

Dick and Mary Lahue help bring history alive



STAFF PHOTO BY LUCILLE DANIEL

Dick and Mary Lahue receive many callers at their Clear Street home seeking information about Chelmsford's past.

By Lucille Daniel
Staff Writer

Anyone who thinks history isn't fun has not met Dick and Mary Lahue.

Get Mary talking about the town's bicentennial celebrations, and her eyes light up. "People couldn't do enough," she says of the many projects residents were willing to take on. "You should have been here to see our procession from the center of town to the Barrett-Byam Homestead. It was quite a long line."

And take a tour with Dick of the Historical Society's museum at the Homestead, and you would swear he was heating the rooms with his own enthusiasm.

"We just get excited about it all," says Dick about what has kept the Lahues so involved, both behind the scenes and on center stage to help preserve the town's landmarks.

Residents of town for 55 years, the two are in frequent demand by history buffs near and far, who come or call at their Clear Street home to tap into a bit of their encyclopedic knowledge about the people and events that have enlivened Chelmsford's past.

The recent issue of the Christopher Roby bottle, the 15th in a series of commemorative, glass-blown bottles that began as Dick Lahue's fundraising idea for the Historical Society in 1980, has brought into sharp focus the couple's longstanding contributions.

And this week the Lahues will mark a moment in their own history, as they celebrate their 55th wedding anniversary Jan. 26.

Blowing in

Dick and Mary met at Lowell High School, where they were both members of the Class of 1938, but they didn't start dating until after graduation. Following their marriage in Lowell in 1940, they moved into a new home they had build on Arbor Road in North Chelmsford.

"People here used to call anyone who moved to town a 'blow-in,'" says Mary. "Some people still consider us 'blow-ins' because we weren't born here!"

After they married, Dick worked in a defense factory, and because of

this work and the birth of the couple's first child in December 1941, he wasn't drafted into service when the U.S. entered World War II. But Dick was struck one day in 1944, walking in downtown Lowell, by the absence of men his age on the streets. He decided then to enlist in the Navy.

"Those were the days when you went to the enlistment office and then boarded a bus to be shipped out. They didn't waste any time," says Lahue, who adds that it was tough leaving behind Mary and their 2 1/2 year-old-son. Lahue was soon assigned to a merchant ship as a gunner and headed for Murmansk, Russia, at a time when the Germans were occupying the coast of Norway. Of his convoy of 37 ships, 17 were lost in that trip, which was later followed by other assignments in the Pacific and Europe.

Not too long ago, the Lahues were carried back to those war days when they received a letter from the Russian ambassador, dated Jan. 28, 1993, thanking Dick and his fellow sailors "on behalf of President Boris Yeltsin and the Russian people" for their courage at Murmansk. For the two lovers of history, the letter was a poignant reminder.

Discharged on the couple's sixth anniversary, Lahue returned to work in his brother's construction company, where had worked before his marriage. Their son, Richard Jr., was joined in 1946 by another son, Robert, and in 1949 by a daughter, Dana (Mary). Meanwhile, Dick Lahue was beginning to think about changing careers and fulfilling his dream of becoming a teacher. Attending classes part-time on the G.I. Bill, he managed over the years to earn his B.A. and teaching certificate and spent 21 years teaching industrial arts in the Haverhill Middle School, retiring in 1981.

Budding activists

When their children were young, both Mary and Dick became active in scout activities. In fact, one of the cub scouts in Mary's troop was Bernie Ready, now a McCarthy School teacher and well-known local history buff. Dick took a particular interest in helping local veterans who

were interested in running for public office.

Then the pair joined a group of North Chelmsford parents to prevent the closing of the Highland Avenue School, and the group soon became the North Chelmsford Improvement Association, whose members worked to provide the area with other amenities, like school renovations and better lighting.

Dick was also active in the United Commercial Travelers of America, the oldest fraternal organization in the country. While he rotated officer positions in the local chapter and ran several of the group's conventions, Mary was busy in a wide variety of women's programs within the organization.

History calls

But the avocation that was to turn into a real passion for the Lahues, bringing them not only personal satisfaction but the valuable companionship of life-long friends, was their work for the Chelmsford Historical Society.

