

VILLAGE VIEW

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Traditionally today is Patriot's Day; it is celebrated in but two states of the union. Only Maine and Massachusetts commemorate the occasion, the beginning of the American Revolution. In all probability even the token recognition allotted this event would have been lost in the mists of antiquity had not Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem made famous "The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere."

There's something special about rhyming and metered words that tell a story; they stir my soul. When I recite, silently to myself, Longfellow's lines, "If the British march by land or sea from the town tonight, hang a lantern aloft in the belfry arch of the North Church tower as a signal light. One if by land, and two if by sea, and I on the opposite shore will be, ready to ride and spread the alarm to every Middlesex village and farm, for the country folk to be up and to arm," I'm caught in the suspense of the bold scheme of the patriots to outwit the British.

Revere's ride, of course, immediately preceded the initial battle of the Revolution; Ralph Waldo Emerson, another poet, kept alive the memory of that battle with the "Concord Hymn.": "Here once the embattled farmers stood, and fired the shot heard round the world."

A bit of pondering makes me wonder what's become of poets and poetry. What is their function today? Are poets passé and poems only for the effete? Time was, poems were as much a part of people's lives as television is now. Time was, we learned history, English and literature through the study of poetry. School children learned poems by heart and could recite long passages, verse after verse; poems, based more or less on fact, made events, past and present, come alive.

Today's poets, and there must still be such amongst us, produce no historical ballads; if they do, their tales are ignored. And I wonder why.

In early days before our ancestors came to the New World, troubadors wandered across Europe, playing and singing their stories. Our heritage is one of pride in the bravery of men and women whose single contributions changed the history of the world. Why are there no poems today telling the stories of present-day achievements? There might be, for instance, an epic about man's space explorations.

Longfellow, I'm not; someone more talented than I, however, might build on the idea.

"Listen my children, that you may know of the first earth satellite's eerie glow. On the fourth of October, Fifty-Seven, the Russians sent Sputnik toward heaven. Never before in any year did an atom escape Earth's atmosphere.

"America's Echo One, not long after, stilled Russian glee and laughter. Orbiting, transmitting by television, Echo One meant world-wide communication.

"Russia took the lead with Vostock One, put a man in space in Sixty-One. Yuri Gagarin orbited to fame; history will ever honor his name. We sent the chimpanzee, Enos, for a ride; two orbits later he was plucked from the tide.

"The first woman in space was Valentina Tereshkova; a Russian she was and glad when 'twas over. Forty-eight times in only four days, she spun round the earth, to great honor and praise.

"Two years later man first walked in space; a twenty-minute stroll Alexei Leonov traced. Courageous, indeed, were these Russian pioneers, breaking through barriers unvaulted by peers.

"Russians led the race to the moon with an unmanned soft landing, all too soon. The surface of Venus they also invaded. Here at home, gloom pervaded.

"America's first manned flight, Apollo Eight, orbited the moon in December, Sixty-Eight. And Mariner Six in July, Sixty-Nine, passed close to Mars to prove our aim fine.

"The trophy was ours with Apollo Eleven when Neil Armstrong and Buzz Algren blasted off toward heaven. They walked the moon's surface and reported the sight of far-distant Earth, fragile and bright; a marbled blue disc was all that appeared to the eyes of the spacemen as Luna they neared."

That's quite enough of that. On the other hand, isn't the story worth preserving? Isn't the exploration of our universe

important to all mankind, to world history, to generations to come? Shouldn't great poetry be written about it? Shouldn't the story be told and retold in ways it will be remembered?

The plaudits belong not to Americans alone: They must be shared with people of Russia. There's no shame in that; Russians, like us, like our forebears and like those to follow, are people; frail humanity, as are we.

Together and in competition with one another, the scientists, the finest minds of our two nations, and the astronauts, those brave men and women who permitted themselves to be encapsulated and shot into space beyond the atmosphere of our planet, pioneered in the vastness of the solar system.

They, like the country folk of Middlesex County, the farmers of Medford, Lexington and Concord, risked all; some died. And the world changed as a result of their efforts.

On Patriot's Day only two states pay homage to those who took the first steps toward American independence, who fought and died in the first battle which took place more than a year before the declaration of independence from Britain in Seventeen-Hundred-and-Seventy-Six at Philadelphia. Longfellow's ballad romanticizes Revere's ride; it also preserves the story as no other method has done.

Poetry as a medium of telling the glorious stories of man's accomplishments is unequalled. No other media are as easily understood, learned and remembered. No movie, no television show, no prose quite matches the capacity of rhyme to stir emotions, to jog memory, to enable human minds to re-live and recall detail, and to stimulate empathy with the individuals who took the first fearful fateful steps into the unknown.

Neither Longfellow nor Emerson are as much admired as other English-language poets; most highly regarded is Shakespeare. He, too, told stories in his poems and plays. English history lives in "King Lear", "Richard II", and "The Merry Wives of Windsor". European history breathes in "Hamlet", "The Merchant of Venice", and "Othello". The characters who play the parts are people with whom we all can identify. They have loves and hatreds, joys and sorrows like our own.

No modern Shakespeare has awakened; yet there is room for such a one. There is even room for such as Emerson and Longfellow. And there is room for giving more than passing thought to Patriot's Day, to early and to latter-day patriots.

In their courage and in their adventures lie seeds of a patriotism sadly lacking amongst modern man. People who may never achieve fame, who may never aspire to be more than ordinary, need heroes, need to feel pride in themselves through a hero. People can share a hero's acclaim because he, too, is but frail humanity.