

Memorial Day

by *Lynne Belluscio*

The origin of Memorial Day is often debated. Many communities throughout the United States claim to be the first place where folks went to the cemetery to place flowers and flags on the graves of fallen Civil War soldiers. In 1865, in nearby Waterloo, New York, (which in 1966, was officially declared by Congress and President Lyndon Johnson to be the "Birthplace of Memorial Day") the townspeople began planning for a commemoration of those men who had been killed in the recent war. On May 5, 1866, all the businesses in town closed and women prepared wreaths, crosses and bouquets of flowers to be placed on the graves of the fallen soldiers. The village was decorated with evergreen boughs and black streamers. Flags flew at half-mast. Groups of people joined processions to the village's three cemeteries where martial music was played and services were held. The day was observed in a "solemn, patriotic manner." The next year, the people in Waterloo gathered again, but in 1868, in accordance with the General Order of General John Logan of the Grand Army of the Republic, the observance was held three weeks later on May 30. It was to be known as "Decoration Day" and the May 30 date was chosen because no Civil War battles had been fought on that day. By 1890, every northern state recognized Decoration Day, but this day was not popular in the south, where towns preferred to commemorate the fallen Confederate soldiers on Stonewall Jackson's birthday or in tribute to General Lee. Today, Confederate Heroes Day is still celebrated in many southern

communities.

The Staunton Post, Grand Army of the Republic was formed in LeRoy in 1883, but I am not sure when they held the first Decoration Day. It took over twenty years for the GAR to raise enough money to erect the monument on Trigon Park. Finally on Decoration Day, May 30, 1906, the monument was dedicated under the watchful eye of many veterans. Ten years later, the United States was on the brink of World War 1. Over 270 men and women from LeRoy served in the "War to End All Wars." After the war, Decoration Day took on new meaning, as the veterans wanted to commemorate their fallen comrades. In February 1920, the people of LeRoy assembled in the high school auditorium in memory of the young men who had died. Their families were presented with honor certificates from the French government. Archie Ross, president of the LeRoy Post was the master of ceremonies and the honor roll was read. Mr. J. Albert Kenny read "In Flanders Fields." The poem had been written in 1915 by a Canadian doctor, who had been asked to say a few words over the grave of a close friend. The poppy was adopted by the National American Legion as the official symbol of remembrance. Gradually, Decoration Day began to embrace the idea of commemorating veterans from all wars. In 1922, the Veterans of Foreign Wars conducted the first nationwide distribution of remembrance poppies. Today, the American Legion Auxiliary distributes crepe-paper poppies in exchange for donations. For many years, students at LeRoy Central School memorized "In Flanders Fields."

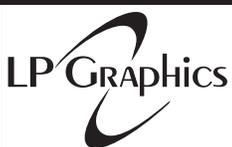


In 1950 Congress passed a resolution requesting the president to call on all Americans to observe Memorial Day as a day of prayer for permanent peace. In 1968, Congress passed the Uniform Monday Holiday Act and established Memorial Day as the last Monday in May. It created a three-day holiday for federal workers. Surprisingly, Memorial Day did not become an official federal holiday until 1971. In 2000, Bill Clinton signed the National Moment of Remembrance to be observed at 3 PM. It is observed by several organizations including Amtrak whose trains supposedly blast their whistles at 3. The President requests that all governors of the United States and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico direct the American flag to be flown at half-mast on buildings, grounds and naval

vessels on Memorial Day.

This year, as LeRoy commemorates Memorial Day, the LeRoy Historical Society is establishing a fund to purchase a grey granite stone and have it engraved with the names of the twelve LeRoyans who died in service during World War 1. In the center is a cluster of poppies. The stone will be dedicated on November 11 on Trigon Park. Sadly, there will be no WW 1 veterans to witness the dedication, but finally LeRoy will honor those who served in the Great War and those who died. Donations can be made to the WW 1 Monument Fund c/o LeRoy Historical Society PO Box 176, LeRoy NY 14482. Donations of \$20 are recognized by an enamel red poppy pin. Over \$1200 has already been received toward the \$5000 goal.

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