

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

May 30, 1995

Memorial Day, 1995

I don't know when they stopped calling the May 30th holiday Decoration Day, but some people probably objected when the change was made. And it seems like it was just a few years ago that the May 30th date was changed as well. When today's youngsters celebrate Memorial Day, they celebrate it on the last Monday of May.

This year another change came to Massachusetts. It is the first year we allow retail stores to open for business. Just as the day has retained its meaning with the other changes, I believe it will absorb the latest shift in public policy and continue to afford all people a little time out from daily life to remember the soldiers, sailors and all others who died in the service of our country.

These ceremonies I have participated in throughout our district show how the people of the Pioneer Valley continue to honor the traditions of Memorial Day.

First came Springfield, with its ceremony at City Hall two weeks ago to commemorate the anniversary of VE Day. I joined the mayor, Congressman Neal and city councilors to mark that day in history. Veterans of the war were the featured speakers at the service, and we heard the exploits of a soldier whose French-speaking ability gained him an assignment in France a year before D-Day. The memories were passed to the future, represented by the members of the Minnechaug band in attendance.

Then came the Longmeadow service on the Green. Previously held in splendid isolation on the weekend before the holiday, the service has now become a part of Long Meddowe Days. The high school students read moving essays just like they did in earlier years and children still sing "America the Beautiful," but now they perform for a large assembly of townspeople. And this fiftieth year after the end of World War II the town honored the two grandsons of Edward Wilkin, the Longmeadow soldier who was awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously in 1945. Everyone who heard the impromptu band concert offered by the Massachusetts National Guard band after the service gained new memories of the meaning of the day.

On Monday, Memorial Day, East Longmeadow had its annual parade and service. The speaker this year was Dina Wright, a second year cadet at West Point. Watching this young woman speak eloquently about her leadership training made me realize how the nation's military has changed in my lifetime. Her understanding of the sacrifices of earlier soldiers enhances her leadership potential.

Hampden has a hometown parade and a memorial service, topped off by a hot dog roast at the fire station. The town's children participate in all three events, and while they may remember the hot dogs with the most pleasure, they will retain the meaning of the service at the town war memorial.

Memorial Day, 1995, ended for me with Tuesday's school assembly in the town of Wales. Scheduled during the school day so that it can be part of the curriculum, the service is the surest way of teaching a new generation the traditions of the holiday.

This then is the way a few of the townspeople of the Pioneer Valley mark the passing of Memorial Day. They might have paused and heard Taps on a day other than Monday. Or they might have gone shopping later. Nonetheless, the parades, songs and speeches seemed even larger this year than when all the stores were closed.