1940s Homeland Security

By Lynn LoFiego

"See ya later!" I called to my mother as I opened the front door. "Betty's here and we're leaving now." I'd been hovering near the door, waiting for my friend to arrive. We were going to go to the movies together. When she rang the doorbell, I was eager to leave.

"Wait a minute!" Mother said as she hustled toward the door. She greeted Betty warmly and then turned to me. "What time will you be home?"

"It's a double feature," I answered. "I don't know. Guess it'll be around 8."

"And it'll be dark by then," said Mother.

It was fairly safe to be out on the streets at night in my town, Milwaukee, Wis., in 1946. Policemen walked their beats throughout the residential neighborhoods. The sidewalks were well lit with streetlights on every block. People felt safe being out at night.

We didn't own a car, so my family either rode the city buses or walked. My house was a block from the bus line, which meant that we walked that one block after dark many times. And my family had strict rules that had to be followed at night.

Mother looked straight at me. "Do you have it with you?"

"Aawww, come on, Mother," I answered. "I'm not a little girl anymore. I'm 16 years old!"

"So? What's that got to do with anything? I wanna be sure you're safe."

"I'll be fine," I said. "And yes, I have it."

"I take it you don't want me to remind you how to use it."

"Right."

"Well, OK then." Mother didn't pursue the subject—but she couldn't resist adding a few parting words of advice.

"Remember to watch out for anyone you see lurking on the street. Don't trust anyone who lurks. If someone gets too close, be sure you use it."

Then she smiled and said, "Have a good time, girls."

Mother closed the door and we were on our way. I could tell that Betty was curious about what she'd just heard.

We had barely cleared the front porch before she asked, "What was *that* all about?"

"Oh, nothing." I wanted to avoid the subject and hoped Betty would take the hint.

She didn't.

"What's this 'it' thing that your mother referred to?" Betty asked.

"Really, it's nothing."

"Come on. Tell me." Betty wasn't about to drop the subject. She kept teasing and asking questions until I finally relented.

"I give up! You're not gonna leave me alone till I tell you. What my mother was talking about was a hatpin—a big, old, sharp hatpin!"

"What?" Betty giggled.

"You heard me. The weapon of defense in my family is a hatpin!" When I saw Betty's confused expression, I knew that she needed an explanation.

We had a simple rule: The women in my family—my mother, my older sister and I—never left the house after dark without carrying a big, sharp hatpin in our pocket. We were always required to wear something that had a pocket when we ventured out after dark.

The hatpin was stuck into its cloth lining. As we walked, one hand had to hold onto the hatpin at all times. It was held at the top with the sharp point facing away from us. If anyone reached out at us, we were instructed to whip out the hatpin and stab the offender's hand or any other body part that was close.

The theory was that the surprise would shock the culprit and thus give us time to run away, while hollering as loudly as we could.

Betty thought it was all funny. "That's really silly!" She laughed. "Who told you to do that?"

I sighed. "Who do ya think?" I had to say no more; she knew that the strategists were my parents.

I was glad when we arrived

From Good Old Days Magazine, July 2007, Vol. 44, No. 7, Copyright © 2007 Good Old Days Magazine

at the theater and our discussion ended. We saw a musical and a mystery, both good films.

I was happy that the movies distracted Betty from the "hatpin defense system." When we left the theater, we just talked about movies and movie stars. The bus stop was right in front of the theater, so getting on and going home was easy. We arrived at our street, got off the bus and started walking the one block back to my house.

We had only walked a few feet when we saw something move near one of the big, old elm trees that lined the street. I blamed it on the wind and kept walking.

But Betty stopped dead in her tracks. She had been thinking about the scary mystery we'd just seen, and she was easily frightened. "There's someone over there," she said.

"Nah," I answered.

"Yes, there is," she insisted. "Remember, your mother warned us to be careful and to watch out for anyone lurking on the street."

"I don't think anyone is lurking. Your imagination is working overtime." We walked a little farther down the sidewalk.

"See?" said Betty. "There it is again. Someone's lurking down there!"

Her anxiety was beginning to frighten me, too. "Is it a man or a woman?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," she said. "It looks big. But that's not the point. I heard your mother tell us not to trust anyone who lurks!"

"Is lurking all you can think of?" I said.

We stood still for a while, but I knew that wasn't practical. "We can't just stand here. We hafta go down that street to get to my house. Let's go real fast and stay on the opposite side of the street. We'll zip on past whatever that is."

"OK," agreed Betty. "But first—do you have your hand on the hatpin?"

"My *hatpin?*" I retorted. "You *laughed* at my family's hatpin security system!"

"I stopped laughing," Betty said. "Now get it out before we go down the street."

I brought the hatpin out of my pocket and held it tightly in my right hand. We crossed to the opposite side of the street and walked as fast as possible.

A sudden wind gust caused something to flap against a tree. Betty gasped. I knew it was up to me to protect both of us because I was the one holding the hatpin, so I stepped in front of her.

We continued to walk as fast as we could. The flapping continued. I squinted and focused my eyes on the spot where I heard the sound. Then I saw it. There on the big elm hung a large piece of a dark cloth, caught on the tree trunk. The cloth flapped every time the wind blew, giving the illusion of someone moving.

No one was there. There was nothing to fear. With a sign of relief, I pinned my hatpin back in my pocket.

"Come on, Betty. It's only a piece of cloth. Let's go home."

Betty was quiet while we walked the remaining distance to my house. "Whatcha thinking?" I asked.

She paused before answering. "I was thinking about that hatpin thing. It's not a bad idea. I think I'm gonna carry one." ❖

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