

THE PALIMPSEST

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VOL. XLIX

ISSUED IN MAY 1968

No. 5

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Memorial Day

Sweetly with loving touch, mem'ry embalms them all,
Loyal, obedient, they answered duty's call.
All that man hath to give they at her mandate gave;
What tribute worthy to deck a soldier's grave?

Memorial Day was the fourth legal holiday to be established in Iowa. Although Christmas, New Year's and the Fourth of July had been recognized as early as 1862, the General Assembly took no further action with regard to legal holidays until 1880. As a consequence Memorial Day may be considered the first in a series of five holidays which have been set aside by Iowa legislatures between 1880 and 1920. Like many other holidays it had been observed in Iowa for many years before it was recognized by law.

The first formal observance of Memorial Day, or Decoration Day, as it was popularly called for many years, dates back to 1868. The idea however is old, for the Greeks and Romans decorated the graves of their dead. Actually the women of the South are known to have placed flowers on

the graves of Union and Confederate soldiers as early as 1863. On April 26, 1865, Southern women decorated the graves of soldiers at Vicksburg where many of Iowa's heroic warriors laid down their lives. Not long after the Grand Army of the Republic was formed, in the spring of 1866, at Springfield, Illinois, that organization began considering the idea of a uniform date for the decoration of the graves of Union soldiers throughout the country. Credit for Memorial Day seems to belong to some unknown Union soldier who suggested the idea to Adjutant General Norton P. Chipman because the custom had prevailed in his native Germany. The latter passed the idea along to General John A. Logan, Commander-in-Chief of the G. A. R., who heartily approved the plan.

On May 5, 1868, General John A. Logan issued General Orders No. 11 from his Headquarters of the Grand Army of the Republic in Washington, D. C. No better explanation of the purpose and significance of Memorial Day can be found. It read as follows:

I. The 30th day of May, 1868, is designated for the purpose of strewing with flowers or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defence of their country during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village and hamlet church-yard 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.

We are organized, Comrades, as our Regulations tell us, for the purpose, among other things, "of preserving and strengthening those kind and fraternal feelings which have bound together the soldiers, sailors, and marines who united to suppress the late rebellion." What can aid more to assure this result than by cherishing tenderly the memory of our heroic dead, who made their breasts a barricade between our country and its foes. Their soldier lives were the reveille of freedom to a race in chains, and their deaths the tattoo of rebellious tyranny in arms. We should guard their graves with sacred vigilance. All that the consecrated wealth and taste of the nation can add to their adornment and security, is but a fitting tribute to the memory of her slain defenders. Let no wanton foot tread rudely on such hallowed grounds. Let pleasant paths invite the coming and going of reverent visitors and fond mourners. Let no vandalism of avarice or neglect, no ravages of time testify to the present or to the coming generations that we have forgotten as a people the cost of a free and undivided Republic.

If other eyes grow dull, and other hands slack, and other hearts cold in the solemn trust, ours shall keep it well as long as the light and warmth of life remain to us.

Let us, then, at the time appointed gather around their sacred remains and garland the passionless mounds above them with the choicest flowers of spring; let us raise above them the dear old flag they saved from dishonor; let us in this solemn presence renew our pledges to aid and assist those whom they have left among us a sacred charge upon a nation's gratitude, the soldier's and sailor's widow and orphan.

II. It is the purpose of the Commander-in-Chief to inaugurate this observance with the hope that it will be kept up from year to year while a survivor of the war remains

to honor the memory of his departed Comrades. He earnestly desires the public press to call attention to this Order, and lend its friendly aid in bringing it to the notice of Comrades in all parts of the country in time for simultaneous compliance therewith.

