

DECORATION DAY AND GRAND ARMY OF THE REPUBLIC

Beautiful Memorial Ceremonial for the Dead Soldiers Fostered by the Veterans of the War of the Rebellion and Certain to Be Handed Down to Future Generations of Patriotic Citizens



DECORATION DAY is an institution peculiarly American, in the particular form of strewing flowers upon graves of the soldier and sailor dead. The custom of strewing flowers upon the graves of friends and relatives is, however, as old as humanity. Prior to the inception of the American Decoration day there is no record of any particular day being set apart for this custom. Decoration day as it is now observed is a southern institution, having originated in Mississippi in the second year of the civil war, when the people of that state by common consent, and later by legislative enactment, set apart April 26, 1862, as "Memorial day," for the strewing of flowers upon the graves of the dead Mississippi soldiers. The following year Alabama, Florida and Georgia adopted April 26 as Memorial day. Other southern states soon took up the custom in memory of their soldier and sailor dead, though all did not set apart the same day. In North and South Carolina May 10 is observed as Memorial day and in Tennessee the second Friday in May, while in Louisiana June 3 is so recognized.

It was not until 1863 that the custom began to be observed in any concerted way in the northern states, although the custom of strewing flowers upon the graves of the soldier and sailor dead was practiced in some localities at an earlier date during the civil war. The first general observance of the day was from the 12th to the 15th of June in the north, on account of flowers being more abundant in the northern latitudes during the period. Efforts were made to have some particular day specified that might be universal throughout the north and it was at the suggestion of Major General John A. Logan that May 30 was fixed as the permanent date. His suggestion did not take well at first on account of the scarcity of flowers in the far northern states during May. But the year following the close of the war May 30 was finally accepted on the recommendation of the first national encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic.

For several years Decoration day was almost wholly a Grand Army of the Republic institution, the public, participating with patriotic fervor in the observance of the day, but now the day is officially recognized as a holiday by all the northern states except Idaho, and such of the southern states as have their own Memorial days. May 30 is recognized in Virginia as "Confederate Memorial day."

South and North Co-operate

Efforts have been repeatedly made to have the south co-operate with the northern states in making May 30 "the" Decoration day, but without result. The south has its own views on this matter and is not disposed to relinquish them. At the same time the southern people have always participated in the Decoration day ceremonies in such southern states where there are national cemeteries maintained and supported by the general government. It is also the custom for the Grand Army of the Republic to unite with the United Confederate Veterans in their Memorial day ceremonies wherever they happen to be Grand Army of the Republic men in the southern states. The confederate graveyard near Camp Chase, Ohio, in which several thousand southern soldiers lie buried who died in prison while prisoners of war, is given the same reverent attention by the Grand Army of the Republic on Decoration day as is given to the dead of the union armies buried in Green Lawn cemetery at Columbus, O.

At first no particular form was observed in the decoration of the graves, each locality where soldier and sailor dead lay buried observing the day in its own peculiar way. At the outset the decoration of the graves or strewing of flowers was entrusted to little girls. The ceremonial was a beautiful one and was generally accompanied with devotional exercises. The ceremony was carried out in the cemetery at the Soldiers' circle, where the larger body of the dead had been grouped. It was soon discovered that a great many soldiers were buried in private lots remote from the circle, and many of such graves were unintentionally overlooked in the strewing of flowers, much to the grief of their friends and relatives. It again frequently happened that soldiers had been buried in almost every cemetery who were unknown in the community where buried, and again many soldiers were known to be lying in unknown graves in the south land where no flower could ever be placed on their graves. It was this thought that inspired the system of decorating unknown graves in form, if not in letter, which has now become the central feature of the Grand Army ritual that is observed in the more imposing features of the day. The known graves can be bedecked with flowers, and are in every cemetery north and south. This feature of decoration has of late years been entrusted to special details of the Grand Army and their auxiliaries, the Woman's Relief Corps and the Ladies of the Grand Army of the Republic, taking place usually the morning of Decoration day, while the formal exercises are usually deferred until the afternoon. The ritualistic ceremony has up to very recent years been carried out in some park, where an unknown grave with a monument is provided for the occasion, around which the general ritualistic ceremonies are carried out followed by an oration and special musical services. The parade feature and park exercises are gradually dying out because of the advancing years of the old veterans who cannot stand the fatigue of the parade or prolonged exercises at the parks. The practice now is to carry out these services indoors, and this year, as last year, in Omaha they will be carried out in the Auditorium, with all the ritualistic forms.

