

Decoration Day/Memorial Day History

In 1868, Commander-in-Chief John A. Logan issued General Order No. 11 calling for all Departments and Posts to set aside the 30th of May as a day for remembering the sacrifices of fallen comrades, thereby beginning the celebration of Memorial Day.

With membership limited strictly to "veterans of the late unpleasantness," the GAR encouraged the formation of Allied Orders to aid them in its various works. Numerous male organizations jostled for the backing of the GAR and the political battles became quite severe until the GAR finally endorsed the Sons of Veterans of the United States of America (later to become the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War) as its heir.

Memorial Day, originally called Decoration Day, is a day of remembrance for those who have died in our nation's service. There are many stories as to its actual beginnings, with over two dozen cities and towns laying claim to being the birthplace of Memorial Day. There is also evidence that organized women's groups in the South were decorating graves before the end of the Civil War.

Memorial Day was officially proclaimed on 5 May 1868 by General John Logan, national commander of the Grand Army of the Republic, in his General Order No. 11, and was first observed on 30 May 1868, when flowers were placed on the graves of Union and Confederate soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery.

The South refused to acknowledge the day, honoring their dead on separate days until after World War I (when the holiday changed from honoring just those who died fighting in the Civil War to honoring Americans who died fighting in any war).

Poppy Days

In 1915, inspired by the poem "In Flanders Fields," Moina Michael replied with her own poem:

*We cherish too, the Poppy red
That grows on fields where valor led,
It seems to signal to the skies
That blood of heroes never dies.*

She then conceived of an idea to wear red poppies on Memorial day in honor of those who died serving the nation during war. She was the first to wear one, and sold poppies to her friends and co-workers with the money going to benefit servicemen in need. Later a Madam



Guerin from France was visiting the United States and learned of this new custom started by Ms. Michael and when she returned to France, made artificial red poppies to raise money for war orphaned children and widowed women. This tradition spread to other countries.

In 1921, the Franco-American Children's League sold poppies nationally to benefit war orphans of France and Belgium. The League disbanded a year later and Madam Guerin approached the VFW for help. Shortly before Memorial Day in 1922 the VFW became the first veterans' organization to nationally sell poppies. Two years later their "Buddy" Poppy program was selling artificial poppies made by disabled veterans.

In 1948 the US Post Office honored Ms Michael for her role in founding the National Poppy movement by issuing a red three cent postage stamp with her likeness on it. *Submitted by Beth Bassett.* ■

What Memorial Day Means

Reprinted from the May, 1907 Brook Reporter

The illustration that appeared is shown here of a G. A. R. member (note ribbon on vest), who has lost an arm to the war effort, explaining the meaning of Memorial Day to a young boy.

So, lad, you don't understand why a lot of grizzled old men should waste a day when God's sun is shining, and march away to the gloom of a cemetery and scatter flowers on mounds that to you are only mounds, but to the world represent a wonderful idea.

Away back, when your granddaddy had two good legs and was as spry as you are today, it became necessary to fight to preserve the unity of the nation. This great country was plunged into war, and you've heard enough to know what a terrible thing war is. And this was worse, for it was a war at home. It wasn't like fighting a foreign foe. It wasn't like defeating the British and driving them out of a land in which then had no business. It was a family war, and it hurt because brothers fought brothers, yes and killed them. And fathers and sons were found in opposing armies. Oh, boy, when you get big enough to understand, and love your country as you must if you are to be a wise and good citizen, you should pray to the good God to whom you say your "Now I Lay Me," every night to preserve us from another Civil War.

It lasted years, lad. It starved thousands, butchered them, wounded them, tortured them. It took the best blood in the country, North and South, for, don't forget, lad, there were good men in gray as well as in blue. They fought for what they thought to be right and so did we, and that means awful fighting, lad. Why, boy, if you should take all the people in ten big towns and bury them right now,



it would not cover the deaths in that big war. And your grandmother and thousands of other mothers and grandmothers cried until they no longer could shed tears. And some of the women fought like man and others went as nurses, and if Carnegie should make medals night and day for a year he couldn't hope to supply them to the heroes of that war, men and women; yes, and children. And most folks who fought in that war fought because of their love of country, lad. It is as fine as your love for your mother. It is something that makes a nation great and strong, and men true and upright. You

know, lad, a good soldier is always a good citizen, and a brave man can never be a very bad man.

And finally it was all over and the right had triumphed as right must if the world is to live, and then, North and South, a great effort was made to forget, to be brothers and friends again; to build up a stricken land; and to take up the burden of making this the most wonderful land on the globe. And we are succeeding, lad. The flag that your daddy hoists on Memorial Day is the flag of Alabama, and Texas, and Ohio, and of all of us, and I love it, for I fought for it, and every one of those green mounds represents love for it,

and every boy should grow up to feel that it belongs to him and that, if trouble comes, he should lay down his life for it.

So you see, lad, Decoration Day represents love of country; devotion; appreciation; self-sacrifice. Those are long words, dear lad. Perhaps they are too long for a little boy, but they are the things that help transform youngsters like you into strong men and good men. And while we keep step to the music of the fife and drum, we are glad that the big world isn't too busy to devote one day each year to memory and the men who fought for the grand idea. *Submitted by Beth Bassett.* ■