

(Exerpts from)

Address of Alfred W. Benson at 1st Annual Reunion of the 154th  
New York Volunteers, Ellicottville, N.Y., August 30, 1888

My Comrades,

Twenty-six years have passed since we were mustered into service, and, with uplifted hands, swore to defend the union of these states. Twenty-three years ago the fragments of the 154th were mustered out at Bladensburg, and returned to the green hills of Cattaraugus and Chautauqua. Since then the relentless reaper has gathered full many a sheaf and today, we look into the faces of only a few of those who were permitted to gather again under the old familiar rays.

Our secretary wrote that he had about 300 names upon the Register--and I asked myself in sorrow where are the 700 men who swore to defend the flag? And there came to me voices out of the viewless air--"Gone to the great majority"--"Passed over the invisible pontoons"--"Camping on the eternal shore", "mustered into the everlasting service"--The faded blue exchanged for the radiant white. Oh! my comrades--we are only the rear guard, and the stragglers. Yonder is the regiment!

We pause today in the swift march of life to put up a milestone--a sort of "Ebenezer" on the road--to cast a glance backward over the line of march, and forward along the course whither we go--and so, this becomes a memorial day of war, as it is a festival day of peace. The ties that were welded in the fires of battle hold us still in fraternal bonds--there, with every lover of the union, with old soldiers and all old soldiers' friends--we first of all pledge anew our faith in the great republic, and our loyalty to the starry flag, while with sorrowing hearts we remember the broken family, and the vacant chair.

1

We meet among the hills, dotted over with homes, where old photographs sent from the front are guarded as richest treasures. There are faded blouses, with blood stains upon them--and battered swords upon the walls, and rusty muskets in the corner. The children with wide open eyes, are told of a father--or shall I say grandfather--time whirls on so--who fought with Hooker at Resaca, or marched with Sherman to the Sea. Of a brother who was borne down in the red tide at Chancellorsville, or swept from the awful ridges at Gettysburg. O, what a time for busy memories. Turn back the clock--reverse the calendar--roll back the years--not one, or ten, or twenty, only--but a good full quarter of a century, with a twelve month added, and go with me to the old home in the quiet countryside. You will need to press your hand to your forehead now, to steady the march of recollection, and shade your eyes from the fierce glare of those days of gold (or should I say brass?) but presently you will see it all. It is the early summer of 1862. Black disaster has overtaken the Union arms. The call of our sad-faced President for 300,000 men has penetrated to every farm house, and been heard in every workshop in the startled north. The boys of 16, 18, 20 years, with a sprinkling of men, with tell-tale locks of gray, are trooping from every lane and swarming the village street--beautiful silken flags whose broad stripes and bright stars were carefully wrought by the fair hands of lovely women, are glistening in the sunshine. The heroic bugle rouses the echoes among the hills--The camp yonder is a prophecy of those upon the Potomac, the Rappahannock and the Tennessee. We are in Jamestown now, in the early September days--Presently a long railway train is seen at the station--Look again--it is crowded with men in deepest blue--The engine is lazily puffing upon the track--And now, away go the boys--

"Fresh in their unstained uniforms  
 Eyes all hopeful, and hearts all warm  
 They go to meet the Southern storm  
 To conquer--or, to die!"

Then there is a wall of gray-haired sires along the track--  
 handkerchiefs flutter in the breeze--babies stare curiously at the  
 strange spectacle--The bands play--the train thunders on and is lost  
 to sight--The villagers go slowly down the street--Mothers bearing  
 great burdens of anguish--Old fathers of young sons choke down the  
 rising sob, and go sadly to the fields, to finish the work the boys  
 had left undone--All is hushed and silent now, in the village street.  
 Henceforth the anxious hour in all the long days to follow, is that of  
 the arrival of the mail--when pale faces are seen reading letters from  
 the front, or eagerly scanning the city papers for lists of casualties  
 in the last fight on the Potomac--My comrades, we speak of the days  
 that tried men's souls--Those were the days that tried women's souls--  
 Ours was to do, and suffer--Theirs to wait and pray. Now let us look  
 out upon another scene. We are upon a southern mountainside, and it  
 is the 8th of May 1864. All battles are alike, in that all are  
 lighted by the same fires of hell, but each has its peculiar phases  
 and each appears differently, to the different men engaged in it.  
 Our glance at this particular field will remind you my comrades of  
 many others, where the old 154th gloriously bore its full share of  
 the battle's bloody brunt.

