

Village

View

by Andrea
Leonard



The fourteenth of June was Flag Day. How do you feel about that?

The stars and stripes, that beautiful banner, the symbol of our nation, the red-white-and-blue. That's our flag.

From earliest childhood I was taught to appreciate what our flag stands for and to respect it. All through grammar school days, each school morning began with a salute to our flag.

At Sunday School, the American flag stood at one side of the altar; the flag of Christ at the other.

The songs I learned and loved, the marches played by the old Osterville Silver Band, were patriotic and heart-stirring. The flag played a big part in the music we enjoyed. "The Flag Goes Marching By", "Stars and Stripes Forever", and, of course, our national anthem, all honor our flag.

The story of Betsy Ross and her handsewn design for the flag, the poem about Confederate soldiers marching into town during the Civil War and the little old lady who shook out her flag and defied the Army, are still thrilling.

"Shoot if you must this old grey head, but spare your country's flag," she said. Makes shivers up and down the spine.

Girl Scout meetings began and ended with the flag ceremony. And they still do. We stood at attention for opening exercises: the flag was carried carefully to the standard, raised and tied securely.

Scouts and Camp Fire Girls still pay homage to our flag.

At the meeting's end the flag was respectfully lowered, folded, stored safely away. We sang together, then, a song -- I can still remember the words.

"Day is done, Gone the sun, from the lake, from the hill, from the sky. All is well; safely rest. God is nigh." It's a simple melody and we all know it as "Taps". A bugle's clear mellow tone, playing "Taps" is a nostalgic sound for most of us.

The little Girl Scouts stood in a circle, crossed arms, clasped hands with one another as they sang. There was a tendency to sway side-to-side in time to the music.

Many of you, reading this, may be grandmothers of youngsters now in a scouting program; you'll remember flag ceremonies and this old song, and be glad the young people still use it.

Are you humming the tune? It runs in my head, even now.

Other times, other years, the flag has meant safety and security. Returning from travels in foreign countries, the sight of our flag, flying and whipping in the wind, let me know I was once more on American soil.

Steaming into New York Harbor one misty June morning almost twenty years ago, the deck of the old Queen Elizabeth was almost empty of passengers. Suddenly, looming out of the fogs hanging close to the Hudson's surface, appeared the Statue of Liberty.

None of the sights seen in the weeks I'd been abroad was lovelier. I hadn't wasted a moment in Europe being homesick, but still found myself blinking back tears at the sight of that great emblem of hope, home, freedom.

Is our view today of the United States as a free country nothing but an illusion? Only when we've had a chance to make comparisons with other country nearby -- no further than another state here would be -- we'd need passports to cross the border.

We'd need not only passports; we'd be checked by police, both leaving our own nation and

entering another. It's a strange feeling for an American traveling outside America to be checked by police at each state line.

We grow impatient, don't we, pausing long enough to pay a highway toll. In most countries cars crossing borders line up for an hour or so, waiting for clearance.

Traveling by bus or train, the police come aboard, examine your passport, your luggage if they choose, ask questions, check each person. At airports you stand in line for police clearance before you clear customs.

The freedoms Americans take for granted astonish foreigners visiting here. We can't imagine it being different. They think us foolhardy to let people wander at will, wherever they choose, without keeping track.

In recent years there's been lots of criticism of newspeople questioning morality and motives of our politicians. Exposures of unpleasant truths about our leaders have disappointed and disillusioned many ordinary citizens.

In other lands such exposure wouldn't be possible; the state controls the press. Reporters of misdeeds in high places are silenced. Dirty-work goes unheeded, unknown, unpunished.

In our country light is cast on the good and the bad by a press unrestrained by government.

The government, on the other hand, has the same right and privilege to tell its own story, its own side, to the people. Then it's up to the people to make their decisions, based on all the information presented.

To me, this is one of our most precious freedoms. Were we to lose it, we'd soon slip into the shadows of tyranny.

Imagine, if you can, hearing no news on the radio or television that hadn't first been cleared and approved by whichever political party was in power. Most of the rest of the world is controlled in this way.

Imagine newspapers that publish only the good news about the state of the nation, only good things about the country's leaders, only what the leaders want the people to know.

In many foreign countries religious freedom does not exist. That means, among other restrictions, that a couple who don't accept the state religion can't be married. They can't even attend services of the religion of their choice.

Imagine, if you can, a city or town in America where there are not several churches of different denominations. Can you conceive of living where there is but one? In some countries, there are none.

Americans enjoy freedom of speech. Whether you're Democrat or Republican, or something else, you feel free to boost the party you like best. You're not afraid to say what you think. You know you won't be whisked off to a concentration camp because you're a dissenter.

Too little attention is paid to the freedoms Americans have. Too much fault is found with the imperfections that do exist. No, this isn't the perfect government, the perfect system; but it's the best anyone's come up with, so far. You soon discover that when you try another kind.

These are what our flag stands for. On Flag day, fly your banner! Play your marches! Sing songs of pride and freedom and joy!

Long may that banner wave!