

PREFACE

If, as has been written, all politics is local, then so too is all history. This volume presents an overview of the town's past, first as the village of East Stoughton, and after 1888 as the town of Avon. It will be seen that almost everything which troubled the people in far-off Washington or New York or Berlin, eventually found its way down to this little crossroads as well. While Presidents, industrialists or madmen may have made their plans miles away, their effects were soon enough felt by the men and women who walked the same streets which we now walk.

This book is not presented as nostalgia, though I am sure that readers will find some of that in its pages. History is really the study of change and how people have adapted to it, and in this book I try to describe, and hopefully explain, why Avon has undergone such a dramatic transformation throughout its history.

I have also tried to emphasize throughout these pages that ours is a story about human beings, many of them lovely, others less so. As I finish this project I find that two incidents will remain in my memory for a long time, and both illustrate my point. The first happened at the very beginning of the project, the other at the very end.

In June 1987 I was invited to go to Avon to discuss the possibility of writing the history of the town for its upcoming centennial celebration. My only previous visit, except as a traveler on Route 24, had come just two years earlier when a local teachers group asked me to give a talk at Blanchard's Tavern about Abraham Lincoln. However that turned out to be a cold, dark February night and I saw almost nothing of the village.

As I drove into town on that beautiful June evening two years later I couldn't help but notice the statue of the Civil War soldier that stands in

Goeres Square. Almost identical in design to hundreds of others around the country, this was different in two very noticeable ways: First, unlike many of these monuments, the Avon soldier is not facing south toward the old Confederacy. Instead, he faces north, guarding the town against some undisclosed enemy, perhaps in Boston. Second, I noticed that this soldier was wearing a black cap and gown, similar to the type worn by high school seniors at graduation. He looked comfortable enough in it, as indeed he should have, for I was told that this was an old custom that the recently graduated seniors at Avon High had kept alive.

I found both of these things interesting, and as a social historian who is intrigued by small towns I began to wonder about who Goeres was, about what part Avon people played in the Civil War, and about what unseen changes this little place had undergone throughout its life. I met with some of the members of the Centennial Committee that night, a bargain was struck, and this book is the result.

The second incident occurred in the late afternoon of December 31, 1988. The manuscript was finished and I had gone to Avon to double check the dates of birth and death for a couple of my subjects. One I found pretty easily on his headstone over in the Avon Cemetery on East Main Street. The other man is buried in St. Michael's Cemetery, not far away, and I quickly drove over to East Spring Street. Because it was New Year's Eve, most of the stores and factories had let out early, so it was relatively quiet there, only the sound of the Christmas wreaths scratching against the granite headstones broke the silence. I had to walk over most of the cemetery before I found the stone that I was looking for. I wrote the information down in the fading light and started back for the car when I noticed H. Carroll Gilgan's grave. I stopped for a minute and then began walking again, past the graves of families that until then had existed only on paper for me: the Goerses, Ganleys, Dohertys, Gearys and many, many others.

The same thought came to me there in St. Michael's that had come earlier over in the Avon Cemetery among the Littlefields, Blanchards, and Wheelers: I knew these people; I never met them, but I knew them all. As a person who had scoured every town report available for Stoughton and then Avon, I have seen them born, seen them married, counted their children. I have read the brittle, yellowed newspaper clippings which followed them through their lives; I have seen them at work, at play, at war. I have read their death certificates at the Town Clerk's office, and I have spoken with some of their friends and families.

What follows is their story, told as well as an outsider can tell it. I am privileged to pass it along.

William F, Hanna
Taunton, Mass.
January 1.1989