Grand Army Will Bequeath Day

Decoration day is a distinctive institution of the Grand Army of the Republic and its general form is, and always will be, in that direction. That the veterans of the Grand Army are jealous of the day cannot be denied, yet the old veterans are beginning to feel that the time is not far distant when they must lay the work down to younger hands, and to this end they look to the younger soldiers of later wars to take up and perpetuate the work of Decoration day with the same fervor that they have always carried it on. But to do this the ritualistic form must be changed somewhat because of the different conditions of the later wars, in which the younger generation fought just as vigorously as did their fathers nearly half a century ago.

Decoration day is virtually divided into three periods, the first being the custom of having old veterans address the pupils of the public and parochial schools on the Friday preceding Decoration day; and Memorial Sunday, when the different posts and corps attend divine services where the services are conducted with special refer-

ence to the Decoration day idea; and third, Decoration day proper. This year the old and young veterans will speak jointly at the several schools. On Memorial Sunday, which happens to fall this year on the Decoration day date, the posts of Omaha, with their respective auxiliaries, will attend church in the morning at the First Presbyterian Seward Street Methodist and Pearl Memorial Methodist churches. Next important to the formal ceremonies of Decoration day is the practice of the old veterans delivering addresses before the public schools. It does not follow that these addresses are always expositions of classic eloquence, for the speakers were not taught in the school of Demosthenes, and oratory may not be their forte. They are men now bent in years who half a century ago left their homes and school to undertake a mighty task, the like of which has never befallen a similar soldiery. They now begin to realize

what they wrought, and as preservers of a nation occupy a place in the schools which their children and grandchildren are attending. They are the living evidence of a past replete with mighty events. The stories of their camp and battle life of half a century ago possess a new interest to them, as the events in which they took part loom up in such vast importance with the passing years. They thought but little of these things then, not that they did not realize their importance, but because they had other things to think of at Shiloh, Mission Ridge, Chickamauga, Bull Run, Antietam, Gettysburg, the Wilderness and Appomattox. With these historic battlefields bristling yearly with new monuments to commemorate their valor in their young manhood days they begin to feel that they are of some importance after all. They may not tell the story of their battles with the accuracy of an official report or a critical review of

the professed historian, yet they can, and do, tell a story of their individual part as seen from their immediate environment that gives to the written historical page a deeper interest and inspires in their hearers a spirit of patriotism that could not be inspired through any other means. They may lapse into occasional egotism in telling their own story, but yet they are the living evidence of the things that shall endure as long as history is treasured or revered. The custom of decorating the waters of the sea with flowers was observed long years before the decoration of the graves of the soldier dead was ever thought of. It was practiced by fisher folk along the sea shores as a tribute to their dead lost at sea. In fact, the custom goes back into the mythological history of England in the days of Good King Arthur and Sir Launcelot, when the Thames, the Tyne and the Dee were carpeted with flowers as a propitiation against disaster by sea or memory of those who had gone to sea in ships and never returned. It was particularly a civil custom and had no bearing upon the soldiers or men-of-war-men who were lost at sea in battle, and it was not until the Spanish-American war of 1898 that the impulse was given to decorate the waters in memory of the dead buried at sea, who had given up their lives in a national cause.

And, strange as it may seem, it was the sea burial of a Nebraska boy that gave rise to the custom. And, stranger yet, this Nebraska boy was the first American soldier buried at sea of which there is any record, and also the only one. The young soldier in whose memory this custom originated was Sergeant George Geddes of Company C, First Nebraska United States Volunteers, who died at sea from meningitis on June 20, 1898, while the regiment was enroute to the Philippines. He was buried the following day from the United States transport Sherman. The services were conducted by Chaplain Mailley and Major John M. Stotsberg. The entire transport fleet stopped during the burial service in respect to the solemn occasion. A quartet of Company L (Thurston Rifles) of Omaha sang the funeral dirge, "Lead, Kindly Light." Sergeant Geddes was a member of the company from Beatrice and the ceremonies of the burial produced such a profound impression upon the command that it was determined that thereafter no American soldier should be buried at sea, but that his body should be returned to his native land for interment.

