

This holiday still stands for something important

by Hugh Mulligan
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RIDGEFIELD, Conn. — Down the road a piece from my house is a tiny cemetery bordered by old stone walls. Weathered tombstones dating back to colonial times sprout among the weeds.

It's called the Selleck cemetery, after Squire Selleck who operated a lime mill nearby.

Somebody, probably from a local veterans organization, visits this otherwise forgotten burial ground every Memorial Day to place brand new American flags and some flowers on the graves of Joseph and Nephi Whitlock.

I don't know who the Whitlock boys were — brothers, I'm sure, but I pay them a quiet visit every now and then. I have been curious about them ever since moving to Ridgefield nearly five years ago.

Their twin white granite headstones stand at rigid attention at the far end of the graveyard, overlooking the lake, as if they still were on guard duty with the 17th Regiment of the Connecticut Volunteers. The 2½-foot-high stone nearest the lake reads:

Civil War
Joseph H. Whitlock
Co. C 17th C.V.I.
Died July 16, 1863

That would have been two weeks after the battle of Gettysburg, and I have often wondered whether he was among the 38,000 casualties of that murderous meeting of George G. Meade and Robert E. Lee on another cemetery ridge.

Nephi's stone is similarly lettered, except the last line notes that he died on May 2, 1912, at the age of 68, which means he was 19 when Joseph died. I hope Nephi was the younger brother, but boys went off to war very early in those days. From what I can gather in the local chronicles, the Whitlocks were people of some substance in this southern Connecticut town.

I don't suppose the family's apparent prosperity kept the Whitlock brothers, if they were brothers, from accepting the \$200 "bounty" that the town voted to pay each Civil War volunteer. Records show the town treasurer was authorized to borrow up to \$16,000 to finance the bounties, but since 209 men from town served in the war, there must have been a sizable deficit.

Memorial Day, I hope, still signifies something more to people across the country than the opening of the beach and picnic season and the combustion noises of the Indianapolis 500.

When I was a kid growing up in Long Island City, just across the East River from Manhattan's skyscrapers, we always put on our Boy Scout uniforms on Memorial

Then there would be solemn speech by some politician, prayers by an ecumenical sprinkling of the local clergy, a recitation of a Joyce Kilmer poem containing the line "knapsack lie easy on my back," and hot dogs and soda pop down at the American Legion Hall, which was the bounty they paid to us for showing up.

I'd like to be in Evanston, Ill., some Memorial Day and pay a visit to the monument in Calvary Cemetery honoring Col. James A. Mulligan, a Civil War hero who must be a relative back there somewhere. Someone recently sent me a clipping from The Irish American News, a Chicago paper, telling about the dedication of the Mulligan memorial on Decoration Day, as it used to be called, May 30, 1885.

The tall granite shaft, adorned with a Celtic cross, contains the inscription: "In memory of James A. Mulligan, Colonel, 23rd Illinois Volunteers, Irish Brigade. Born, Utica, N.Y. June 25, 1830. Wounded in Battle at Kernstown, Va., July 24, 1864. 'Lay me down and save the flag.'"

I have been curious about the brigade ever since receiving as a Christmas present a replica of a Civil War recruiting poster that still hangs on the wall of my

writing den:

"Mulligan's Brigade!
Last Chance to Avoid the
Draft!

\$420 Bounty! to Veterans!
\$302 to all other Volunteers! ...

"All able-bodied men between
the ages of 18 and 45 ...

"All who wish to join John Mulligan's Irish Brigade, now in the field, and to receive the munificent bounties can have the opportunity by calling at the headquarters of Capt. J.J. Fitzgerald, of the Irish Brigade, 23rd Regiment Illinois Volunteers."

Were John Mulligan and James Mulligan brothers or did the printer goof? They both could not have commanded the brigade. According to Carl Wittke's "The Irish in America," the 23rd Illinois "was recruited by Col. James A. Mulligan, editor of Chicago's first Catholic newspaper, the Western Tablet, and included Irish companies from Springfield, Rockford and Galena."

Anyhow, of the 2,800 men Mulligan, James or John, recruited, only 30 were on hand to see his monument dedicated 20 years after the war ended. Few had survived the severe mauling the regiment received in two bloody engagements with larger Confederate forces.

"Lest we forget," wrote Kipling. Some say the world would be better off if we forgot heroes and concentrated on the living. Maybe. But the habit of patriotism is too ingrained for me not to remember on Memorial Day.