

William Moonan

Chairman ~ Bedford Selectmen



THE CENTENARY OF ARMISTICE DAY
NOVEMBER 11, 1918 TO NOVEMBER 11, 2018

On the eleventh hour, on the eleventh day, of the eleventh month, one hundred years ago this day, fighting between the Allied Forces and Germany stopped, putting an end to the bloodshed of World War I under the terms of an armistice agreement signed in France that same day.

On the one-year anniversary of the armistice agreement, President Woodrow Wilson signed a proclamation commemorating November 11 as Armistice Day. The celebrations were to include parades, public meetings and a two-minute suspension of business at 11:00 AM.

The proclamation read: "...Armistice Day will be filled with solemn pride in the heroism of those who died in the country's service and with gratitude for the victory, both because of the thing from which it has freed us and because of the opportunity it has given America to show her sympathy with peace and justice in the councils of nations..."

It occurred to me that it would be interesting to know how the good people of Bedford celebrated that first Armistice Day. Records show that the Armistice of November 11, 1918 was celebrated in Bedford by the ringing of the church bell in the morning and a parade of the school children.

A newspaper that week reported that "the signing of peace was suitably celebrated in this town. A Peace rally was held on Monday evening (Armistice Day itself) which was attended by practically everyone in town.

A parade was held starting at the town hall and proceeding down South St., across Loomis St., and up Main St., (now known as The Great Road), to Willson Park, and back to the town hall. Torches and flags were carried by the participants. All gathered in the hall afterwards for a community sing. Three rousing cheers were given for the Allied Nations and their leaders, ending with America and President Wilson. At the close of the meeting, a dummy replica of the Kaiser was escorted through the hall by several pallbearers, and another parade formed which marched to the Union School grounds where the Kaiser was cremated in a tremendous bonfire."

A week later, a peace thanksgiving service was held at the town hall. Several interesting speakers addressed the large audience, and a community sing was held.

When a soldier returned to Bedford, the fire alarm and the church bell were sounded. Everyone knew some soldier had come home and there was great excitement.

Seventy-three of the residents of this town entered service during World War I, this number included one woman, Abigail Bacon. Bedford's population was 1,362 during World War I. Fully five percent of its population went to war. The equivalent of that today would mean that 714 of our citizens did the same.

Three of the young men paid the supreme sacrifice. That would be the equivalent today of 56 of our citizens being killed in the war. Fitting tribute was paid to their memory that night. They were Stanley Thomas Anthony, Hugh I. Hunt, and William Walter Hamilton, whose memory is still honored by Bedford's American Legion.

The following summer, Bedford's veterans of the World War were officially welcomed home with a reception banquet and ball in the town hall. The hall was decorated with United States flags. The Selectmen were guests. Prayer was offered by the acting pastor of the Congregational Church, and following the dinner, he presented to each of the service men a bronze medal. The families of the three dead soldiers were given gold medals. A ball followed and dancing was enjoyed until midnight.

Much has changed in the last century. Bedford is no longer a farming community. A little more than ten times as many people live here now as did during World War I. People walked to work or rode a horse. Now we drive air-conditioned automobiles. Very few people had telephones or electricity. The exponential change and growth in technology since 1918 has been breath-taking.

And Armistice Day has changed, too. In 1926, eight years after President Wilson's original proclamation, Congress passed a resolution urging state governors to observe Armistice Day with "thanksgiving and prayer and exercises designed to perpetuate peace through goodwill and mutual understanding between nations." More than a decade later, on May 13, 1938, Congress made Armistice Day an official holiday dedicated to world peace.

But, as we all know, World War I was not the war to end all wars, and by 1954 lawmakers believed that veterans from World War II and the Korean War also deserved their own day of remembrance. So President Eisenhower, on October 12, 1954, signed a bill changing the name of Armistice Day to the more inclusive Veterans Day, a holiday to thank all who had served the United States of America. In his proclamation recognizing Veterans Day on

November 11, he wrote: “On that day, let us solemnly remember the sacrifices of all those who fought so valiantly, on the seas, in the air, and on foreign shores, to preserve our heritage of freedom, and let us reconsecrate ourselves to the task of promoting an enduring peace so that their efforts shall not have been in vain.”

And so we gather here today to carry on a tradition begun a hundred years ago. Despite its different names, the purpose of Veterans Day has remained the same: to remember the sacrifices of all the men and women who have served the United States --- and to say “thanks”; thank you for your service.