We are on Rocky face, and the old white star division is climbing  
 the steep and difficult ascent. There is a ledge of huge rocks upon  
 the crest, and behind them the enemy we cannot see, but whose  
 presence we can almost feel. Slowly the line of blue advances--

not a shot is fired--the birds sing in the branches, and the line sweeps on in silence. At the head of one company of as brave men, as brave and true as any that wore the star that day and whose honored and heroic captain, now before us, was then in Libby prison, marched a young lieutenant, only just assigned to its command. By the lieutenant's side stood the orderly sergeant--always a hero, but never more heroic than on that afternoon in May. He towered over six feet in height, erect, powerful, determined, brave: giving to the young lieutenant in command that soldierly sympathy, and loyal support, so grateful in that trying hour. The regimental colors float close by in the breeze--other colors wave here and there along the line and reveal the place where other regiments form links in the living chain tightening around that Georgia mountain. We can almost see over the crest now--only that ugly looking ledge yonder, we cannot look beyond that--and it was well we could not. The line sweeps on firm and unbroken. Now a white puff and a single shot--Comrades did you hear it? Now another, yes a dozen--See, the skirmishers yonder dodge behind the trees, and fire up the mountain at something we do not see. But, do you see the little wreaths of smoke between the huge rocks yonder, and hear the crack of the rifles--And, there is a gray hat above the rock, and there is another and another--Yes a hundred. Steady! The bullets fairly spatter upon the rocks and whizz in the air. On goes the line. The regimental flag still flutters up the mountain, and toward the fatal rocks. Your lieutenant is pale, and almost silent. Still at his side that faithful sergeant fairly leaps up the mountain. The men catch hold of jutting rocks and projecting branches, as they grandly climb upwards. See!--the flag darts forward as the brave color bearer seeks to plant it on the ledge in front.

And now the crest is all alive with men in gray. Up go their colors as they leap from behind the rocks. Out blazes the flash of ten thousand muskets right above us. And Oh, cruel, cruel, backward, downward falls that great faithful sergeant--over and over like a great wheel in his mad descent down that slippery steep. And with him seven of that little company of 30--dead and wounded--And so in other companies along the line men dropped like leaves. Our darling flag went to the dust, as its bearer received a fatal shot, a comrade seized it but only to fall, another clutches the precious staff and, thank God, it is safe. Oh, it was so close to those blazing muzzles hot with death! The men in grey again sank out of sight behind the rocks. The Union line again reformed and climbed that road to death--and so all the afternoon the battle's bloody edges hovered about that crest, but never above it. By a strange fatality that seemed to fall on our devoted regiment, the support upon right or left was wanting at the supreme moment, when our flag was almost there, and so, sullenly, heroically, firing up the mountain still, the old 154th, battered, bruised and bleeding, retreated to its foot. And it was night.

As the lieutenant, that night, by the flicking camp fire, made out his list of casualties and noted the names of dead wounded and missing, he could not hold back the tears. For they were heroes all--"some body's boys"--some of the same boys who left the northern village that September day in 1862. And to this day the 8th of May is a monumental day in his memory, and he remembers the terrible volley from the rocks, and sees the noble form of that Sergeant rolling down the mountain. One day when the clouds are all lifted, when the things seen and temporal shall vanish from his mortal sight, and the fields of paradise unfold upon his clearer vision, he hopes to

see that faithful friend, it may be, still in blouse of blue, but strangely bright and radiant--reaching out a comrade's hand to help him up, as on that slippery mountain on that day of fate in May....

