

Safely Rest

by Lynne Belluscio

Benjamin Harrison wrote: "I have never been able to think of the day as one of mourning; I have never quite been able to feel that half-masted flags were appropriate on Decoration Day. I have rather felt that the flag should be at its peak, because those whose dying we commemorate rejoiced in seeing it where their valor placed it. We honor them in a joyous, thankful, triumphant commemoration of what they did."

And so on Saturday, May 24, at 8:30 in the morning a group of volunteers (and anyone can join us) will meet at the entrance of Machpelah Cemetery to begin the Memorial Day tradition of placing a flag on every veteran's grave. After three years, we have come to know these men and women. As Maya Angelou has written: "How important it is for us to recognize and celebrate our heroes and she-roes!"

Some sections of the cemetery will be filled with flags, as veterans of World War I, World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War have come to their final resting place. Scattered in the older sections of the cemetery, lone flags mark the graves of Revolutionary War soldiers and Civil War veterans. I have not been able to discover when LeRoy became commemorating their veterans.

The history of Decoration Day begins during the Civil War, when in 1864 women put flowers on the graves of the Civil War dead in Boalsburg, Pennsylvania, near the battleground of Gettysburg. Four years later the Boalsburg chapter of the Grand Army of the Republic made the decorating of graves an annual event. In April 1865, Mrs. Sue Landon Vaughn led a group of women to Vicksburg,

Mississippi to decorate the graves of the fallen Civil War soldiers. In May 1865, local women from the Stonewall Jackson Memorial Association decorated all the Confederate soldiers' graves in Winchester, Virginia. April 1866, women of Columbus, Mississippi, decorated the graves of soldiers from both North and South and the *New York Tribune* prints a story about the impartial offering which was seen "as a healing touch for the nation."

In Carbondale, Illinois, Ambrose Crowell and Russell Winchester organized the first community-wide Memorial Day observance in the United States on April 29, 1866. But it would be the Western New York Town of Waterloo that would receive national acclaim as the "Birthplace of Memorial Day." In 1873, Memorial Day is recognized as an official holiday in the State of New York and soon other states follow.

In 1887, Memorial Day (or Decoration Day as it was known) became a legal holiday for all government employees. In 1901, Congress provided that if Memorial Day fell on a Sunday, the holiday would be celebrated on Monday and in January 1971, the "Monday Holiday Law" was passed and the celebration of Memorial Day changed from May 30 to the last Monday in May.

For nearly a hundred years, the argument of which



town deserved recognition as the first to commemorate Memorial Day raged, but in 1966, Congress recognized Waterloo, New York as the first to observe the holiday. In December 2000, the "National Moment of Remembrance" was passed which asked that at 3 P.M. local time, that all Americans voluntarily and informally observe in their own way a Moment of Remembrance and respect,

pausing from whatever they are doing for a moment of silence or listening to Taps.

"Day is done.
Gone the sun
From the lakes
From the hills
From the sky.
All is well
Safely rest.
God is nye."

Please, if you have the time, join us Saturday morning for the placing of the flags.


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