

# MEMORIAL DAY

LAST MONDAY IN MAY

**I**T WAS 1866, and the United States was recovering from the long and bloody Civil War between the North (Union) and the South (Confederate). Surviving soldiers came home, some with missing limbs, and all with stories to tell. Henry Welles, a drug-store owner in Waterloo, New York, heard the stories and had an idea. He suggested that all the shops in town close for one day to honor the soldiers who were buried in the Waterloo cemetery. On the morning of May 5, the townspeople placed flowers, wreaths, and crosses on the graves of the northern soldiers in the cemetery.

In the South, women's organizations were also honoring the war dead, decorating the graves of southern soldiers who had died in the war. In many towns and cities there was a growing movement to honor the war dead with a special day. So in 1868, General Jonathan Logan, commander of the Grand Army of the Republic, established May 30 as the official day of observance to honor all those who had given their lives in service of their country. The day was called Decoration Day.

In General Logan's proclamation of Decoration Day, he declared:

*The 30th of May, 1868, is designated for the purpose of strewing with flowers, or otherwise decorating the graves*

*of comrades who died in defense of their country and during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village and hamlet churchyard in the land. In this observance no form of ceremony is prescribed, but posts and comrades will in their own way arrange such fitting services and testimonials of respect as circumstances may permit.*



The day was to be a memorial, and was intended also to be a day of reconciliation, as flowers were placed on the graves of both Union and Confederate soldiers in Arlington Cemetery.

In a typical Decoration Day ceremony in the North, veterans would march through the town to the cemetery to decorate their comrades' graves with flags. They took photographs of soldiers next to American flags. Rifles were shot in the air as a salute to the northern soldiers who had given their lives

to keep the United States together. Children read poems and sang civil war songs and hymns. Veterans came to the schools wearing their medals and uniforms to tell students about the Civil War.

In 1882, the name was changed from Decoration Day to Memorial Day, to honor soldiers who had died in all previous wars—not only the Civil War. In the northern States, it was designated a legal holiday. The southern states honored their

PREVIOUS PAGE: Flowers and wreaths are placed on graves in memory of loved ones who have died in war.

ABOVE: In 1868 General Jonathan Logan established May 30 as the official day of observance, not only as a memorial but also as a day of reconciliation. Flowers are placed on graves of those who have lost their lives in wars.

war dead on other days until the end of World War I.

After World War I, Memorial Day was also called Poppy Day because of Moina Michael's idea to wear red **poppies** on the day, in honor of those who had died in the war. She was inspired by John McCrae's poem, "In Flanders Fields," which speaks of the bright red poppies that grow among the graves on former battlefields in Belgium. Her sale of poppies on Memorial Day benefited military men in need. The tradition eventually spread to other countries, where real or artificial poppies were sold to benefit war **orphans**.

Since 1922, the VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars) organization in the United States has sold paper poppies, made by **disabled** veterans, on Memorial Day.

In 1966, President Lyndon Johnson proclaimed Waterloo, New York the birthplace of Memorial Day. In 1971, President Richard Nixon declared Memorial Day a national holiday, to be observed on the last Monday in May. Cities all around the United States hold their own ceremonies on this day to **pay respect** to the men and women who have died in wars or in the service of their country.

Today, Memorial Day is also a day for personal remembrance. Families and individuals honor the memory of their loved ones who have died. Church services, visits to the cemetery, flowers on graves, or even silent **tributes** mark the day with **dignity** and **solemnity**. It is a day of **reflection**. Memorial Day often coincides with the end of the school year, so to many Americans the day also **signals** the beginning of summer—with a three-day weekend to spend at the beach, in the mountains, or at home relaxing.

### **Arlington National Cemetery**

Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia is the nation's largest nation-



ABOVE: After World War I, Memorial Day was also called Poppy Day, and bright red poppies were worn in honor of those who had died in that war.

al cemetery. Buried there with a special place of honor are members of the armed forces, as well as astronauts, explorers, and other distinguished Americans. President John F. Kennedy is buried in a spot overlooking Washington, D.C., and marked with an eternal flame.

In the early hours of the morning, on the Friday before Memorial Day, soldiers of the Third U.S. Infantry walk along the rows of **headstones**. Each soldier stops at a headstone, salutes, takes one flag from the bundle of flags he or she is carrying, and pushes it into the ground.

These soldiers are part of a special regiment, the Old Guard, and they consider it a **privilege** to place flags on the more than two hundred thousand graves of soldiers who served and died in wars. "They have done their job," said one soldier, "and now it's my turn to do mine."

It is an equal honor to guard the Tomb of the Unknowns. Four unknown soldiers have been buried in this spot: one soldier from each of the two World Wars, one from the Korean conflict, and one from the Vietnam War. Each of these soldiers represents all of those who gave their lives in the modern wars. On another hill of Arlington Cemetery, there is a **mass** grave of **unidentified** soldiers from the Civil War.

On Memorial Day, the President or Vice President of the United States gives a speech and lays a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknowns. Members of the armed forces give a rifle salute. At other tombs, veterans and families come to lay their own wreaths and say prayers.

## Glossary

**recover(ing):** *v.* to get well after an illness, disaster, or injury  
**limb(s):** *n.* arm or leg  
**honor:** *v.* to remember or recognize with respect and thanks  
**cemetery:** *n.* graveyard; place of burial  
**wreath(s):** *n.* ring or circle of leaves or flowers used for decoration or commemoration  
**decorate(ing):** *v.* to furnish or cover with something ornamental, such as to place flowers on a grave  
**proclamation:** *n.* an official or public announcement  
**designate(d):** *v.* to specify; assign  
**strew(ing):** *v.* to throw around lightly  
**rebellion:** *n.* revolution or uprising  
**hamlet:** *n.* small town; village  
**churchyard:** *n.* the ground around a church, often used as a graveyard  
**prescribe(d):** *v.* to give guidance or a rule or a direction  
**post(s):** *n.* military camp or fort  
**fitting:** *adj.* appropriate  
**testimonial(s):** *n.* formal statement or declaration of value or merit; words of praise  
**memorial:** *n.* ceremony or monument to honor the memory of a person who has died or an historical event  
**reconciliation:** *n.* the act of restoring harmony or a resolution of differences  
**veteran(s):** *n.* member of the armed forces, now retired or discharged  
**comrade(s):** *n.* good friend; a colleague  
**salute:** *n.* gesture of honor or respect  
**poppy(-ies):** *n.* a species of flower known for its bright red or scarlet flowers  
**orphan(s):** *n.* a child whose parents have died or have abandoned the child  
**disable(d):** *adj.* having limited ability due to an injury or physical abnormality  
**pay respect:** *v. phrase.* honor  
**tribute:** *n.* statement of praise and respect  
**dignity:** *n.* self-respect; nobleness of manner  
**solemnity:** *n.* seriousness  
**reflection:** *n.* deep thought  
**signal(s):** *v.* to indicate; to mark  
**headstone(s):** *n.* stone marker for burial places  
**privilege:** *n.* special right

**mass:** *adj.* pertaining to large numbers or quantities; not separated

**unidentified:** *adj.* having no name or identity