Mary had joined the Society first and encouraged her husband to sign on in the 1960s when the group was beginning to raise money to establish a museum at the Barrett-Byam Homestead. The Society had been asked to move from the second floor of Adams Library when the space became essential to the library's work. For a while the historical treasures were kept in local barns and in the 1802 Schoolhouse which was then used as a town storage shed.

But in the mid-1960s Mr. and Mrs. Albert Murray offered to donate their 1663 home at 40 Byam Road for a Historical Society museum if the Society could raise \$60,000 to maintain the building and grounds.

"At first we thought, 'We can never raise that!'" says Dick. "But people were very supportive, and we were able to move in in 1967."

A museum trust was set up for the house, and the Society owns the contents, says Dick, who has run the house for the trust for over 20 years.

The year after he retired, Dick spent all day every day at the Homestead transforming a cow barn into the Watt-Stevens Education Center, which now has space for

meetings, exhibits, and video showings. The center is named after two of the Society's most active members Charles Watt, whose family helped fund the building, and former president Hazel Stevens, who also donated funds for the renovation. Oil portraits of the two benefactors by Chelmsford artist Ruth Costello hang prominently in the large meeting room.

A legacy of caring

Over the years, Mary has spent hours clipping newspapers articles and gathering and organizing data to keep the Society's records intact.

Dick has been counted on for his carpentry skills, and various wall plaques throughout town attest to the time he has spent helping preserve such landmarks as the 1802 Schoolhouse, the Old Town Hall, and the Middlesex Canal Toll House. In 1985 he was honored by being chosen as grand marshal of the July 4 parade.

The list of town committees Dick has served on and achievements he

has participated in is lengthy, but he gives due credit to Mary, who, he says, was always there behind the scenes doing what needed to be done.

Fundraising has always been one of the Society's main concerns, and Dick began the tradition of the popular glass bottles that continues today. And some residents with "Entering Chelmsford" magnets might not know that they, too, benefit the Society, with over 7,000 having been sold to date.

"We still get a great kick out of what we do, but some younger people have to be taking over," says Dick. "We've tried to instill in our three children that they've got to get involved, they've got to give something back to their community. And it'll pay off, because their own kids will begin to realize the value of getting along with people and being a part of a community."

The Lahues children have learned the family lesson well. Their oldest son, Dick Jr., and his own son Scott wind the town clock atop the First Parish Church each Sunday morning.