III. Department Commanders will use every effort to make this Order effective.

Iowa cities and towns were quick to obey General Logan's order for a Memorial Day in 1868. On May 27th Post Commander Sam S. Sample announced in the *Weekly Gate City* that the Keokuk G. A. R. would join in the national exercises on May 30th. No other city in Iowa could observe Memorial Day more fittingly than the Gate City of Iowa. At Keokuk was located Camp Ellsworth, the first military camp in the State. Here the First Iowa Infantry was mustered in and from here most of Iowa's troops embarked by steamboat for the South. Three other military camps were located at Keokuk during the Civil War. The thriving city at the foot of the Lower Rapids contributed two hundred commissioned officers to the bloody struggle. Samuel Ryan Curtis of Keokuk was one of four Iowa men to attain the high rank of Major General; Brigadier General William W. Belknap of Keokuk was destined to become Secretary of War in General U. S. Grant's cabinet in 1869.

It is not for camps and officers alone that Keokuk is singled out, for other Iowa cities contributed freely of their young manhood. It is because

Keokuk became a great hospital center for wounded soldiers during the Civil War where thousands of sick and wounded were brought aboard such hospital boats as the *Express*, the *D. A. January*, the *Diligent*, the *Gladiator*, the *Sunnyside*, and many others.

When the steamboat *Decatur* docked at Keokuk in July of 1862, that city had opened its fourth hospital in a public school building. By the close of the year 1862 it was estimated that more than seven thousand men were being treated in Keokuk. The same scenes were reënacted in 1863; on December 24th the record showed that 7396 sick and wounded soldiers had been brought by steamboats from the South to Keokuk. Of these, 617 had already died. In all, six hospitals were ultimately opened in Keokuk.

Because of the large number of deaths the Federal government established a National Cemetery in Keokuk, the only place of its kind in Iowa. Here sleep over seven hundred of the "Boys in Blue" who gave their all to preserve the Union. A sprinkling of the "Boys in Gray" also sleep peacefully at Keokuk. The National Cemetery at Keokuk should always serve as a symbol for those thousands of Iowa's heroic dead who slumber far from home — at Pittsburg Landing and Vicksburg, at Corinth and Shiloh, and along the road that marked Sherman's March to the Sea.

The editor of the Keokuk *Gate City* strongly

supported the observance of Memorial Day in 1868. "The military will attend in force," he declared. "Little girls from the various sabbath schools in the city will scatter the flowers. Our citizens are asked to join in the procession and the commemorative ceremony. It is purposed that everything shall be done decorously and in order. Further announcement will be made of the order of exercises. The event will appeal direct to the heart and willing minds of our people. Only a few short years separate the grievous, perilous past — which was the present when those graves were made — from us. . . . So remembering the glory, and merit, and brave endeavor of the soldier's life, of these men who sleep in our cemetery, and with devotion and love for the cause for which they fell, the citizens of Keokuk will at once gladly and sadly join in the ceremony to which the veteran soldiers of our city invite them."

The ceremony in Iowa's only National Cemetery in 1868 was impressive. Only a brief notice had been given and it was hardly to be expected that a large number of people would attend. The *Weekly Gate City* accordingly felt that Keokuk had "honored itself" as well as the Union soldiers buried in the cemetery by turning out in such large numbers on Memorial Day. The editor felt the "outpouring of people of all ages and conditions, the lengthy and imposing procession, the hearty spirit and success of the whole affair, was

a glad surprise to everybody. Its spontaneity was the charm of it. 'Republics are ungrateful' has long been the aphorism of their enemies, and quoted with the tacit sanction of their friends. A self-governed people have been accused of ingratitude to their benefactors. The people of Keokuk cannot be accused of forgetfulness or of indifference towards her fallen soldiery — of the men who died for the life of the nation."

The Sabbath schools were nearly all represented, and the little folk were there, attended by their teachers. The members of the various societies were there, with the citizens coming afoot and in carriages. The excellent military band, the profusion of flags and banners, and the lavish display of flowers and evergreens combined to make a very colorful procession. "We heard no estimate of the number of people in it," the editor declared, "but it was one of the largest and best we have ever seen in Keokuk. A noticeable and worthy feature of it was the large attendance of soldiers, principally members of the Grand Army of the Republic."

