. Abbott Collection (hereafter cited as Abbott Collection), donated by Roberta Abbott Buckle to the Local History & Genealogy Division of the Rochester Public Library. Much of the collection has been digitized and is available to the public as part of the library’s *Rochester Voices* website. Abbott’s yearbook can be seen here: <http://www.rochestervoices.org/content/collections/robert-n-abbott/booklets-and-other-documents/yearbook,-madison-high-school-1934/>. As yet undigitized portions of the Abbott Collection are available for viewing by appointment in the Local History & Genealogy

Division of the library, 115 South Ave., Rochester, NY.

16. James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945–1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 4.
17. Buckle, interview, December 18, 2014.
18. Informed by Robert Abbott, “Biographical Sketch.” Abbott Collection, Box 2, Folder: “Biographical Information.”
19. “Col. Robert N. Abbott Long Served ‘at The Front,’” *Rochester Times-Union*, August 26, 1964.
20. Abbott, “Biographical Sketch.” Abbott Collection, Box 2, Folder: “Biographical Information.”
21. As stated in the commendation for Robert Abbott’s Bronze Star Medal. Abbott Collection, Box 1, Folder “Awards and Citations, 1941–1948.”
22. Buckle, interview, December 18, 2014.
23. Bob Marcotte, “*Arsenal of Freedom*, Part One: Rochester Products that Helped Win World War II,” *Rochester History* 66, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 3–4.
24. These newspaper articles were clipped by Abbott’s family and preserved in a scrapbook during his years of military service. Abbott Collection, Box 2, “Scrapbook.”
25. Abbott’s Legion of Merit file, Abbott Collection, Box 1, Folder: “Awards and Citations, 1941–1948.”
26. General Huebner’s comments and his esteem for Robert Abbott were relayed by Roberta Buckle, letter to the author, May 6, 2015.
27. These awards can be seen in the Abbott Collection, Box 1, Folder: “Awards and Citations, 1941–1948.”
28. Marcotte, “*Arsenal of Freedom*, Part Two: Rochester Plant Workers During World War II,” *Rochester History* 66, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 25–26.
29. Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 118–124.
30. Buckle, interview, December 18, 2014.
31. “Maj. Abbott Takes Bride,” Abbott Collection, Box 2, “Scrapbook.”
32. Abbott, “Biographical Sketch.” Abbott Collection, Box 2, Folder: “Biographical Information.”
33. Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 128.
34. *Ibid.*, 207–208, 214.
35. *Ibid.*, 215, 221.
36. “Major Missing in Korea,” newspaper clipping, undated. *Rochester Voices*, <http://www>.

rochestervoices.org/content/collections/robert-n-abbott/articles/article,-major-missing-in-korea-ca-november-or-december-1950/.

37. Abbott, "Biographical Sketch." Abbott Collection, Box 2, Folder: "Biographical Information."

38. Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 221–223.

39. Ibid., 222.

40. "Major Missing in Korea."

41. "Col. Abbott Tells of Death Valley Days," newspaper clipping. *Rochester Voices*, <http://www.rochestervoices.org/content/collections/robert-n-abbott/articles/article,-col-abbott-tells-of-death-valley-days-ca-fall-1953/>.

42. "Col. Robert N. Abbott Long Served 'at The Front,'" *Rochester Times-Union*, August 26, 1964.

43. "Col. Abbott Tells of Bodies Piled Up 'Like Cordwood,'" *Democrat & Chronicle*, December 5, 1953. *Rochester Voices*, <http://www.rochestervoices.org/content/collections/robert-n-abbott/articles/article,-col-abbott-tells-of-bodies-piled-up-like-cordwood-december-5,-1953/>.

44. "Col. Abbott Tells of Death Valley Days."

45. "Col. Abbott Tells of Bodies Piled Up 'Like Cordwood.'"

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

49. Roberta Buckle, interview with the author, May 7, 2014.

50. "POW Sends Poem to Wife on Prisoner's Prayer," Abbott Collection, Box 2, "Scrapbook."

51. Robert Abbott to Winona Abbott, telegram, September 6, 1953. *Rochester Voices*, <http://www.rochestervoices.org/content/collections/robert-n-abbott/correspondence/telegram,-robert-abbott-to-winona-abbott-september-6,-1953/>.

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55. *Korean War Atrocities: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Korean War Atrocities of*

the Permeant Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations, United States Senate, Eighty-Third Congress, First Session, on S.Res.40, December 4, 1953 (statement of Lt. Col. Robert Abbott, Infantry, 1242D ASU, Rochester, NY), 189.

56. *Ibid*, 202.

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58. “Abbott Sees China Leading World Reds,” newspaper clipping, n.d. *Rochester Voices*, <http://www.rochestervoices.org/content/collections/robert-n-abbott/articles/article,-abbott-sees-china-leading-world-reds-ca-fall-1953/>.

59. *Ibid*.

60. *Ibid*.

61. Patterson, 198.

62. “Abbott Sees China Leading World Reds.”

63. “Col. Abbott Asks Strong Reserve to Combat Reds,” newspaper clipping, n.d. Abbott Collection, Box 1, Folder: “Post Korea Communism.”

64. Abbott, untitled speech, Abbott Collection, Box 1, Folder: “Post Korea Communism.”

65. “Abbott Sees China Leading World Reds.”

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About the Author

Jeffrey Ludwig is Director of Education at the William Seward House Museum in Auburn, NY. He served from 2012 to 2015 as a Historical Researcher in Rochester’s Office of the City Historian, where he regularly contributed to the *Democrat & Chronicle*’s “Retrofitting Rochester” column. He earned a PhD in American History from the

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The entrance to the Colonel Robert N. Abbott Veterans Community Technology Center, which opened in June 2009. The Abbott Center serves as a key resource for the Rochester Veteran's Outreach Center at 459 South Avenue. The facility contains Abbott's medals as well as a timeline honoring his lifetime of service. It provides thousands of Rochester veterans with computer training and Internet access. Courtesy of Jeffrey Ludwig, Office of the City Historian, Rochester, NY.



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