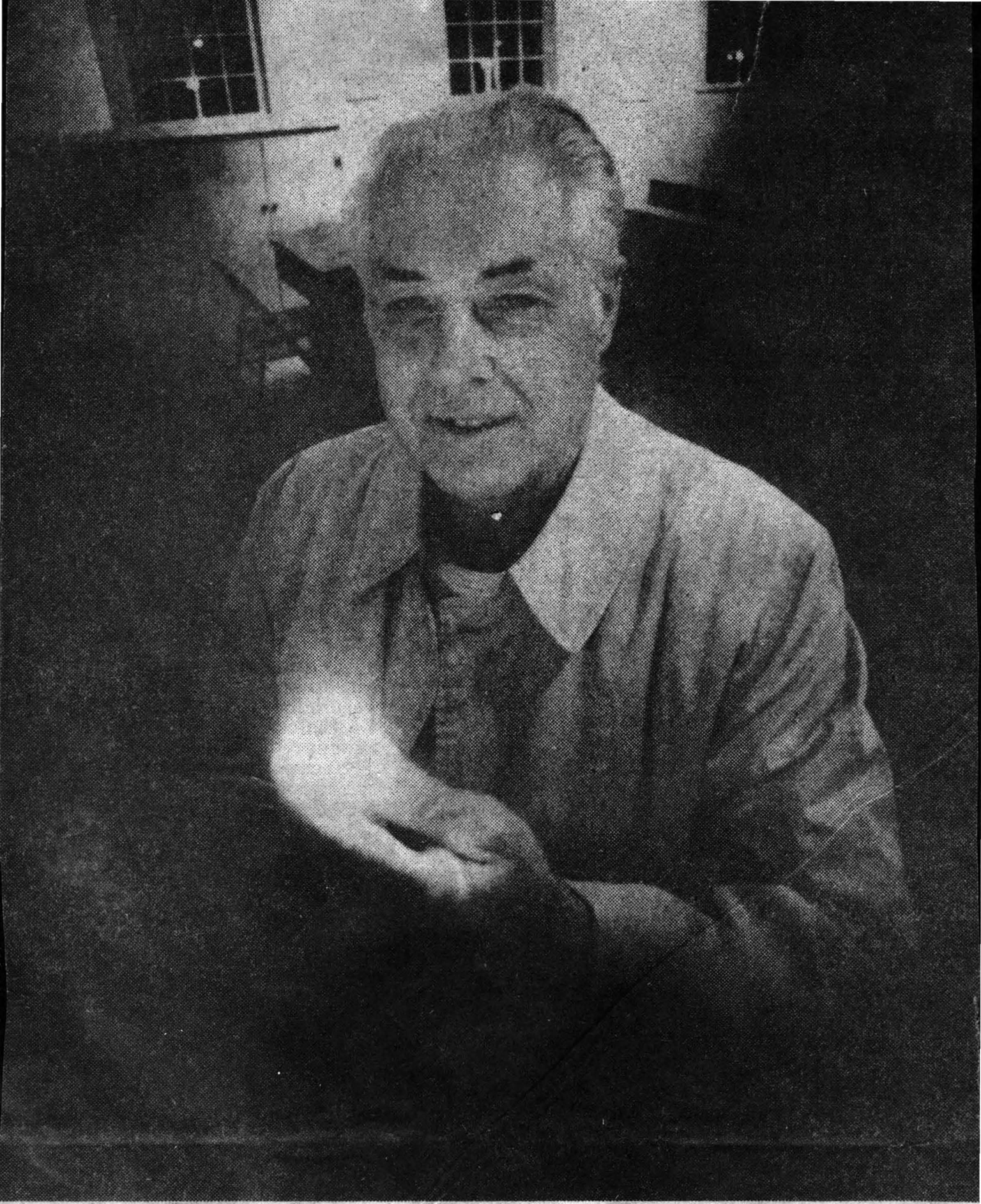
Their daughter Mary Cafelle, on the staff at Westlands School, is clerk for the Historical Society. And son Bob and his family, residents of Westford, are active in school activities there.

For the fun of it

School children and adult visitors who are lucky enough to tour the Barrett-Byam Homestead with Dick Lahue are regaled by story after story of real people and their real quirks. They get a glimpse of children's games, hoop skirts, high button shoes, and a replica of a country store complete with Hershey's boxes advertising candy bars for a nickel.

And they get meet the likes of William "Popcorn" Manning, a former resident of East Chelmsford, who accidentally discovered popcorn. Want to know how? Pay a visit to the Country Store.

"Most of all, we were happy doing what we did," says Mary Lahue. "We've made a lot of wonderful friends. And there's been great joy along the way."



Candlelit night

DEC. 8, 1983

Holiday candles are glowing in the windows of Chelmsford's 1802 schoolhouse and plenty of other buildings in the town's historic district. Above, Historic

District Commissioner Richard Lahue turns on one of the electric candles in the schoolhouse. (Sun photo by David Brow)

Russians remember Chelmsford veteran

4-25-96

BY BRENDA DONOGHUE
STAFF WRITER

A dangerous U.S. naval assignment to Russia during WWII recently earned Chelmsford resident Dick Lahue a second military medal from the Russian government.

Both of his medals commemorate anniversaries of the Allied victory in WWII or, as Russians call it, "The Great Patriotic War," and were awarded for the Allied support of Russia during the country's "fight for freedom against Germany." He received the first medal belatedly in 1993, commemorating the 40th anniversary of the war. He recently received the 50th anniversary medal.

Lahue did not know of the first award until he read about it in the "Armed Guard Magazine" in 1992. He applied for the 40th



STAFF PHOTO BY BRENDA DONOGHUE

Dick Lahue holds a case containing his World War II medals.

anniversary medal soon after.

