

## **Memorial Day 2007**

### **Rededication of the Soldiers' Memorial at Plains Cemetery, Litchfield, ME**

**Guest speaker: CAPT Edward Avis, USNR (Ret.)**

Good morning and thanks to all of you who have come here today to honor the men and women of all our nation's wars who made what we often call the "ultimate sacrifice" in the defense of freedom and of our nation. By your very presence here as a free people you proclaim that these fellow citizens have not died in vain and that their memory is worthy of all the thanks and honor we can bestow upon them.

In the next few minutes we'll examine the history of this day of remembrance, with emphasis on its origin following the Civil War. We'll also consider the Soldier's Memorial behind me and later in the program we'll have a special short ceremony of rededication of the monument.

The American Civil War wasn't the first armed conflict in which our country was engaged and it certainly wasn't the last. It was, however, the most costly in terms of American casualties than any before or since. It touched every American, North and South, Blue or Gray. It put farm boys who had never traveled more than a few miles from home into uniforms and sent them off to distant battlefields. It asked them to march endlessly, to often live on meager rations in miserable circumstances, to endure extreme hardship and, frequently, to face the threat of injury or death. And, most importantly, their sacrifice shaped the

future of our nation and established forever the Union of the States.

In the years following the Civil War the veterans who survived that conflict returned to their homes and farms and the pursuit of their peaceful lives. But the things they saw, the hardships they endured, the comrades they lost and the horrors they witnessed changed them. Returning soldiers formed organizations for mutual support and to preserve the knowledge of their shared suffering and the memory of their fallen comrades. The organization most recognized in the northern states was the Grand Army of the Republic.

Even before the end of the war various groups began the practice of decorating the graves of the fallen, but it was not until May of 1868 that Memorial Day was officially proclaimed by General John Logan, national commander of the Grand Army of the Republic. His proclamation reads, in part:

*“The 30th day of May, 1868, is designated for the purpose of strewing with flowers or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village, and hamlet church-yard in the land. In this observance no form of ceremony is prescribed, but posts and comrades will in their own way arrange such fitting services and testimonials of respect as circumstances may permit...*

*We should guard their graves with sacred vigilance. All that the consecrated wealth and taste of the nation can add to their adornment and security is but a fitting tribute to the memory of her slain defenders. Let no wanton foot tread rudely on such hallowed grounds. Let pleasant paths invite the coming and going of reverent visitors and fond mourners. Let no ... ravages of time testify to the present or to the coming generations that we have forgotten as a people the cost of a free and undivided republic.*

*Let us, then, at the time appointed gather around their sacred remains and garland the passionless mounds above them with the choicest flowers of spring-time; let us raise above them the dear old flag they saved from dishonor.”*

As the survivors aged they recognized a need to erect memorials to those who served in the conflict. In the early 1900's many towns large and small commissioned Soldiers' Memorials like the one behind me - and the Town of Litchfield was no exception. This particular monument was dedicated on Friday, June 14, 1907 and the dedication ceremony was reported in the Kennebec Journal. The article in the paper lists the various speakers and credits the Libby Relief Corps for conducting a fund drive to purchase the monument, along with \$500 contributed by the Town. (Copies of that article are circulating in the crowd for those interested in reading it.)

In just a few days the stone sentry behind me will have stood watch over this piece of ground for 100 years. The monument on which he stands bears the inscription:

Erected in the year of our Lord 1907  
By the Libby Relief Corps No. 73  
and the Town of Litchfield  
In Memory of  
Her **two hundred** loyal sons  
Who served in the war of  
1861-1865 thus aiding  
In the preservation  
And unity of the nation.

**Those two hundred or so men weren't just faceless numbers!** They were members of this community – they paid taxes, they farmed the fields, they attended Town Meeting, they operated the mills, they attended church services (some, perhaps even in the church that stands behind you) – they were fathers, sons and husbands who walked this same ground that we do today. Indeed, some of you here today are descended from those brave men.

I'd ask you to consider for a moment the impact on a small rural community with an agricultural base when two hundred of its men in the prime of their lives left their homes and families for service on distant battlefields. The 1860 U.S. Census lists the population of Litchfield as 1702 – including 894 males of all ages. I don't know the exact statistics but let us assume conservatively that of the 894 males in Litchfield in 1860, roughly 600 might have been

of military service age. These 600 would be the most fit, the woodsmen, farmers, craftsmen – the workforce and community leaders of the day. When 200 of those men - 1/3 of that workforce and leadership - were called away to war the impact must have been serious indeed, especially considering that the social support organizations we know today didn't exist in the 1860's. Those families left behind still had to operate the farms and maintain the commerce of the community.

As in all wars, the sad fact is that many of those men never returned alive to their homes and families. They died in battle or of disease and are buried in the cemeteries of Litchfield or in Virginia, Louisiana and other southern states. The Litchfield Historical Society is attempting to document the service and sacrifice of each and every one of those men. The task is far from complete but we do know a few stories of Litchfield men that I'd like to share with you:

Private Charles H. Adams was only 18 years old when he was mustered into the 19<sup>th</sup> ME Volunteer Infantry on Aug. 25, 1862. He took the same train from Bath as the other members of the 19<sup>th</sup> as they began their journey to the battlefields of Virginia. He was with the 19<sup>th</sup> as they crossed the Potomac River at Harpers Ferry and entered Virginia and set up camp at the small settlement of Bolivar. But on Oct. 20, less than two months from the day he enlisted he was dead – not from an enemy bullet, but from one of the many diseases that took so great a toll on both armies.

William Cook and Frederick Gowell, of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Maine Cavalry made it all the way to Louisiana where they also died of disease.

Private Nathaniel O. Gowell, also of the 19<sup>th</sup> ME Volunteer Infantry, was taken prisoner at Jerusalem Plank Road in SEPT 1864 and died in the hellish conditions of Andersonville Prison less than four months later.

- Lieutenant J. Edwin Libby died of disease in LA
- George M. Maxwell was killed at Fredericksburg
- Joseph Meader was killed in battle before Richmond
- Cyrus Perry was wounded at 1<sup>st</sup> battle of Bull Run and died in Litchfield 6 months later
- George W. Potter died in Gardiner of wounds received in front of Petersburg
- Private James O. Stevens died of starvation while being transferred to Andersonville prison.

The list of Litchfield Civil War dead goes on and on as does our honored dead of other wars. Harry W. Starbird died in the Philippine Islands during service in the Spanish American War. Frederick McMaster was killed by a rifle bullet at Chateau Thierry in France during WWI. The plaque to my right honors Litchfield's service members from WWII, including the names of William R. Bold, Richard Cobb and Andre R. Walker who perished in that conflict.

So it was in Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf, Iraq and Afghanistan – members of our community served and still serve with honor and distinction in defense of freedom.

Today as we rededicate this monument I'd ask each of you individually and all of us collectively, as the Town of Litchfield, to rededicate ourselves to remembering and honoring our fellow citizens – the men and women of ALL wars who gave their lives in the service of our nation – a nation that, thanks to their sacrifice, remains FREE. And when we remember them I'd also ask that you further honor them by remembering their NAMES – for the likes of William Bold, J. Edwin Libby, and Charles Adams were our neighbors, even if separated in time. We should not forget them but should heed General Logan's admonition to *“gather around their sacred remains and garland the passionless mounds above them with the choicest flowers of spring-time”*.