

Recollections of

MEMORIAL DAY IN FREMONT, N.H.

By: Matthew E. Thomas
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The following is an eyewitness account of the many fine and appropriate Memorial Day Observances that have been held in Fremont, New Hampshire dating back to the early 1960's.

With the exception of a few Memorial Day Observances held during the early 1970's nearly all have been truly worthy of the significance of Memorial Day.

I do know that Memorial Day was often organized by Albert "Pokey" Fuller (1897-1966) for many years during the 1940's, 1950's and early 1960's. He was a very kind, civic-minded, and generous man who did so much to make Fremont a much more exciting town than it would have been otherwise had he not lived here. He was a colorful character that was very active in the Fremont Grange, ran a thriving poultry farm, owned and operated a local school bus business bringing Fremont students back and forth to school and to Sanborn High in Kingston.

"Pokey" and his devoted wife Ruth (Hall) Fuller would for over twenty years, open their camp on Beaver Lake in Derry and host the entire Town of Fremont for a huge Town Cookout every summer in August during the 1940's & 50's. The entire town would literally close down for a day and over 500 residents would head to Derry to attend this popular town event every year. Pokey & Ruth would cook up huge batches of seafood chowder, hot dogs, hamburgers, roasted corn-on-the-cob, make salads, desserts, etcetera. Townspeople also brought food to contribute to the cook-out. These cookouts did so much to keep & promote Fremont as a very close-knit community. Without question, everyone in Fremont, related or not, was truly part of one great BIG family!

"Pokey" served on several town boards including selectman, and was also a Rockingham County Commissioner for ten years. He was a very outgoing man who would frequently dress up in costumes for local Parades & Minstrel Shows. In the 1940's he even pulled out the old Fremont horse-drawn Hearse and put a stuffed replica of Adolph Hitler's body complete with a Hitler face mask into the back of the hearse to enter into a Raymond, N.H. Parade. It was a truly big hit in that parade since it took place during World War II.

"Pokey" always saw to it that Fremont had some prominent political guest speaker for Memorial Day that included various New Hampshire Congressmen, U.S. Senators, & occasionally a Governor. After the parade and ceremonies, hundreds of people would, depending upon the year, attend two sittings of either a FREE Lobster Dinner, or a Turkey or Barbequed Chicken Dinner all at the Town Hall. Numerous families from around town would donate many of the necessary "fixins" such as pies, drinks, bread, beans, or whatever else was needed to feed such a throng of people. This was done in the days when "community" meant a great deal to everyone here in

Fremont as well as elsewhere around New Hampshire. Afterwards, townspeople would listen to a band concert on the Town Hall lawn, and then go watch a baseball game between Fremont and some other local town. This was the BIGGEST DAY OF THE YEAR for the small Town of Fremont back then...much of its success was thanks to Pokey's organizational skills, enthusiasm, and devotion to Fremont...much like that of Jeanne Nygren, Heidi Carlson, & Kathy Clement in the town office who organize the Memorial Day Observances now.

I remember Memorial Day as being a very big day in Fremont back in the 1960's and 70's. Nearly EVERY house and public building on Main Street had an American flag displayed on the front of their home, or hanging at half-mast from a flagpole every Memorial Day. This author will **never forget as long as I live** how incredibly patriotic Fremont was back in those days and how proud it made me and others feel to be a part of this great little town. To see such patriotism & devotion for our nation's veterans, be they dead or alive, was and is, truly a magnificent sight to experience every year. Various 4-H groups, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, local baseball teams, grade school students, numerous veterans, police and firemen, the parade marshal, gold-star mothers, various guest speakers, the Sanborn, Raymond, or Newmarket High School Bands, and sometimes a float or two –all would gather at the Sandown Road Bridge, or at the Town Hall to begin the Parade that marched up to the Village Cemetery. The Memorial Day Observance would begin with a short ceremony on the Sandown Road Bridge in Fremont Village (formerly called the "Rocks Bridge") where a colorful flower wreath was dropped into the Exeter River to honor our Navy veterans, followed by a 21-gun salute by the veterans standing in uniform and at attention on the bridge.

Afterwards, the Parade would begin by 9:30 am and march up to the cemetery. People would be lined sporadically along the parade route, with the bulk of parade viewers sitting or standing in front of the People's United Methodist Church, or the Ellis School, and especially in front of the 1800 Meeting House. Bertram Seaver of Danville, would have his sound system set up in front of the Scribner Monument just inside the Village Cemetery so the local minister, selectboard, guest speakers, singers, and patriotic reciters could all be heard. Chairs for veterans were placed in front of the podium. Usually, 250 to 325 people annually attend the observance at the Cemetery.

