

Memorial Day

All citizens should observe Memorial Day and VFW Posts should take the lead. Memorial Day is about remembering. This day is, and should remain, sacred for all veterans. But what about non-veterans? Do they really understand the true meaning of Memorial Day?

Decorating the Graves of Comrades:

Memorial Day was born out of necessity. In an effort to make sense of the horrendous loss of life suffered in the Civil War - which killed more Americans than any of the nation's wars before or since - citizens across the nation grasped for ways to honor those who had made the supreme sacrifice. It was a war that touched nearly every American family.

On May 5, 1866, residents of Waterloo, N.Y., held the first complete community-wide observance of Memorial Day. Solemnly and in a patriotic manner, Waterloo citizens dedicated the entire day to remembering all Civil War dead. They flew flags at half-staff, which to this day remains the tradition. (All U.S. flags should be displayed at half-staff during the morning hours. At noon they should be raised back to full staff.)

In 1868, Gen. John A. Logan, Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Army of the Republic, designated May 30 as Decoration Day. He said it was "for the purpose of strewing with flowers or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion." The GAR hoped the practice would be repeated annually.

In 1873, New York was the first state to legalize May 30 as a holiday. By 1890, all northern states had followed suit. Until the National Holiday Act of 1971, Memorial Day was observed each May 30. Today it is officially recognized on the last Monday of May.

Ponder the Sacrifices:

But to many veterans, changing the day merely to create three-day weekends has undermined the meaning of this sacred day. As Memorial Day has grown to honor the sacrifices of all veterans killed in defense of the nation's freedom, all citizens should regard it as their civic obligation to remember why it is a holiday. While non-veterans may not take the time to decorate fallen soldiers graves or attend ceremonies, they should at least take a few moments to ponder how different their lives would be. Without the courage of the many patriots who have died so that the rest of us can live free, American democracy could be a footnote in history.

Perhaps the most profound tribute of all was made on the first national memorial observance in May 1868 by a man who would become the country's 20th President, Union Army Gen. James A. Garfield: "They summed up and perfected, by one supreme act, the highest virtues of men and citizens. For love of country they accepted death, and thus resolved all doubts, and made immortal their patriotism and virtue."