



## .....STRAIGHT FROM THE HORSES MOUTH

Duane A. Lienemann, Nebraska Extension Educator, Webster County

May 22, 2015 Edition

Have you ever really sat and thought about the meaning of Memorial Day and the real reason for the upcoming weekend. I think it would be pertinent, since as I write this column we are at the beginning of Memorial Day weekend, which is observed annually on the last Monday in May. I know that several area school alumni banquets and gatherings are held during this weekend and so many people look forward to the weekend for many reasons. I would count myself among those who use the weekend to remember family members who have departed and to try to gather as a family whenever or wherever we can. I will visit graves and will enjoy a day from work, but maybe we should give pause to what it is about!

Memorial Day was originally designed to commemorate all men and women, who have died in war or military service for the United States. Many people do visit cemeteries and memorials on Memorial Day, but many more use it for rest and relaxation, many times at lakes or parks. Many people have traditionally seen as the start of the summer season. But whatever the traditions for families, I believe that we may find that it has lost its meaning over the years. I think it would be good to take a look at this holiday in this week's edition and I will explain why I feel the way I do.

Let's first look at a little history of this Federal Holiday. You may be surprised that Memorial Day, as we know it today, was inspired by the way people in the Southern states honored their dead. That tradition was not lost on a General John Logan, national commander of the Grand Army of the Republic, who observed the practice and felt strongly that it should be celebrated by our Nation. He went to Congress and proposed that a day be officially proclaimed as a day of memory for those that lost their lives during the Civil War. The Congress did indeed declare the first day of remembrance on May 5, 1868 and it was first observed on May 30, 1868, when flowers were placed on the graves of Union and Confederate soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery, thus the original "Decoration Day."

I wonder how many people really knew or remembered that what we now call "Memorial Day," was originally known as "Decoration Day." The first state to officially recognize the holiday was New York in 1873, but by 1890 it was recognized by all of the northern states. What is ironic is that this practice originated in the Confederate States, but yet the South refused to acknowledge the day, instead honoring their dead on separate days. This separation continued until after World War I when the holiday changed from honoring just those who died fighting in the Civil War to honoring all Americans who died fighting in any war. It is now celebrated in almost every State on the last Monday in May and is called almost universally as Memorial Day.

I think most people link this day with poppies. I would bet that many of you have donated a dollar or two to affix one of those red poppies to your lapel. Have you ever wondered where the poppy came in as part of the Memorial Day celebration? Well, as I understand it, in 1915, inspired by the poem "In Flanders Fields," Moina Michael penned the following lines: "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. Shortly before Memorial Day in 1922 the Veterans of Foreign Wars (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. It is a tradition that is still popular around our country. Do you have yours?

I mentioned at the beginning of this column that I believe we lost the value and meaning of the hallowed event. I quite honestly believe this happened with the passing by Congress of the "National Holiday Act of 1971" which was legislated to ensure a three day weekend for Federal holidays. I think it just made it all the easier for people to be distracted from the spirit and meaning of the day. It may be worth noting that several Southern states have an additional separate day for honoring the Confederate war dead. Maybe the original practitioners still understand the reason.

I think that you will find that the traditional observance of Memorial Day has diminished over the years. I think the moving to that three day weekend encouraged putting emphasis on other things other than our fallen soldiers. Memorial Day has become less of an occasion of remembrance. Many people choose to hold picnics, sports events and family gatherings on this weekend. Many Americans, in my opinion, have forgotten the meaning and traditions of Memorial Day. At many cemeteries, the graves of the fallen are increasingly ignored and even neglected. Most people no longer remember the proper flag etiquette for the day. While there are towns and cities that still hold Memorial Day parades, many have not held a parade in decades or put out flags at cemeteries or on the town square to honor them.

Some people think the day is for honoring any and all dead, and not just those fallen in service to our country. While I think it is good and right to honor our own passed loved ones, I think we don't want to forget those who this day was originally prescribed for. Thank a veteran or stop by the grave of someone who gave their life for their country and our collective freedom. I personally salute my father and both of my grandfathers who all served our country in World War II and World War I respectively. They are now gone but not forgotten. Nor do I forget all those that fought before them, with them, and since then to make sure we are free to celebrate as we do see fit. Let us not forget the reason of Memorial Day!

The preceding information comes from the research and personal observations of the writer which may or may not reflect the views of UNL or Nebraska Extension. For more further information on these or other topics contact D. A. Lienemann, Nebraska Extension Educator for Webster County in Red Cloud, (402) 746-3417 or email to: [dlienemann2@unl.edu](mailto:dlienemann2@unl.edu) or go to the website at: <http://www.webster.unl.edu/home>