

## Illinois Supplement

Greetings Sir Knights:

With the month of May comes a very sobering and somber holiday – Memorial Day. It is a time set aside to remember and honor the brave men and women who have so valiantly given their very best in service to this great nation. Least we forget the importance of this day and think of it only as one more three-day week-end, please read and remember the following short history of Memorial Day. We owe it to the memory of so many brave men and women to hold the importance of the day in highest esteem.

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 the 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; a hymn published in 1867 "*Kneel Where Our Loves are Sleeping*" by Nella L. Sweet carried the dedication "To The Ladies of the South who are Decorating the Graves of the Confederate Dead" While Waterloo, New York was officially declared the birthplace of Memorial Day by President Lyndon Johnson in May, 1966, it's difficult to prove conclusively the origins of the day. It is more likely that it had many separate beginnings; each of those towns and every planned or spontaneous gathering of people to honor the war dead in the 1860's tapped into the general human need to honor our dead, each contributed honorably to the growing movement that culminated in General John A. Logan giving his official proclamation in 1868. It is not important who was the very first, what is important is that Memorial Day was established. Memorial Day is not about division, it is about reconciliation; it is about coming together to honor those who gave their all.

Memorial Day was officially proclaimed on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May, 1868 by General John A. Logan, national commander of the Grand Army of the Republic, in his General Order No. 11, and was first observed on the 30<sup>th</sup> of May, 1868, when flowers were placed on the graves of Union and Confederate soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery. The first state to officially recognize the holiday was New York in 1873. By 1890 it was recognized by all of the northern states. 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). It is now celebrated in almost every State on the last Monday in May (passed by Congress with the National Holiday act of 1871 (P.L. 90 –363) to ensure a three day weekend for Federal Holidays), though several southern states have an additional separate day for honoring the Confederate war dead: January 19 in Texas, April 26 in Alabama, Florida, Georgia and Mississippi; May 10 in South Carolina; and June 3 (Jefferson Davis' birthday) in Louisiana and Tennessee.

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, 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 3 cent postage stamp with her likeness on it.

The traditional observance of Memorial day has diminished over the years. The graves of the fallen are ignored and neglected, with many feeling that the day is to honor all dead. Many people do not follow the proper flag etiquette. There are of course exceptions. On the Thursday before Memorial Day, 1,200 soldiers of the 3<sup>rd</sup> US Infantry place small flags at each of the more than 260,000 gravestones in Arlington National Cemetery. And then patrol 24 hours a day during the weekend to ensure that each flag remains standing. Beginning in 1951 the Boy and Cub Scouts of St. Louis began placing flags on the 150,000 graves at Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery. In 1998 on the Saturday prior to Memorial Day the Boy and Girls Scouts place a candle at each of 15,300 grave sites of soldiers buried at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park.

To help re-educate and remind Americans of the true meaning of Memorial Day, the "National Moment of Remembrance" resolution was passed in December, 2000, requesting that at 3 p.m. local time, all Americans voluntarily and informally observe their own Moment of remembrance.

Sir Knights, where would we be had it not been for the efforts of the many brave men and woman who made the ultimate sacrifice on our behalf?

*Jesse Lee Johns, Sr. Grand Commander*