Upon arriving at the cemetery, Post Commander Sam S. Sample gave the order to strew flowers upon the graves. The Reverend John Haines of the Chatham Square M. E. Church opened the services with prayer. The band played martial music, and the choir of the Congregational Church sang "America" and "The Star Spangled

Banner." The inter-denominational character of the services is attested by the three ministers who participated in concluding the services. "Then it was evening," the *Gate City* records, "and the crowd left the dead sleeping under their flowers."

Although Memorial Day did not become a legal holiday in Iowa until 1880, Keokuk continued to observe the day in a fitting manner. Five years after General Logan issued his proclamation, the *Keokuk Weekly Gate City* of June 4, 1873 recorded:

Decoration Day in Keokuk was observed with appropriate ceremonies. It is gratifying to know that our citizens maintain the proper interest in this praiseworthy practice of assembling annually at the graves of our patriotic dead and paying a fitting tribute to the memory of those who sacrificed their lives that we as a nation might live.

The attendance was not so large of course as it would have been had the weather been more favorable. Notwithstanding this drawback several thousand people turned out to participate in the exercises.

Between eleven and twelve o'clock the steamer Cricket arrived bringing a delegation from our neighboring city of

FT. MADISON.

This numbered nearly one hundred persons and consisted of ex-soldiers and their families. They were received at the levee by Torrence Post No. 2 G.A.R., and conducted to the Hall of the organization on Main street, where a lunch had been prepared for them. Here a social time was

had until half past 1 o'clock, the time for the assembling of those to take part in

THE PROCESSION.

This was formed on Blondeau street and proceeded on its march in the following order:

Martial Band.

Torrence Post No. 2 G.A.R., in uniform.

Ft. Madison Delegation.

Battery.

Citizens in vehicles.

Col. A. G. McQueen officiated as Marshal of the Day, assisted by Gen. L. T. Barney and Major Harry Kenderdine.

Owing to the muddy condition of the streets the procession was not large. It was nevertheless an imposing one, and large numbers of our citizens congregated on the pavements to witness it.

The column proceeded along the line of march designated, and from thence to the cemetery, where a large crowd of our citizens had assembled.

THE CEMETERY

Never looked more beautiful than at this time. Many of the graves were decorated for the occasion, and everywhere were to be seen evidences of care and attention on the part of those who have friends buried there.

After strolling about the grounds admiring the taste and skill of kind hands which had been at work there, the large concourse of people proceeded to the

NATIONAL CEMETERY.

Where the exercises of the day took place. These were opened with an impressive prayer by Rev. J. W. Chaffin, Pastor of Chatham Square M. E. Church, followed by a song by the Glee Club and music by the Martial Band.

Then came the oration by Lee R. Seaton, Esq. This was a fine production, and patriotic devotion to the cause for which so many of his brave comrades laid down their lives. The oration was listened to attentively throughout, and was pronounced by many to have been one of the best they had ever heard in Keokuk:

Following the oration a volley of musketry was fired by Torrence Post, after which there was an interval, during which the interesting and impressive ceremony of strewing flowers upon the graves took place under the direction of the ladies of the Decorating Committee.

After martial music, another song by the Glee Club, and the Benediction, the exercises closed and the crowd dispersed to their homes.

Gen. J. C. Parrott was President of the Day.

The National Cemetery is in excellent condition, and reflects the highest credit upon Mr. Clayton Hart, who has charge of it. Everything about the house and grounds presents a neat and attractive appearance and gives evidence of much care and attention. The Government was fortunate in selecting Mr. Hart for this important trust.

A handsome speaker's stand has been erected in the center of the grounds, which adds much to their appearance.

During the afternoon nearly all the business houses in the city were closed and the day was generally observed as a holiday.

