

REDEDICATION OF HISTORIC PROTESTANT CHAPEL AT VETERANS ADMINISTRATION MEDICAL CENTER

The Hon. Judge Walter H. Rice

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2005 - Transcript

Good evening and welcome to the rededication of the Historic Protestant Chapel at the Dayton Veterans Administration Medical Center, a facility that, until embraced by a very dedicated group of individuals, the National Park Service and our local congressional delegation, had fallen on hard times. Times so hard that no less a personage than our community's conscience, Dale Huffman, pondered in a 1998 column the question "Does this Chapel have a prayer?" Tonight, thanks to the hard work of more people than I can possibly name, this community answers that question "Yes, this Chapel had a prayer, that prayer has been answered, and this magnificent, this beautiful old Chapel, a significant item of local Dayton history, has not only been preserved for all to enjoy, but preserved and ready to continue its record of service to America's veterans, and, thus, to the greater Dayton community and to the nation as a whole."

On March 3, 1865, President Abraham Lincoln, as one of his last official acts, authorized the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers to provide Civil War veterans with health care, a home and an opportunity to learn a trade. The Medical Center at Dayton opened in 1867, as the Central Branch, to fulfill this vision. While other branches were added later, the Medical Center at Dayton had the distinction of being the largest and most elaborate of the Soldiers' Homes throughout the remainder of the 19th century. The historic Chapel that we rededicate tonight was built in 1870, by veterans of the Civil War who lived at the Soldiers' Home. These veterans, many of them disabled, quarried the limestone themselves from the Soldiers' Home grounds, resulting in the first permanent chapel ever built by the United States government. Regrettably, in July, 1998, rotting wooden supports that made the floor structurally unsound, not to mention a leaking roof, worn out steam piping, flaking lead paint and asbestos brought about the inevitable closing of this historic building. Without the necessary funds to rehabilitate and to renovate, everyone acknowledged that this historical structure hadn't a prayer of survival.

At the urging, and even the insistence, of the community's congressional delegation, Senator Michael DeWine, Congressman David Hobson and then-Congressman Tony Hall, a group of citizens was rallied to the cause and the first of many meetings was held on March 9, 1999. This group, consisting of local and state political officials, representatives of the congressional delegation and of a number of veterans groups, ranging from Friends of the Soldiers' Home to the Veterans Service Center of Montgomery County, and veterans of the Korean Conflict, World War II and Viet Nam, came together to answer the prayers of those who loved this beautiful structure and all that it stood for.

Over the course of some eight months, this *ad hoc* group met to explore strategies on ways to answer the prayer to save this Chapel. A small sum of money was appropriated by Congress, allowing the mothballing of this building, in order to prevent further deterioration. However, some ten to fifteen times that amount was needed to make the necessary repairs so that this Chapel would once again become a functioning entity.

As the group learned more of the history of the Soldiers' Home and its Chapel, the members became even more dedicated to raising the necessary funds, not only to refurbish and re-open this historic Chapel, but as a means of honoring America's veterans. We learned that construction began on the barracks at the Dayton Soldiers' Home in August, 1867, and by December, almost 1,000 veterans were receiving care at this facility. The Home Hospital, begun in 1868, was widely acknowledged as one of the finest structures of its kind in the United States, featuring rehabilitation programs for disabled veterans and instruction in trades and business. It was the first large-scale venture by the United States government in the care and rehabilitation of a specific segment of our population. By May, 1870, the 40 structures at the Dayton Soldiers' Home constituted a small city and were likened to "more a grand square in Paris than a simple American institution." The headquarters was completed in 1871, along with an amusement hall, featuring four bowling alleys, bagatelle tables, and a billiard table. In February, 1871, the intricate flower gardens, the lovely grotto, the beautiful lakes and a magnificent conservatory with tropical plants and animal exhibits were nationally recognized in Harper's Weekly as "not equaled by anything in our Central Park." By 1871, the number of veterans receiving care at the Dayton Soldiers' Home reached over 2300, making it the largest facility of its kind in the world. The Soldiers' Home became a popular destination, both for tourists and for residents of the Greater Dayton area. Excursions by railroad were popular. The Dayton Soldiers' Home was advertised as the most popular travelers' resort west of the Allegheny Mountains. Over 100,000 tourists were visiting the Soldier's Home on an annual basis by 1876, a figure some three times the population of Dayton. A centennial bell was cast and installed in the Chapel in May, 1876. It remains there today. Some 20,000 visitors attended the ceremonies on April 12, 1877, when President Rutherford Hayes delivered the dedication address and unveiled the Soldiers' Monument. A hotel with 20 guest rooms was dedicated, with an adjacent restaurant, in 1879. The Memorial Hall Building, a state of the art opera house/auditorium, seating some 1,500 persons, was dedicated in 1881, and, over its lifetime, featured many of the leading performers throughout the country. By 1884, the number of veterans receiving care at the Dayton Soldiers' Home reached over 7,000, almost two thirds of the total number receiving care at all of the Soldiers' Homes in our country. In 1897, the father of Wilbur and Orville Wright, Bishop Milton Wright, preached at this very Chapel to some 350 veterans. By 1910, the number of visitors to the Soldiers' Home exceeded 660,000 visitors annually, six times the then population of Dayton. Even today, the Dayton VA Medical Center is still one of the largest field stations in the Veterans Administration in terms of total bed capacity, continuing to provide a complete range of in-patient and out-patient services, stimulating the nationwide emphasis on ambulatory care and shorter lengths of hospital stay.

