

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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New Meaning for May 1

One of my happy childhood memories of springtime is the ritual of May baskets on the first day of May. My sisters and I created paper baskets and filled them with wildflowers. Then we placed the baskets at the doorway of a favorite neighbor, rang the doorbell, and hid to watch the neighbor react to the surprise.

As I grew older, I was surprised to learn the ominous Soviet meaning of that same day. May Day marked the Moscow demonstration of military might as threatening missiles and tanks were paraded in front of equally threatening Russian leaders. Then a third meaning was developed for May 1 - Law Day.

Hampden County traces a historic connection with the commemorative day to its inception. The late Robert Bodfish, a local attorney who was then president of the Massachusetts Bar Association, was instrumental in developing the idea of Law Day to offer an American counter celebration to the Communist world's May Day.

Attorney Bodfish, town moderator and general guardian of the town's welfare until his death in 1990, is often remembered for a parliamentary innovation at a 1950s town meeting that enabled the town to vote to build a high school. Most people don't know of his participation in Law Day, although his home displayed a commendation from President Eisenhower for that contribution.

Today Hampden County Law Day is celebrated with a breakfast organized by District Attorney William Bennett and attended by representatives of law enforcement and legal professions. Sunday morning's program at the Oaks Banquet House had all the ingredients necessary to proclaim, as Massachusetts stated on the first Law Day, that our nation is ruled by laws, not by men. Participants included state and national legislators and the Massachusetts Attorney General. Chiefs of police and line officers attended, as did DARE officers.

These lawmaking and enforcement officials gathered to report on their efforts to keep society safe. Speakers included Congressman John Olver and Attorney General Got Harshbarger.

The highlight of the morning came when District Attorney Bennett recognized the Law Enforcement Official of the year. Sgt. Michael Reid, head of Springfield's Homicide unit was honored for his leadership in a year that saw arrests and convictions in several notable murder cases. A standing ovation accompanied the plaque awarded to Sgt. Reid as the assembly thanked him for his outstanding service.

Several speakers noted the need for additional funding from either the state or federal government. There was, however, a bright spot on the funding issue. Project DARE received the proceeds from the breakfast, a nest egg to add to local fundraising efforts and a new appropriation from the state.

I hope your children still celebrate May Day with flower baskets. I appreciate the end of Moscow's May Day parade, and I anticipate the future honoring of Law Day as Hampden County officials pursue its ideals.