Memorial Day continued to be observed in Iowa although with varying degrees of emphasis and for some years without the sanction of State law. When the Eighteenth General Assembly met at Des Moines in 1880, Representative Bruce T. Seaman of Scott County introduced a bill on January 22nd amending the Code of Iowa to make May 30th a legal holiday. The bill was passed by the House by a vote of 90 to 9. The Senate approved the same measure by a 40 to 1 vote and the bill was signed by Governor John H. Gear on March 12, 1880.

The State of Iowa was thirty-four years old in 1880, but its youth forms no measure of the magnitude of its sacrifice in the Civil War. In four years Iowa lost almost twice as many men killed in action or died of wounds as did the thirteen original colonies in the seven long years of the American Revolution! The sacrifices of the Hawkeye State were recognized by the *Iowa State Register* in the following editorial on May 29, 1880:

"This is Decoration Day — sacred to the heart of every lover of his country. It is an old theme, but one very dear to those who shouldered their muskets and tramped out the weary years that marked the bloody era of the great rebellion. It awakens memories of that great struggle that flood the soul with joy and with grief — joy that the struggle, dark, gloomy and nearly without

hope at times, ended with a country saved from dismemberment; grief, at the death of the thousands of the men who died that we might enjoy the blessings of free government, under a great and prosperous nation. The memory of these brave souls, who made the supremest sacrifice known to man — of life itself — ought, and always will be treasured with holy patriotism, by those who believe that this people should be a nation, strong in all its attributes of power, freedom, and happiness of its people."

After pointing out how Iowa had marshalled nearly eighty thousand men, who won the "plaudits of the world" by their "unflinching valor" at such battles as Wilson's Creek, Donelson, Vicksburg, Shiloh, Corinth, Nashville, Lookout Mountain, and on Sherman's March to the Sea, the editor continued: "The future Iowa people — those who shall come with centuries yet to follow — need never be downcast at the record of Iowa men who went forth in the brunt of the battle that wiped out forever the foul blot of human slavery and its attendant horrors. 'Storied monuments and animated busts' will arise to proclaim the valor and heroism of our Iowa Soldiers."

Originally scheduled for Saturday, May 29th, the 1880 Decoration Day services at Des Moines had to be postponed until Sunday because of rain, but the program was carried out to the letter. The parade started promptly at two o'clock in the

afternoon, the booming of the signal cannon being followed by the ringing of all the church bells in the city for twenty minutes. The order of procession was:

- Kinsman Post
- East Side public schools
- Catholic schools
- West Side public schools
- Veteran Soldiers and Sailors' Association
- Crocker Post
- Joe Hooker Post
- Military companies escorting the vehicles containing the thirty-eight little girls, representing the different States
- Fire companies and civic societies
- Citizens on foot
- Carriages containing the president and orators of the day, city council, decoration committee, etc., etc.
- Citizens in carriages

Bands were assigned their positions in the parade by the marshal. Upon arriving at the ground the following order of services was observed: decoration of graves by committee and friends; calling to order at the stand by the President of the Day, Colonel Conrad; prayer by Chaplain W. W. Thorpe; music by the band; music by the quartet; address by Chaplain D. R. Lucas; music by male quartet; address by Comrade Robert Afton; music by quartet; volunteer addresses; benediction.

Each family had been asked to contribute at least one bouquet but flowers were sent in such

profusion that, in addition to supplying each grave with two wreaths and three bouquets, there were enough to allow flowers to be strewn over all.

If Memorial Day was postponed by the forces of Nature at Des Moines in 1880, the forces of Man almost postponed the Des Moines observance in 1899. In that year the Modern Woodmen of America, assisted by the Royal Neighbors, held their annual memorial service on Sunday. The *Iowa State Register* of May 29, 1899, records:

There were more interesting features connected with the observance than had been advertised. To begin with, the Iowa State Military Band had been engaged to furnish the music for the parade. This band was to lead the west side camps, and the east side camp had arranged to have Agnew's band furnish the music for their part of the procession. When the union men of the State Military band heard of this arrangement there was music not on the programme. In short, the union men flatly refused to march in the same parade with the non-union men of Agnew's band. The Modern Woodmen officials pleaded and exhorted, but in vain. The refractory and indignant bandsmen were politely told that they were hired to do what the Woodmen wanted them to do, and if they were not willing to perform on that basis, they could pack their drums and horns and go home. They went home and the parade marched without one band.

