

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

May 20, 2007

### **Memorial Day, 2007**

This year marks the nation's 139<sup>th</sup> commemoration of Memorial Day, a day established after the Civil War to honor the casualties of that conflict. Our town has made its observance part of the Long Meddowe Days weekend celebration since the early 1980's.

It is my privilege to take part in the ceremony, and each year I try to link the story of the nation's earlier wars with the today's events. This year I was able to take a very personal story for the historical segment. I recently inherited a packet of family letters from the 1800's, including letters from Civil War soldiers. This letter from an Indiana volunteer showed the patriotism you would expect from a Union soldier along with a touch of uncertainty at returning to civilian life. Here is an excerpt.

Head Quarters 1<sup>st</sup> Col Brig A.C.  
Chattanooga, Tenn. May 10<sup>th</sup> 1865

Dear Brother,

Your favor of April 27<sup>th</sup> came to hand in due time and was gladly received....

Well, we down here think the war is nearly to a close, and some of us (I for one) expect to go home soon to reap the rewards of our labors as soldiers of the union. It seems to me that a brighter future is in reserve for our nation than the records of the past have shown. Heretofore we have been called a free nation, hereafter we shall be not only, as heretofore, called a free nation, but a nation of freemen, and then when the great sin of slavery, which is always productive of evil, is done away with, and we are once more upon a peace basis, we may look for such a reformation as never before has been known, at least within our country....

Now that the armed rebellion is played out till it is hardly worth the name of rebellion, I am ready to go home and throw off the habiliments of a soldier and put on those of a civilian and follow the pursuits of a civil life, but whether I pursue the same course that I had decided upon before I entered the service, or not, will depend on circumstances which I shall fully consider when I get home.

Charles Lester

The letter writer's pride in making our country a nation of free men still inspires me today. Retaining or expanding freedom is the goal of every war America enters.

His thought about returning home provides a glimpse of the reality that travels through time. Just as it applied to a Civil War soldier, it concerns every returning member of today's armed forces when their wartime service comes to a close.

Young soldiers may have put their careers on hold while they served the nation. They might have been called to active duty from mid-career civilian lives. They have surely lived experiences that we can only attempt to understand. They have earned our gratitude.

Several of the speakers at last weekend's observance spoke of the need to welcome each returning soldier with thanks and appreciation for their service on our behalf – and with assistance if it is needed. Let's try to keep those reminders fresh long after the Memorial Day service that gave us the message.