

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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A Longmeadow Tradition: the gold-headed cane

Last week I was privileged to participate in a Longmeadow I tradition - the presentation of the gold-headed cane. At the age of 104, Samuel Canter has attained the honor of being Longmeadow's oldest resident. As such, he is now the custodian of a cane that has passed from hand to hand since its arrival in town in 1909.

It was an honor to meet Mr. Canter, whose picture is elsewhere in this week's Longmeadow News.

When Selectman Jerry Nolet invited me to the presentation, I knew a little bit about the tradition of the cane, but not enough to write about. Since then I have talked with Mabel Swanson at the Longmeadow Historical Society, who knows all about it. Today I can put on my historian's hat and relate the history of the cane.

The cane was designed as a promotional tool by a Boston newspaper, the old Boston Post. The newspaper no longer exists, a fact that is most likely unrelated to the success of this particular promotion. In 1909 the newspaper created 431 canes and presented one to the oldest resident in each of 431 New England towns. Each cane is a tapered ebony walking stick with a rounded gold head. The head is inscribed with the name of the town and the honor it bestows. Just as the Boston Post has disappeared, many of the canes have been lost over the years as the chain of custody is broken. East Longmeadow and Longmeadow have kept the tradition, however, and I've attended presentations in both towns.

Old newspaper stories record various presentations of the cane. Longmeadow has had its share of centenarians, although the cane used to be within reach of a person in the nineties. In 1963 it was presented to a 98 year old man who, according to his family, still drove his car. Mrs. Mary Wallace and Mrs. Margaret Richardson, the past two recipients, were both over 100 years of age when the cane was presented to them.

Now it is in the care and custody of Mr. Samuel Canter. Born in 1893, he is within three years of living in three different centuries. And I had the feeling when I met him that he will be able to tell stories of all three centuries. Born in Russia, he became an American citizen as a young man. And now he is recognized by Longmeadow as our oldest resident. He greeted me last week saying, "God bless America. It is a long way from Russia!"