

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, May 25, 2009

Memorial Day at Mercersburg: I have always liked Memorial Day or, as some old folks called it, Decoration Day. There are two main reasons it is a favorite holiday: I like what it stands for, and it signifies the unofficial beginning of summer. When I was growing up, we always put up the huge 48-star flag on our 108-foot-high flagpole in the front lawn of Auburn Heights (taken down in the early 1980s), and after I started driving, I would take my mother to Union Hill Cemetery (Kennett Square), Hockessin Friends Burial Ground, or Old Drawyers near Odessa where she would put flowers on graves of family members.

My first experience with the community cemetery at Mercersburg (Pennsylvania) was in 1942, a few days before I was graduated from Mercersburg Academy. On May 30, the entire student body joined local residents of Mercersburg in a quiet service to celebrate Memorial Day. It was a beautiful morning and, in the midst of the dreaded final exams, provided the perfect period of reflection on what had been and what was about to come. We had been in World War II for six months.

Forty years after that, I read a wonderful story that related to the cemetery at Mercersburg. Just before 1900, a young man named Archibald Rutledge from McClellanville, South Carolina, was hired to teach English at the academy by Dr. William Mann Irvine, founder (1893) and headmaster of the boy's boarding school. Rutledge was a legend in his own time; he had retired as head of the English Department a year or two before I became a student in 1941, but he was still mentioned frequently and always with great esteem and admiration. A few years after his first arrival at Mercersburg, he had married Dr. Irvine's daughter, which didn't hurt, either.

Right after 1900, Rutledge was wandering around the cemetery near his new home when he came across three or more Confederate graves. He knew the occupants had been killed in one of the several skirmishes that occurred north of the Mason-Dixon Line in the days leading up to the Battle of Gettysburg. He decided that he would try to find family survivors of the brave young men who lost their lives in 1863. Returning to South Carolina nearly every summer, exhaustive research turned up the widows of three of the men whose graves he discovered. None of the widows, then becoming elderly, had known what happened to their young husbands; all they knew was that they didn't come home. Rutledge arranged for them to come to Mercersburg to visit the graves.

It was uncertain what sort of reception they would receive from the Yankees in Pennsylvania. There was one train a day into Mercersburg, and the day they were to arrive, Archibald Rutledge (and many others) prepared to meet them and make them feel at home. Memorial Day was not celebrated in the south, and the widows must have feared the reception they might receive. When the train pulled in, however, the whole town turned out, and the southern ladies were real heroes during their stay in Mercersburg. They were forever grateful to Archibald Rutledge for finding their deceased husbands and making possible the memorable visit. I'm sorry I never met the "legend in his own time."

Carl S. Amsley (1921–1998), known to most of us who have owned steam cars, is buried in the community cemetery at Mercersburg, the town where he was born.