A local Methodist or sometimes Baptist minister would usually give an opening prayer; then the selectmen would say a few words of Welcome, and the Guest Speaker would then give their speech, some long, some short. If it was a hot morning, then all the speeches seemed too long to us youngsters. Then a special recognition for some veteran or veterans might be noted; followed by a musical selection performed by some talented local singer, or singers. I remember Harold Doucette of Fremont would occasionally be the guest singer once and awhile back in the 1970's or early 80's, and much later by *The Grace Notes* Acapella group since the 1990's. A student from Ellis School would be selected **every year** to recite the *Gettysburg Address*, as well as another to recite *Flanders Field*. Both of these recitations were an integral part of Fremont's annual Memorial Day Observance without fail year after year as they personified President Lincoln's immortal words while dedicating the Gettysburg Battlefield in November 1863...

"that these dead shall NOT have died in Vain – that this Nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom--and the government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

It was a tradition for many, many years during the 1950's thru 1970's to have ALL the Ellis School students march with their respective class grade in the Memorial Day Parade. After all this, the younger children and students would be taken by the hand, most by some adult, to place an American Flag in the flag-holders, or stand at the graves of veterans all resting within the Village Cemetery. This quiet and respectful tradition would be followed with a twenty-one-gun salute which was fired off from in front of the old Meeting House, and then immediately followed by that forever haunting sound of "Taps" being played -- one echoing from beside the Meeting House, and the other from in back of the cemetery. Nick & Eileen Ferro have performed *Taps* on their bugles in more recent years. I cannot remember who did it when I was younger, but somebody always did. One year they actually played a recording of it since they couldn't get a real bugler.

Lloyd Metevier Sr., a military veteran of the Korean Conflict, he very ably organized the annual Memorial Day Military Color Guard & Marching Veterans for 50 years and perhaps a little more, making sure all servicemen & women had enough guns and ammo to fire off in front of the meeting house for the 21-gun salute, and to march in precise military form. After Lloyd's passing ironically on Veteran's Day 11-11-2011, Kevin Murnane took over these responsibilities for a few years.

Seldom did it rain on Memorial Day as I remember with the exception of 1983 when the observance was thus carried out from inside the Meeting House (one of the BEST EVER Memorial Days that I will always remember). The outstanding acoustics inside the meeting house was absolutely ideal for speakers and bands alike—especially when the *Newmarket, N.H. Band* performed two patriotic selections from up in the second-floor gallery. That band performance resounded magnificently throughout that historic old building with such vigor and reverberation that it was totally unforgettable to anyone who witnessed that spectacular musical performance. It was absolutely inspiring! That was another incredibly special Memorial Day Observance despite the rain! Again, Fremont managed to turn Memorial Day into a very meaningful and respectful tribute to our soldiers and sailors. It also rained in 1997 and the service was held inside the Ellis School Gymnasium, and perhaps in another year since then.

The Freeman & Norine (Clement) Emerson Family starting with Freeman Emerson (1895-1988) a WWI Veteran, and three future generations of this family has marched in EVERY Fremont Memorial Day since 1920. They will be doing so again this year (2023) to honor the passing of Mildred (Emerson) Frye (1924-2023 daughter of Freeman & Norine)—Fremont's LAST native WWII Veteran. Mildred, who like her parents was a very cheerful, good-natured soul, will most appropriately be buried right after Fremont's Memorial Day Observance on May 28th in the Fremont Village Cemetery. Many of her children, grandchildren and great grandchildren will be present.

Other veterans that marched for many years included Freeman Emerson, Mildred Emerson Frye, Richard Burleigh, Robert Burleigh, Darrell Turner, Floyd Pratt, James O'Brien, Richard Johnson, William Copp Jr., George Baker, Richard Heselton, Rose Boden, Susan Boden, Tom McGall, and Richard Rand to name a few. Richard "Dickie" Rand was the longtime Fremont Cemetery gravedigger for 60 years who buried many Fremont veterans from 1952 until his death in 2012.

Lillian Pratt & Pearl Davies were longtime gold-star mothers. Lillian's son Philip A. Pratt died in Vietnam on May 31, 1969 and Pearl's son Richard C. Davies died on March 23, 1955 in a military

hospital from a severe illness contracted during his military service. **Female resident and/or native veterans Eleanor Gates, Rose Boden, Susan Boden, Mildred Emerson, Charlotte Grey, Florence Thomas, Tami Bolduc, and Lisa Begley, all served in the military through the years since WWII.**

Fremont veterans who died while serving their nation since WWI include: James Matthew Forsaith - WWI; Lawrence E. West & Alfred G. Dupree – WWII; Raymond E. Kelly -Korea; & Philip A. Pratt – Vietnam.

22 Fremont Veterans out of 100+ died in the Civil War (1861-1865) and Samuel Willey (1843-1927) was the last resident Fremont Civil War Veteran to died in Fremont on July 17, 1927. Asa T. Worthen became the LAST NATIVE FREMONT CIVIL WAR VETERAN TO DIE on -December 27, 1932 at Hampstead, N.H.

As long as I can remember ice cream cups and cookies were always passed out to all the youngsters that participated in the annual Memorial Day parades from the 1960's well into the 2000's and perhaps then some. Former Town Clerk Betty Stanley would take care of ordering the American Flags and the refreshments during the 1970's until 1999. I'm not entirely sure if her predecessor Town Clerk Marie Vetter handled these same tasks in the 1960's but most likely she did as Marie was another very nice person who was proud to be a part of Fremont.