The following Decoration day of 1899 the mother of Sergeant Geddes attended the decoration ceremonies at the Beatrice cemetery and was broken-hearted over the fact that the grave of her boy could never be strewn with flowers. She was almost inconsolable, when another mother of a Nebraska boy promised her that her son's grave should be strewn with flowers the following Decoration day. The idea took and early in May of 1900 the Woman's Relief Corps of Beatrice, Rawlins Corps No. 92, took the matter up and enlisted Lincoln Woman's Relief Corps of San Francisco in the cause. Flowers were sent from Beatrice to San Francisco to be strewn upon the waters of the Pacific in memory of Sergeant Geddes. The express companies vied with each other for the privilege of carrying the box of flowers free from Nebraska to San Francisco. The flowers were received in San Francisco by representatives of Lincoln corps and on Decoration day this corps of devoted women took the flowers to the Cliff House and, with impressive ceremonies and in the presence of many hundreds of San Francisco people, cast the flowers on the ocean.

The following year a similar box of flowers was sent from Nebraska to San Francisco for the same purpose. A portion of the flowers was strewn on the ocean from the Cliff House, the other portion having been taken to sea by a member of Lincoln corps, who was then enroute to Honolulu, and passing near the spot where the body of Sergeant Geddes had been buried at sea two years before, the flowers were cast upon the sea in his memory, the vessel stopping for the purpose and, it being on Decoration day, appropriate devotional services were held in honor of the event and day.

This was the beginning of the custom of strewing flowers on the waters in memory of the American soldier and sailor dead buried at sea, and now the custom has become universal and a part of the observance of Decoration day, and will so continue, having been recognized by the national departments of the Woman's Relief Corps and the Ladies of the Grand Army of the Republic. The woman who first conceived the plan was Mrs. Carrie M. Peters, now a resident of Omaha, but then of Beatrice.

Afloat on the Missouri
The decoration of the waters is not confined to the sea and lake coast cities, but to all interior cities as well, wherever there is a body of water. The ceremony has been observed in Omaha for the last five years with increasing interest. In 1907 and 1908 a beautiful floral boat was provided and set afloat on the Missouri at the foot of Douglas street, the boat being launched by a detail from the United States navy recruiting station at Omaha. The same form of ceremony will be observed this Decoration day, the exercises to take place Sunday evening at 5 o'clock, in order not to interfere with the more general observance of the day. The ceremonies will be participated in on this occasion by a class of young girls, which will give a short drill and recitation appropriate to the event, following which an address will be delivered, and followed by the launching of the floral boat. The Ladies of the Grand Army of the Republic will have charge of this service, as has been the custom for the last three years. A detail from the United States navy will assist in launching the boat and its floral cargo. A note is sent with the boat asking those who find it, should it drift ashore, to set it afloat again on its way to the sea. The boat is usually a frail structure that will sink within several hours.

Another form of ceremony is to strew the flowers with appropriate ceremonies from a bridge or river bank. The ritual is a beautiful one and at the same time extremely simple. During the last year or two an effort has been made to give the credit for the introduction of the ceremony of decorating the waters to women in various parts of the country, particularly along the Atlantic and Pacific seaboard, but the practice in its present form, and that adopted by the national departments of the Woman's Relief Corps and Ladies of the Grand Army of the Republic, is the Nebraska idea and has been in regular practice since 1900. The Decoration of the Waters has taken a strong hold in the south and will be observed this year in almost every southern state, the Nebraska form of ritual being adopted.

Champion Hail Story Told by Oldest Inhabitant
NOTICED, haven't you, how hailstones grow in size in the imagination of the oldest inhabitant and his younger sons as the date recedes? Colonel McGorriety of Milwaukee is not the oldest inhabitant, neither is he a younger son, but he exhibits the talent of both and put their best efforts to sleep. Listen to his story:
"One spring years ago I was traveling through what is now the state of Idaho selling Whahoo. There were no railroads through that country then, so I was utilizing a native pony as means of transportation.
"That was in the early period of my association with the business of manufacturing and selling the marvelous remedy I refer to, and I was not then so well acquainted with all its powers as I am now. My experience came near costing me dear, too. Only the intervention of the elements bringing the timely hail from which dates my partiality to this variety of storm saved my career from untimely extinction.
"Camping for the night on a lonesome trail, I inadvertently left a large quantity of Whahoo exposed to the interference of my sensation hunting equine. During the night the pony, becoming restless, interested itself in the receptacles containing the remedy and drank a large quantity. It must have been shortly thereafter that I awoke to observe the beast endeavoring to climb a neighboring tree. I was astonished, naturally, and took steps to calm the excited animal. However, the pony took steps also, quicker than mine, and before I could reach it it was flying up the mountainside.
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