

A Memorial Service that brought Westford Folks closer

By GORDON B. SEAVEY

WESTFORD The annual Memorial Day observances have come and gone for this year. Ceremonies were briefer, the parade shorter and the crowds along Main Street and the Common much thinner.

The American flag has now returned to full staff after a special token of respect to those who had fallen in previous conflicts. Old-timers still discuss what was done on this sacred day generations ago.

They are remembering those who fought in the American Revolution, but only through the placement of the Stars and Strips alongside thin, tall slate gray markers in local cemeteries.

With a population of only 1,175 at that period, 250 from Westford endured the hardships of that bitter war for freedom. This meant that practically every able-bodied man and boy left his Westford home. Many were poorly equipped and trained, not knowing the hard life ahead.

These same senior citizens watched the long, thin line of Civil War veterans drop down to the very last man in blue when Wayland F. Balch died in 1937, at the age of 97 years and 8 months, was laid to rest in Westview Cemetery. Hiram Dane had passed on a few years previously.

According to state archives, Westford "was not behind any town of its size and wealth in the Commonwealth in fulfilling every obligation demanded of it by the State or nation during the entire period of the Rebellion." It furnished 172 men, a surplus of fifteen over all demands.

World War I

When the United States entered World War I on April 6, 1917, it brought a strong surge of patriotism throughout the land. All in all, Westford sent 137 of its young men and five women into the service. Most of them left from the steps of the town hall, where Town Clerk Charles L. Hildreth, ever faithful and generous with his camera, made photos of the men for their families.

Many today remember the hardships of the people in the service and the folks back home. Most of the local draftees were sent to Fort Devens, which was ill-equipped and ill-prepared by modern standards for training fighting men. Influenza struck many which added to the misery of being transported from their homes.

Before the Armistice was signed on November 11, 1918, 43 men and two women had been shipped overseas, some never to return.

Dancing in the Streets

It was a mild, pleasant November morning in Westford when news trickled in that the Germans had met the Allies' terms and

the "war to end all wars" had ended. It was a day that people had long prayed for.

Folks dashed from house to house to be sure that their neighbors had heard the exciting news. Church bells rang constantly and mill whistles cut the air. Flags were waved and houses were decked with the tri-color. All business and mills locked their doors.

Students at the Academy and Frost School promptly formed a parade of their own, led by a 13-year-old Boy Scout bugler for Troop 1. Cheering was heard everywhere.

The villages and outlying areas had already caught the same fever.

Two hundred cheering men, women and children led by Percy Davis, an overseer in the Abbot Worsted Mill at Forge Village and the local File and Drum Corps, marched first to Graniteville. Here another excited group fell in line for a trek to Westford Common. They gathered near the spot where 130 Westford Minutemen left for Concord a century and a half earlier.

Captain Sherman H. Fletcher, a long-time selectman, postmaster and head of the Public Safety Committee from the band stand, called the gathering to order. He spoke of the much earlier visit of General Joffre of the French forces calling on the U.S. for help, and the ready response of America.

When he noted that the Germans had bragged they would be in Paris in three weeks, London in three months, and the U.S. in three years, the crowd cheered.

Principal William C. Roudenbush of Westford Academy spoke along patriotic lines and the need of our country to rebuild. Albert R. Wall and Davis, speaking for Graniteville and Forge, mentioned the many contributions made in their districts to the war effort.

Miss Rebecca Leduc sang "La Marseillaise" in French and then led the audience with "Rule Britannia" and the "Star Spangled Banner."

One of the largest observances ever held in town was about to come to a close. While 600 townspeople stood with bared heads, the names of those who had already died were read: Privates J. Norbet Brule, Napoleon J. Lanctot, Adlard Langley, Antonio Palermo (the first casualty killed in Argonne, October 14, 1917), Bernard J. O'Hara, Charles Smith and Lt. Orton V. Wells. There were no dry eyes as "Taps" was played.

The spontaneous program over, there were cheers again. If there had been any animosity and a feeling of separation between the various sections of the town, this was the turning point towards solidarity. All Westford embraced one another.