Memorial Day in Fremont seemed to be on the decline by the mid-1970's. They were still nice and appropriate but not as enthusiastically organized or well attended. I think this was because it was during this time period when Memorial Day started to be observed as a three-day weekend event instead of observed specifically on May 30th which had always been the designated day for the holiday since 1868.

Thanks to the organizational efforts of Jean (French) Ragonese, and the help of Dorothy Gaudet, Patricia



Johnson, Elizabeth Stanley, Fran & Joe Foley, Matthew Thomas, and others, Fremont Memorial Days were renewed with new enthusiasm starting in 1979. The Parade & Ceremony was more conscientiously organized, and some of the old traditions that ceased being done, were reintroduced back into Fremont Memorial Day Observances. The Memorial Day Dinner was also re-introduced again, only this time it was held at the Ellis School Gymnasium with a very

popular Roast Beef Dinner attracting hundreds. It was all a wonderful success and the dinner was carried on for a few more years until it too became difficult to get enough helping hands to keep it going.

Freeman Emerson & Kenneth Crooker had spent numerous years placing American Flags on the graves of Fremont Veterans throughout Fremont cemeteries and even in West Brentwood & East Chester. These cemeteries included the Beede Cemetery on the southeast corner of Beede Hill, the Knowles-

Chase-Carr-Leavitt Cemetery, Ingalls-Sleeper Cemetery, the Isaac Brown Cemetery, the Hoyt-Currier Cemetery, as well as the Fellows Cemetery in West Brentwood, and the Sanborn Cemetery on Fremont Road in East Chester. Because it was customary for the grade school children to place flags on the graves in the Village Cemetery during the Memorial Day service, this was the only cemetery that didn't get flags placed on graves back in the 1970's and 1980's in advance of Memorial Day. Matthew Thomas accompanied Freeman & Kenneth for several years helping them with this annual task during the late 1970's and early 1980's until they got too old to keep it up. By the time they passed on, or couldn't do it anymore, the task became more than one person could handle and it was taken over by members of the fire department, the town office, or other town volunteers. In more recent years – say the past six or seven, the Fremont Fire Department also places orange flags on the graves of past Fremont Fire & Rescue personnel in the Village Cemetery, Knowles-Chase-Leavitt, and Ingalls-Sleeper Cemeteries.

The 125th Anniversary of Memorial Day Observances in Fremont since 1879 took place in 2004 when local historian Matthew Thomas served as Guest Speaker. The 140th Anniversary of this special occasion took place in 2019 when the town invited Steve Woods from Claremont, N.H. to be our Guest Speaker and who has portrayed President Abraham Lincoln with a remarkable likeness and persona for several years, along with his wife who portrayed his wife Mary Todd Lincoln.

With the exception of 2020 & 2021 the first two of three Covid Pandemic years when Memorial Day in Fremont was forced to be cancelled -- these past two decades of Fremont Memorial Day Observances have been extremely outstanding...even the out-of-town-guest-speakers are often totally stunned by the exceptionally outstanding and appropriate observances that Fremont holds. Our town was honored back in 2009 when it was named by New Hampshire Magazine as one of the two most patriotic towns in New Hampshire because of our Memorial Day services. Great credit and many thanks go to all the hard work that Jeanne Nygren, Heidi Carlson, Kathy Clement, and the Selectboard do to make it all so meaningful!

For several years there has been performances by the *Dunlap Highland Bagpipe Band* from Kittery, ME; the spiritually uplifting *Grace Notes*, and several talented solo singers like Amelia Earnshaw, Mary O'Brien, Tara O'Hare, Sara Croteau and several others whose names I cannot remember. The entire program reflects admirably upon our little town by showing genuine respect and appreciation for ALL that our veterans have done for our country over the centuries.

A Veteran's Quilt of Remembrance is put out each year during Memorial Day observances for all Fremont veterans to sign.



After the conclusion of the annual services, the Meeting House is often opened to the public for tours of one of only two authentic twin-porch meeting houses remaining in the United States.

There is also a barbeque held at the Fremont Safety Complex sponsored by the Fire Rescue Department for the public to enjoy.



This year (2023) we will have Mr. David Welch, age 85, of Kingston as our Guest Speaker. He is a long-term member of the New Hampshire State Legislature and a longtime member of a Colonial Militia Re-Enactment Company. He will appear in colonial costume and will surely give a very appropriate speech that will reflect the many sacrifices countless Americans since the Revolutionary War have made in order to

preserve our American freedom & ideals for nearly 250 years when we first declared our Independence from Great Britain in 1776.

Needless to say, this author hopes and prays that Fremont will **ALWAYS** make a special effort to hold solemn and meaningful Memorial Days in the future for as long as this Republic remains free and devoted to the ideals and principles handed down by our early forefathers & mothers...otherwise everything we have strived to be and achieve for almost 250 years, will have been done in vain at an unimaginable cost of life, limbs, and sacrifice.

Matthew E. Thomas

