

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

June 4, 1998

Memorial Day Service, Longmeadow

Long Meadow Days arrived late this year, a week later than Memorial Day. That meant service of remembrance on the Green was also held a week after Memorial Day, although it was only one day after the traditional May 30 date. The service gave to me the opportunity to talk about the nation's soldiers who have died in her wars.

Veterans from World War II, Korea, and Vietnam were all in attendance, as were Marines who served on active duty. One man in attendance comes every year to honor his comrades in Vietnam; one Pearl Harbor veteran is there every year in his World War II uniform. It is a ceremony to remember the town's war casualties as far back as World War I, though the day was set aside to honor the fallen soldiers of the Civil War.

The town invited me to speak at the service, and I found my topic in an old Civil War book. I found the book, published at the end of the Civil War in 1865, while rummaging through a used bookstore recently.

The book tells the story of Union prisoners in the infamous Confederate prison at Andersonville. An introductory page contains the following inscription. It first drew my attention because the text was shaped in the form of a cemetery marker. Some words are a little old-fashioned and some references are specific to preserving the Union. Nonetheless, the emotion seems timeless, equally appropriate in its call for remembrance of warriors who fall in modern warfare. Here is the inscription:

Sacred is the memory of the thousands of our brave soldiers who have sacrificed themselves upon the altar of their country, in defense of her laws and institutions; her liberties and rights. With the courage and ardor of patriots; with the enthusiasm of loyal subjects under a good government; with the intelligence and zeal of union-loving citizens, and an unselfish devotion to the lofty principles of truth and justice, and an eye on the basis of a lasting peace, they went forth pledging "their lives and sacred honor," in maintenance of the glorious cause. Many have languished and died in prisons, and thus sleep the noble youth of our country; the pride of the land... They have fallen. Like autumn leaves at touch of frost, they have been swept to the earth, where they lie in undistinguished piles. The hearts of the people shall be their tombs, but marble and granite should be lifted high, as the testimonial of a grateful mankind for the deeds they have done, and the radiant glory with which they have crowned the nation. (Life and Death in rebel Prisons. 1865, Hartford)