My comrades, leaving home in my adopted state, I have travelled across plain and river, by forest and lake to grasp you by the hand, to look once more into your old familiar faces, to revive again the incidents and the service now a quarter of a century old. Some of you I may meet again--many of you I shall not see until we are finally mustered out, and mustered in. My acquaintances and neighbors of a score of years gone by have met me usually with the remark, "How old you have grown"--just as though they expected that the plains of Kansas, in the exuberance of their fertility could furnish some rare plant wherof we might eat and remain in Eternal youth. Let me assure you that although we raise corn of marvellous height, pumpkins of phenominal weight, wheat to feed the starving multitude, and cattle that no man can number, although our skies are sunny and our zephyrs balmy (when indeed they do not deepen into the festive cyclone)--still out there <sup>in</sup> ~~is~~ that favored heart of the continent old father time does get in his work. And, let me whisper it, so that it won't be noised about--you my comrades, are growing old too. I remember some of you upon whose lips the prophecy of coming manhood was not apparent (at least not without a field glass) in 1862 are now liberally sheathed with grey. Nay more--you have not come here alone as you enlisted, but kind-faced matronly ladies are at your side and by the hearty soldierly obedience you yeild to them I readily conclude that you are theirs--that is to say that you are married. I observe, too, great troops of sunny haired and rosy cheeked

children. I am persuaded that these are your children, or your grandchildren. If our Sec'y has counted 300 survivors, I wonder how many he would find if he counted not only you but yours? And if this new regiment were on dress parade--what a surprising sight to be seen. I wonder if even our respected and much loved Col. Warner could find military terms adequate to such a condition of things. Ah, well, God bless the children, and the **grandchildren**, and may they never forget the story of the 154th in which their fathers served.

Yes we are growing old. We hail each other boys today, but we are the boys of 30 years ago. Gray heads if not white ones hold sway in our camp, and halting steps are noticed in our line of march. But we have been permitted to live in the heroic days of the great republic, and though we are in the main poor and obscure, yet we would not exchange our experiences for the wealth of Vanderbilt or the fame of Blaine. We will not dwell among the tombs today, or grope in the shadows. If old in years we may be young in patriotism, in devotion to home and flag and native land. Besides our work is not done. We believe in the crowning principle of loyalty. Let us then be loyal to God and country and humanity. We must soon strike our tents here and march to the camp yonder, but we may leave behind us sons and daughters who will uphold, defend and cherish the principles for which we fought. Thus may the short story of our lives be reproduced, in greater faithfulness we trust, in these who shall follow after. May we not inspire in these sons and daughters of the veterans of '61 & 2 that devotion to flag and duty, that shall make them also ready so that the future Bull Run if it should come may be followed by another and more glorious Appomattox.

We will go to the "low green tent whose curtain never outward swings"--but we will live again in sons and daughters who will finish the work we must leave undone. We may not leave them much of material wealth but we will leave them a free, united and prosperous country-- A flag without a stain--a nation without a rebel!

Our ranks are growing thinner. In a few years there will only be enough to serve as relics wherewithal to grace the platform on the 4th of July. What shall we do? Close up the ranks just as we did in the old days. It will shorten the line--Oh yes--but it will leave the front solid. That is, we must stand together and feel the electric touch of elbows all along the line from Maine to California. True we are all citizens now and have our own affairs to look after and differ in politics as we have a right to, but beyond these we should bury all the strife and discord and remembering common hardships and common triumphs, be welded together in fraternity of feeling as in the days when we shared each others blankets and drank from the same canteen....

In this reunion time we cannot fail to remember the faces that faded from our mortal sight at Chancellorsville, at Gettysburg, in Tennessee, in Georgia and the Carolinas. And in the midst of this festival in the green hills at home, drop a tear for those our comrades who during and since the war have gone into the last camp. But their fame, thank God, is secure. They fought the good fight and kept their county's faith....

And now, my beloved Comrades, my task is done, rudely and imperfectly but my heart was in it. We look away from the scenes of war to this beautiful land of peace remembering



The cannon plows the field no more  
The heroes rest, Oh, let them rest  
In peace along the peaceful shore  
For peace they fought, for peace they fell  
They sleep in peace and all is well

Men of the old iron bound, storm tried and death swept 154th  
N.Y.--May your last days be your best. May you together with those  
who have crossed the flood muster again on the farther shore a  
thousand strong! Every man at his post.

Hail and farewell!