From the multiple meetings of this *ad hoc* group, occurring throughout the winter, spring and summer of 1999, came the American Veterans Heritage Center concept, now a 501c(3), not for profit corporation. By preserving not only this historic Chapel, but also, among others, the 1880 Patient Library, the 1871 Headquarters Building and the 1900 barracks, the American Veterans Heritage Center intends to preserve the buildings for use as a National Veterans Museum, to honor veterans and to utilize their wisdom and experiences, to instill patriotism in present and future generations, and as an educational and conference center.

Good things began happening, in answer to the prayers of the community. In August, 2001, the National Park Service awarded a Save America's Treasures grant to the Veterans Administration, a \$130,000 matching grant, to be used to repair the floor support in this Historic Chapel. In April 2003, the Historic Putnam Library, built in 1880 and known as Building 120, was reopened at a ribbon cutting ceremony attended by the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs. In January, 2004, the National Park Service awarded National Register of Historic District status to 261 acres of the Dayton Veterans Administration Medical Center Campus. In October of last year, the American Veterans Heritage Center hosted a signing ceremony for an agreement between the National Park Service and the Department of Veterans Affairs, to commence a landmark assessment study of eleven historic sites, several of which are located on this campus. In May of this year, the American Veterans Heritage Center mission to repair the floor of the historic Chapel was completed, leading to tonight's rededication.

On Veterans Day in 1999, the American Veterans Heritage Center, with its mission of preserving and reopening these four historic buildings as a museum dedicated to American veterans and their contributions, was announced to the public. At that time, an invitation was extended to all in attendance to return to the rededication of this historic Chapel, a facility which would once again make the Veterans Center a showplace and a gathering place for not only Dayton but for the nation, a facility that will tell the story of those persons whose selfless efforts have made possible the peace and the prosperity we enjoy today, and the preservation into the 21st century and beyond of the American ideal of representative democracy. Those of you here tonight have answered and accepted that invitation, delivered six long years ago.

We must not forget, even though we come together tonight to celebrate the rededication of this beautiful Chapel and the hard work of the American Veterans Heritage Center and so many other people who made it possible, that we also come together to remember and to pay tribute to the veterans who have served this country so very well, many of whom have paid the ultimate price, men and women who have made it possible for their fellow citizens to maintain the freedoms and liberties that distinguish us from all other countries of the world and that still, after two and one quarter centuries, make America the beacon for freedom-loving peoples the world over.

I have a very vivid imagination. I can see myself, still, as I did as a boy, hitting a dramatic, bases-loaded home run in the bottom of the ninth inning to win the World Series for my favorite team, sinking the winning jump shot from half court to win the NCAA championship or, even, appearing before a joint session of Congress, delivering the State of the Union message as President of the United States. My imagination allows me to place myself in all sorts of situations, situations that no one, not even Forrest Gump, could possibly call to mind. However, I absolutely cannot, cannot, cannot imagine myself as a member of the military in time of war, putting my life at risk for my country, by being in combat. That is why, ladies and gentlemen, I have always been, remain today and will always be in awe of our veterans and what they have risked and accomplished, in order that our democratic institutions could endure.