During the programme another incident happened which caused quite as much excitement as the band episode. Dr. J. Everst Cathell, the popular rector of St. Paul's church, furnished the excitement during his ad-

dress, which was the main one of the afternoon, and in the nature of an annual memorial sermon. Dr. Cathell proceeded much along the usual line during the early part of his address. The order of Modern Woodmen was especially commended for its many excellent features, especially its insurance department. He then turned to the subject of modern day marriage relations and commended the Modern Woodmen for the close fraternal relations existing between the wives and husbands in the Modern Woodmen camps in the auxiliary lodge, the Royal Neighbors. These remarks were much appreciated, so far as there was no excitement. But at this point the worthy doctor took occasion to denounce, in caustic terms, the prevalence of divorce and the lightness made of the marriage relation in many instances. He referred to the fact that divorces permit another marriage by either one or both of the parties, and cited cases recently in the Polk county District court, where persons who have been granted divorces have proceeded from the court room to the office of the county clerk to get a license for another marriage. This practice the speaker denounced in unmeasured terms, and he then proceeded to give a prominent minister of the city censure almost as severe for making light, as the speaker called it, of the marriage service in another way. The act referred to was the performance of the marriage services by Dr. E. L. Eaton, of the First Methodist church, of two couples from the balcony of the Equitable Building during Seni Om Sed week last fall. Dr. Cathell said that the preacher who performed this ceremony holds himself high above most people in denouncing many things which other people deem of small importance, but in thus belittling the sacredness of the marriage service, he was doing a thing which most men, not divines, would scorn to do. The arraignment of Dr. Eaton, while his

name was not mentioned, was so severe that little less than a sensation was caused.

The memorial services were largely attended. The big auditorium of the Tabernacle was filled to overflowing. Jas. D. Rowen presided. The West Side camps formed about 1 o'clock and marched across the river to the lodge rooms of the other camps where the camps all united and marched to the Tabernacle. America was sung, and the invocation was pronounced by Rev. Otto Gerhardt. Dr. Cathell delivered his address, after which a hymn and the lodge ode was sung, when the procession formed and marched to the cemetery, where the usual memorial rights of the order were performed. The parade was an extremely long one and made a fine appearance.

The pattern followed by Des Moines in 1880 and 1899 is typical of memorial services in Iowa. The fact that Memorial Day became so strongly entrenched in the hearts of the people was in large measure due to the heavy sacrifices that Iowa had sustained in the "War Between the States," to the large number of widows and orphans who were left to mourn the dead, and to the strength of the G. A. R. in Iowa. In 1886, for example, there were about four hundred Civil War veterans living in the city of Keokuk alone. And Keokuk was not one of Iowa's largest towns.

The political influence of the G.A.R. is attested by the number of Civil War soldiers who have been elected governors of Iowa. Their names, home towns, and years in office as governor follow:

Colonel William M. Stone, Knoxville, 1864-1868

Colonel Samuel Merrill, McGregor, 1868-1872

Colonel Cyrus C. Carpenter, Fort Dodge, 1872-1875

Captain Joshua G. Newbold, Mount Pleasant, 1877-1878

Captain Buren R. Sherman, Vinton, 1882-1886

Lieut. Colonel Francis M. Drake, Centerville, 1896-1898

In 1890 the Iowa Department of the Grand Army of the Republic reached its peak strength — 20,324 members in 435 Posts. In 1918 a total of 4700 comrades from 289 Posts visited 543 cemeteries to decorate 27,400 graves on Memorial Day. In 1935 only sixty-two members attended the Sixty-first Annual Encampment in Waterloo. When Memorial Day was observed in 1944 less than a score of veterans remained of the 79,000 Iowans who responded to the call of "Father Abraham" in those stirring Civil War years. The Iowa Department of the G.A.R. lost its last member with the death of James P. Martin of Sutherland on September 20, 1949.