Lahue's part in earning these medals was on a 10-day voyage as a gunner on a merchant marine ship. The trip, made in total darkness, was from Scotland, past the Arctic Circle to northern Russia, all in the midst of German submarines waiting to destroy the American convoy. The 57-ship convoy delivered much-needed items like food, ammunition, equipment and clothing to Murmansk, Russia to help the soldiers.

It was Lahue's first assignment since he joined the Navy in 1944 and, for security purposes, he wasn't told where he was going or why. He signed on with the U.S.S. Nelson W. Aldrich, a ship manned by merchant marines with Navy men working as the gun crew. As part of that crew, Lahue's duty was to shoot

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Local veteran earns honors from Russians

VETERAN, FROM PAGE 1

down enemy aircraft.

"My first assignment was the worst one of the war. But I only knew one thing about it when I got on the ship and that was that it would be cold," Lahue said. The government distributed heavy, fur-lined clothing and insulated the ship before the crew left for Scotland from New York. They anchored in Glasgow just before Thanksgiving 1944, still not knowing their assignment.

"When we were in Glasgow, I ran into guys who were on their way back from Murmansk and they said, 'Oh boy, you're in for it.' I felt like I would have rather not known at all," Lahue recalled.

Why was this assignment more difficult than similar ones around Europe and Asia?

"Because of its location. The Germans occupied Norway and could send out submarines and

aircraft and we had to make passage from Scotland to Russia using a small area of water," he said.

Plus, he said, it was dark most of the day — so close to the Arctic in winter — and the snow fell so quickly and heavily the crew could not walk along some areas for fear of falling off the ship.

"We couldn't use lights because it was said you could see a match lit 11 miles away," he said.

It was especially tense when a steam gasket in the boiler room blew and Lahue's ship was left behind the security of the rest of the convoy.

"I think that bothered me more than anything because you just felt safer when others were around you," he said. "There weren't any of the smaller destroyer ships (which were part of the convoy) scouting for submarines either."

It took the ship two days to fix the gasket and catch up to the

convoy. The trip took 10 days and the crew stayed in Russia for about three weeks before returning to Scotland. Without heavy supplies and equipment weighing the ships down on the return trip, the convoy separated twice as individual vessels were swayed by rough sea and winds.

"But I think the stormy weather was a plus because our ship wasn't sailing through the same dangerous route as we took on our way to Russia," he said.

"In our convoy, we lost about 30 of our 57 ships. The ones sailing along the outer rows carried about 10,000 tons of ammunition and the Germans used to target them a lot. When one of them was hit, it made a tremendous explosion. We used to call that 'coffins corner'," he said. "I was lucky in

getting there and back without a scratch."

He returned to the United States soon after and was able to see his wife and young son in Chelmsford before going to New York for his next assignment.

Over the next few years, he traveled on merchant marine ships to Asia and Europe and was stationed for a few months in Boston.

Still, he said, that trip to Russia was by far the most hazardous of them all. But Lahue said he was really frightened only a few times during that assignment. He was usually too busy to think about the dangers.

"The only time I really thought about it was when I was out there on duty and it was pretty quiet, and especially when we weren't with our convoy," he said.

Historian: I can't think of a nicer place to live

• Thursday, December 16, 1999 •

BY SCOTT MACEACHERN
STAFF WRITER

He has lived in Chelmsford for only 40 years, but you'd swear Richard Lahue has lived here all his life.

The 81-year-old Clear Street resident is one of Chelmsford's foremost history gurus and a perfect gent to boot. Lahue, a native of Dracut, and wife, Mary, settled in their first home in North Chelmsford in 1940.

"I don't know where you could live in a nicer town," Lahue said. "My kids were born here, went to school here and live here."

The current Lahue home in the Westlands is a white cape with a well-manicured lawn. Inside is a large museum's-worth of information.

Paintings and lithographs of historic Chelmsford buildings line the walls of the living room, den and family room. Colorful glass bottles emblazoned with the names and insignias of Chelmsford landmarks and organizations glisten in the windows. Framed packages of original matches from the Byam Match Factory, circa 1835, hang on the wall of the workshop where Lahue is currently framing prints of historical landmarks to sell in support of the Chelmsford Historical Society. Old bottles unearthed from the original Chelmsford Ginger Ale factory on Littleton Road rest on one of five living room bookshelves packed with historical novels and reference books.