Tomorrow is election day, and it is not a stretch of our imagination to envision our walking into the polling place, not alone, not alone, but accompanied by a veteran whose courage and sacrifice made it possible for us to continue to perform this most important duty of American citizenship. Truly, everything we do, every privilege we enjoy as free Americans, from voting, to arguing both in support of and in opposition to the position of our government and the prevailing wisdom of our times, to having the best standard of living in the world, to enjoying the benefits of the best system of justice ever devised for resolving disputes between individuals and between individuals and their government and to having more freedoms and liberties *vis a vis* a strong central government than any people in the history of the world, everything, absolutely everything, we owe to our veterans, those among us who have answered the call to defend the American experiment in government and to guarantee that they, their contemporaries, we and future generations would be free.

So let it not be forgotten that we come together not only to rededicate a beautiful Chapel and to pledge ourselves to build on these premises a Veterans Heritage Center that will attract people from the world over, but that we also gather to pay a silent tribute to the American veteran, those who have served us in time of war as well as in times of peace, and those who have died in battle in defense of their country.

Who are these veterans who have served us in time of war and in time of peace, many of whom have made the ultimate sacrifice—they are men, and women now, who died fighting for a cause in which they believed...persons who died believing that they fought to defend the American way of life and all that it entailed...men who belonged to a generation that did not question military service and the call to arms in defense of our country's liberty.

These men, and women now, who questioned not their fate as soldiers of democracy and of freedom, did not serve, sacrifice and die in vain, but rather laid the groundwork for the America of today, an America in which our freedom remains inviolate...the freedom to dissent as well as the freedom to be here today in reverent memory of our veterans.

Who are these persons we honor today...they are men who answered the call to arms against British tyranny at Lexington and Concord, and with these efforts forged a free republic on this continent, dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal and dedicated to the system of constitutional government, creating and embodying a Bill of Rights granting to our citizens more individual freedoms in relationship to their government than any people to have inhabited the earth, before or since, have ever had.

Who are these veterans we honor today...they are men who, after their service to their country, many with little more than the clothes on their backs and courage and faith in their hearts, set out across this broad land to build homes and settlements and to spread our system of constitutional democracy which has been the envy of every people in the world. Men who, armed with rifle and the American dream, created upon this continent a system of laws and government that allowed and encouraged a man to be a man and not a cog in a governmental machine.

Who are these veterans we honor today...they are men who when the Civil War threatened to tear apart forever that fabric of democracy so carefully woven, without question, lifted arms to save forever the one governmental union that promised a man a measure of freedom with human dignity.

Who are these veterans we honor today...they are men who, when the first and second World Wars began enveloping the planet, unhesitatingly gave of their lives to save the world for democracy against the totalitarian hordes of dictatorship, so that the spirit of democracy could continue to light the way toward human dignity for all of the people of this earth.

Who are these veterans we honor today...they are men who fought the wars of Korea and Viet Nam, many of whom gave their lives in a cause which they believed would protect the world for democracy against the totalitarian menace of communism, which threatened to overwhelm our individual freedoms and liberties, both here and abroad. These men won the Cold War and have brought about an America unchallenged in strength and in leadership.

Who are these veterans we honor today...men and women, who have fought in both Gulf Wars and who fight today, as we speak, many of them risking their lives, in a cause which they fervently believe will protect and preserve the world for democracy against international terrorism.

In short, just who are these veterans we honor today...they are men and women, of every race, color and religion, who, since the founding of this country, have fought with arms and, more than occasionally, paid the supreme sacrifice to preserve for America

and for the world a democratic society in which all peoples might flourish side by side, and which all opinions might be heard and honored, not so much for what was said, but for the right to be heard at all.

The veterans we honor today, by the precious giving of their services and even of their lives in the defense of their country and its way of life, have preserved an America in which dissent is not only encouraged and tolerated, but respected as well.

All of us owe an undying debt of gratitude to our American veterans, men, and women now, who have fought over the past 230 years to preserve the American ideal of freedom and dignity for all. Not only do we owe our veterans a debt of gratitude, but we also owe to each and every one of them the unceasing obligation to work and to labor to achieve the ideal of world peace in our time, and the ideal of true liberty and justice—social, racial and economic justice---at home, so that these American veterans we honor today will not have served in vain.

Welcome to the Rededication of this Historic Chapel on these historic grounds and thank you, each and every one of you, for helping to answer the prayer to save this priceless bit of history.