

## Bethlehem Moment 5: A Handless Hero helps dedicate Memorial Pool, pleading for peace

The Bethlehem Gadfly Bethlehem Moments, Fun Stuff, Gadfly's posts February 5, 2019

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City Council

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A Bethlehem Moment: May 30, 1957

*“Amputee Veteran Pleads for Peace in Dedicating Pool as War Memorial,” Morning Call, May 31, 1957.*

On Memorial Day May 30, 1957, there were two stars in Bethlehem, one a half-million-dollar pool, the newest addition to our “recreational parade of progress” on Illick’s Mill Rd., and the other an honest-to-goodness movie star.

The 75’ x 165’ pool was to be a “living memorial” – a tribute, as the now age-stained plaque to the left of the entrance says, “a tribute to those citizens of Bethlehem whose services to our nation in times of peace and war have preserved our freedom and independence.” Mayor Earl Schaffer touted the pool as the “greatest shot in the arm” to his ambitious recreational plan. But the fittingly somber tone of a war memorial dedication was set by the daunting appearance and foreboding words of Harold Russell, who won an Academy Award for his portrayal of a disabled World War II veteran returning home in the brutally frank film *The Best Years of Our Lives*, which is ranked 37<sup>th</sup> on the American Film Institute’s 100 best films of all time.



Both Russell’s hands were blown off in a demolition accident on D-Day, and he bared his stumps as well as exhibited his consummate skill with a pair of prosthetic steel hooks in the 1946 film that had just been re-released in 1954. In a “stirring message” to an audience of 500, Russell, “Mr. Veteran,” as he was called, who enlisted right after Pearl Harbor and went on to become National Commander of AMVETS and a founder of the World Veterans Foundation, cautioned that we find ourselves in a “death struggle” with “international gangsters”

led by the “evil” Soviet Union and under the “threat of a dreadful atomic war” — and that the elusive path to peace lay in sincere international brotherhood. It is a sobering and chilling reflection on this “handless hero’s” hopeful words that in 1957 the Vietnam War was already two years old, that the first Bethlehem mortality there was only eight years away, that each of the 32 Bethlehem men killed in that war might have innocently swum in those inviting waters before which Russell spoke and pleaded for peace, and that one or more might even have been there that very day.

*“Brotherhood Key to Peace, Pool Dedication Crowd Told.” Bethlehem Globe Times, May 31, 1957.*

### Further info on the pool:

The pool cost \$460,000, a sum, as Mayor Schaffer liked to point out, raised mainly from sale of the Lehigh golf course (now the site of the Lehigh Shopping Center) and a contribution by Bethlehem Steel and only minorly by tax money. Even so, as you can see from the design sketch, a canteen and a wading pool to the east of the adult pool were cut for financial reasons.



### Further info on Harold Russell:

“Russell received the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor in 1947. Earlier in the ceremony, he was awarded an honorary Oscar for ‘bringing hope and courage to his fellow veterans.’ The special award had been created because the Board of Governors very much wanted to salute Russell, a non-professional actor, but assumed he had little chance for a competitive win. It

was the only time in Oscar history that the Academy has awarded two Oscars for the same performance.”

Russell was one of only two non-professional actors to win an Academy Award for acting.

Richard Severo, “Harold Russell Dies at 88; Veteran and Oscar Winner.” *New York Times*, February 1, 2002.

The Army film *Diary of a Sergeant* (1945) showed Russell cheerfully in his daily activities. He would write, “the human soul, beaten down, overwhelmed, faced by complete failure and ruin, can still rise up against unbearable odds and triumph.”

Moving clips from *The Best Years of Our Lives*:

“Dependent as a Baby”

“And for what?”



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The first Bethlehem soldier to die in the Vietnam War was Robert S. Ruch, October 30, 1965.