"You are never alone when you have a book to read," Lahue said, quoting one of his wife's favorite sentiments.

Shelves in Lahue's basement family room are jammed with binders filled with every newspaper clipping that ever mentioned Chelmsford.

"My wife loves to do this," Lahue said. "One day she will donate them to the Historical Society."

The basement walls are covered with awards and citations Lahue has received for his work on town boards, historical organizations and from his service in the Navy during World War II.

The most recent addition to the wall is the Chelmsford Historical Society Guardian Award recognizing Lahue's efforts to "preserve, protect and restore a piece of Chelmsford history."

Lahue and his wife have been involved with the Historical Society since 1967.

"My wife got me involved," Lahue said. "She is really the spark-plug."

A historian's history

Before Lahue's began his long service to this community he traveled a long road of service to his nation.

Lahue was born in Dracut and graduated high school in Lowell.

"I graduated with my wife and we were married later that fall," Lahue said. Next month the couple will celebrate 60 years together.

After high school, Lahue worked for his brother, who was a builder in Chelmsford, and constructed a home for his bride and himself.

"Along came the war," Lahue said.

Lahue volunteered for the Navy. He went to boot camp in Sampson, N.Y., gunnery school in Gulfport, Miss. and target school in New York City. Lahue was assigned to a ship, the *U.S.S. Nelson W. Aldridge*.

The *Aldridge* was a merchant ship delivering 50-ton locomotives and railroad cars to Murmansk, Russia. The trains were to be used by the Russians to ship goods to Russian troops fighting Germany. Lahue said the ship's route was one of the most dangerous because it was through Nazi-infested waters.

For his efforts in helping get the shipment to Russia, the Russian government sent Lahue and the other surviving members of the *Aldridge* a commemorative medal at the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II.

Lahue recalled a mission in which the *Aldridge* sailed to France to pick up a group of POWs and bring them back home. Lahue, whose job it was to mind the guns, was on duty one day when he heard one of the POWs call his

name.

"I saw this guy, he was my next door neighbor, from here in Chelmsford," Lahue said. "I got him some food and some fresh water. When I was on duty I let him sleep in my bunk."

Lahue got out of the Navy after 19 months and went to work in the naval offices in Boston. Years later, in 1967, he was hired as an industrial arts teacher at a Haverhill middle school.

"I have been in the construction business all my life," Lahue said. "[Teacher] was the best job I ever had. I used to love to go to school."

The Historical Society

Lahue joined the Chelmsford Historical Society in 1967. His wife got him involved by volunteering

them to move artifacts from the Chelmsford Public Library to the Barrett-Byam Homestead.

"I love it, it has become like a home to me," Lahue said.

Lahue's interest in the historical society has not waned because he is constantly learning something new about Chelmsford.

"Just looking things up and learning new things every day," Lahue said. "My wife calls me there [Byam House] and always asks when am I coming home."

Lahue believes it is important to know the historical past of the community because it is its citizens' heritage.

"If they don't remember where they came from and what life was like before they were here then they will never know," Lahue said. "It is our heritage, you will never be able to duplicate it."

Lahue said heritage was instilled in him by longtime historian and friend George Parkhurst, who died June 17, 1998.

OVER



Historian Richard Lahue accepts the Chelmsford Historical Society Guardian Award earlier this year.

"George Parkhurst instilled in me a sense of our heritage, that things need to be accurate," Lahue said.

Lahue said there are many things he has helped keep historically alive in Chelmsford of which he is proud. Among them are getting the granite marker at the site of the former Byam Match Factory on Robin Hill Road; helping to get new benches made in the Little Red Schoolhouse; keeping Susan McFarlin's name on the old McFarlin School when it became an apartment complex; helping name the Parker Middle School after Lt. Col. Moses Parker; and creating the military room at the Barrett-Byam Museum.

"There is so much memorabilia about Chelmsford, that is what drives me," Lahue said. "When you live in a town which has given so much you have to give something of yourself, you cannot just stand to the side."

Richard O. Lahue Sr.
Feb 4, 2010
by Fred Merriam

