

In memory of Chelmsford soldiers

MAY 26, 1988

It was just a century ago that Chelmsford held its first formal celebration of Memorial Day, on May 30, 1888. The idea of setting aside a special day on which to honor the soldiers who had died in the Civil War was proposed by General John A. Logan, commander-in-chief of the Grand Army of the Republic (the association of Northern veterans of the Civil War, known as the G.A.R.).

As we observe this solemn "holiday" in 1988, it might be interesting to reflect briefly upon the part played by Chelmsford citizens in this conflict that inspired Memorial Day.

Altogether two hundred and eighteen men served to the credit of Chelmsford in the Army during the Civil War and twenty-three in the Navy. Of this number twenty-five were killed or died in the service.

Much has been written about the bloody battles and the long marches but there were also periods of inactivity when, in the 30th Regiment of Infantry at age 23, writing to his half brother, Charles S. Reed, who lived at 156 North Road, Logan reported that his unit had sailed out of Boston on the steamer "Constitution" (not to be confused with the sailing ship known as "Old Ironsides") and was anchored off Fortress Monroe at the entrance to Chesapeake Bay in January, 1862.

"We met a great many small vessels going out -- some of them loaded with hay and ambulance wagons -- said to belong to Burnside's expedition. I never dreamed of the warlike preparations constantly going on here. In addition to a dozen or so men-of-war, there are all kinds of craft . . . why there's stuff enough here to lick a nation. . . . Sewall's Point is in sight of here and the rebel forts can be seen with a glass. On the other side can be seen distinctly a rebel encampment."

In spite of being in a combat zone, he wrote, "The scene about here is grand and I only wish that you and the rest of the folks could enjoy it, too."

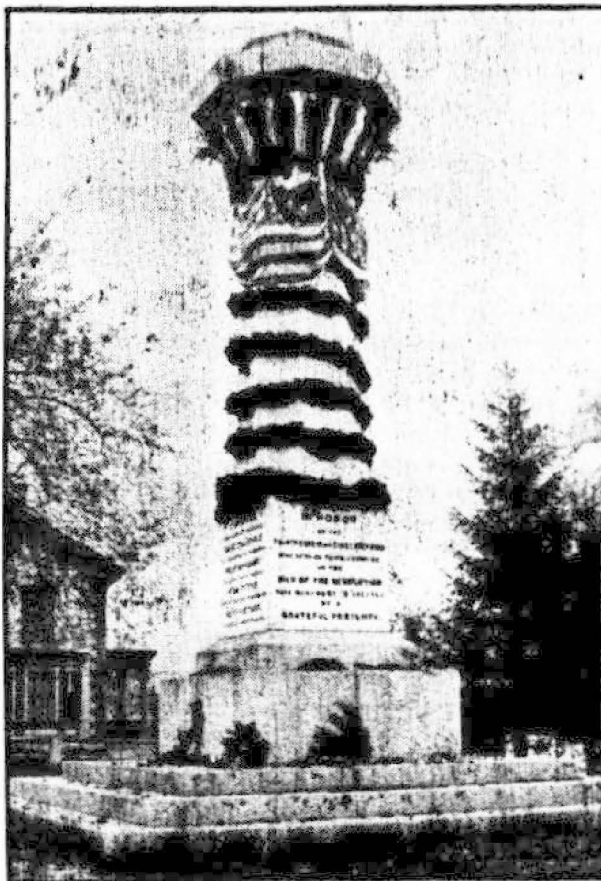
In a short note he said that "this is an

The way It was

By George A.
Parkhurst



awful dull, lazy, useless life . . . Last evening we could see the rebel campfires at Sewall's Point. We shall hate to leave this place for I don't believe Ship Island is half as pleasant."



A REVOLUTIONARY MONUMENT on Chelmsford Center Common, decorated for Memorial Day during the late 19th century.

By March 8th, they had settled temporarily at Camp Thompson on Ship Island and he reported that ships were arriving daily with cannon and thousands of troops, adding that "some important movement is being planned and a landing will be effected somewhere."

In August, 1862 the 30th Regiment was in Baton Rouge, La. where George Reed died on August 2nd. It is interesting to note that four weeks later, George's brother, Charles S. Reed, enlisted in Co. K, 6th Mass. Regiment of Infantry for nine months.

Another Chelmsford soldier, 29 year old George A. Parkhurst, grandfather of the present writer, also enlisted in Co. K the same day. His letters to his father, Solomon Parkhurst (living at 67 High Street) and to his girl friend (Clorinda Hodgman of 75 Concord Road, whom he later married) tell of his experiences.

Waiting to see action was not a problem with him. By September 18th, he wrote from Suffolk, Va., "Yesterday we received the information that the rebels were advancing upon us 15,000 strong and six batteries. You can form some idea of our situation when I tell you that our force here was not nine thousand men and we had only two batteries. We slept on our arms all last night being apprehensive of an attack early this morning but morning came and no enemy appeared."

The tension was relieved with the arrival of 10,000 reinforcements. He added that "it seems almost madness for such inexperienced troops as the 6th with so little drill -- some of them not knowing how to load a rifle -- to engage veteran soldier."

Perusal of these letters gives us an insight into the day to day lives of two local soldiers in the "War between the States" -- one who was fortunate to return to lead a happy civilian life, and one who was mourned on that first Memorial Day by his comrades in arms.

George Adams Parkhurst is a Chelmsford historian whose family has lived in town since 1654.