Memorial Day was inaugurated in 1868 as a distinctly northern holiday, the South observing its own Confederate Memorial Day on April 26th. In 1873 New York adopted "Decoration Day" as a public holiday, the first Northern State to do so. Rhode Island made the day a legal holiday in 1874, Vermont in 1876, New Hampshire in 1877, Wisconsin in 1879, and Iowa in 1880. Ohio and Massachusetts legalized Memorial Day in 1881. Since then it has gradually become a

legal holiday in all the Northern States and in the Territories.

For many years after 1868 Memorial Day orators used the occasion to glorify the success of the Union over the Confederacy. Time has done much to mellow this bitter spirit — historians, writers, and poets have endeavored to deal with both sides of the question with sympathy and understanding. When sons of the men who had worn the Blue and Grey charged up San Juan Hill, a new nation was forged out of the courage exhibited in that epic event. Early in the 20th century General John B. Gordon, a famous Confederate general, told Union veterans at St. Paul that "The reason it took you so long to defeat us was that we were Americans like yourselves."

In 1913, the whole nation thrilled when more than fifty thousand veterans of the Civil War met in a grand reunion at Gettysburg. "It was an army united in sentiment and united in fact, for the blue linked arms with the grey. They marched the dusty road together from the village; they sat down at the same mess tables, and they talked over the war before the campfires." The crowning event came when the survivors of Pickett's Charge marched through the wheat fields and up the hill to clasp the hands of the surviving members of the Union force who had held that position against them. General Sickles, the only corps commander of the Union Army at Gettysburg

who was living in 1913, was the recipient of hundreds of salutes from the "Boys in Grey."

Since that memorable reunion at Gettysburg the United States has passed through the fiery cauldron of World War I, World War II, and the Korean conflict where the American soldier fought a relentless, treacherous foe, with one hand virtually tied behind his back. Memorial Day has taken on a wider, a deeper, and a more intimate meaning in Iowa and the Nation. Veterans of the Spanish-American War and the American Legion now bolster the thinning ranks of the G.A.R., holding aloft the Stars and Stripes as grateful tribute is paid to the memory of our soldier dead.

And now a host of new names must be entered on the obelisk of fame that will mark the military exploits of our Iowa warriors. At Pearl Harbor and Bataan, Guadalcanal, Tarawa, and Saipan, the Midway Islands and the Coral Sea, Kiska and Attu, in Africa, Sicily, Italy, France, Germany, Korea, Iowans match their exploits with the heroes of old and many will pay the supreme price of freedom. By some divine alchemy the heroism of men becomes the heritage of the world. At no time is this more keenly felt than on Memorial Day.

Witness, for example, the memorial services held at Des Moines on September 10, 1944, when the Seventy-eighth National Encampment of the G. A. R. was held in the capital city of Iowa.

Seated in the Coliseum with bowed heads, fourteen Union veterans paid reverent tribute not only to their departed comrades but to the heroic dead of World War II. Addressing his words directly to the sorrowing relatives and friends of those who have given their lives in Africa, in Europe, in Asia, and in the South Pacific, 95-year-old George A. Gay of Nashua, New Hampshire, declared: "This memorial is not only to our G.A.R. but it is for every citizen in this hall. You have lost your loved ones and we have lost ours. But they are not dead — they live and they walk beside us."

Seventeen years later, in 1961, the United States began its four-year commemoration of the Centennial of the Civil War. Memorial Day in 1961 has taken on even greater significance as such names as Laos, Algeria, the Congo, Cuba, and a score of other sore spots throughout the world threaten the peace. It has been estimated that 90,000 war veterans are buried in Iowa cemeteries, veterans who have fought for their country from the Revolutionary War to the Korean conflict. Memorial Day is dedicated to the memory of these men and the honors they won for themselves, for their families, and for their country.

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