A View Through History
With Kyle Schiller Barrett
Milam County Museum Coordinator

Memorial Day: Rooted in Our History

Our nation will observe Memorial Day on Monday, May 29th this year. It is a day of remembrance, honor and patriotism that is well rooted in our history.

Like most of the cities, towns, and counties across these United States, Milam County and its citizens will recognize the Memorial Day holiday this weekend. Flags will proudly fly, bands will respectfully play, and many people will just enjoy a fun-filled or restful three-day weekend. County and city offices will be closed, the post office, banks, state and federal government offices won't be open, plus many other businesses will give their employees the day off.

In downtown Cameron, the annual Memorial Day service will be held Monday at 10:00 AM. This ceremony will take place on the corner of Fannin and First Streets. Sponsored by the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post #2010 and the Edwin Hardy American Legion Post #9, our past veterans from Milam County, Texas, and the United States of America will be honored. Citizens will gather in front of the Veterans' Memorial on the northeast corner of the historic Milam County Courthouse for this patriotic event. A tradition we have seen many times.

But… where did it all start? Where did the traditions of Memorial Day begin? It is clearly an All-American holiday, but its roots and origins are cloudy to say the least. The earliest recorded Memorial Day gatherings are claimed by both Northerners and Southerners alike and planted in the annals of American history by the Civil War, 1861-1865.

In the past, Memorial Day was known as "Decoration Day." It usually took place in the spring because flowers were readily available all over the country to "decorate" the graves of veterans. After the American Civil War, ceremonies and gatherings began in cemeteries across our still much divided nation. So, both the North and the South claimed responsibility for starting "Decoration Day," aka "Memorial Day."

In the southern states, widows of Confederate soldiers are said to have "decorated the graves of the glorious dead" with flowers as early as 1866. This was only one year after the end of the Civil War and seems to be a likely occurrence. After all, women left behind as widows would naturally place flowers on the graves of their dearly departed husbands and sons. But… was this the earliest beginning of Memorial Day?

In the North, it was three years after the Civil War, May 5, 1868, when Decoration Day got its start for honoring American soldiers. Major General John A. Logan declared that May 30th should be a day to honor Civil War veterans. Logan was the head of an organization for Union veterans and a member of the "Grand Army of the Republic." He declared that even though the United States was still healing from a great Civil War and dealing with the issues of Reconstruction, a time should still be set aside to honor the soldiers who had died in battle. But… Did General Logan's proclamation indicate the beginning of Memorial Day?

Many places, like Waterloo, New York, have claimed to be the birthplace of Memorial Day. In 1966, Congress and Texas' own President Lyndon B. Johnson believed this city's theory and declared it the "Birthplace of Memorial Day." This small town in upstate New York documented its first Memorial Day Celebration on May 5, 1866 when businesses closed, flags flew at half-staff, and supporters honored Union veterans.

Then what about Columbus, Mississippi's claim to be the birthplace of Memorial Day? Its residents believe a ceremony held in April, 1866 should be the first to have such distinction. According to the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs website, approximately 25 places across the U.S. lay claims to have been the origin of Memorial Day. Richmond, Virginia; Boalsburg, Pennsylvania; Macon, Georgia; and Carbondale, Illinois, (the hometown of the aforementioned General John Logan) all claim to have had the first Memorial Day ceremony. Who are we to believe?

Of course, the largest and one of the earliest Memorial Day recognitions is held each year at Arlington National Cemetery outside of Washington D.C. Surely both the Union and the Confederate veterans of the Civil War can be honored at the former home of General Rober E. Lee and just outside our nation's capital. Fittingly, in Arlington National

Cemetery today, veterans of all wars and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier are revered on Memorial Day.

Lastly, it is interesting to note that on April 25, 1866, a group of ladies in Mississippi visited a cemetery containing the graves of Confederate and Union soldiers killed at the Battle of Shiloh, Tennessee. As these ladies, some widows of Confederate officers and soldiers, cleaned and decorated the graves of the Southern dead, they noticed how overgrown and flowerless the Northern soldiers' graves looked. They felt compassion for these deceased Union soldiers' buried so far from their homes. Unselfishly, without hesitation or regard for friend or foe, these Southern ladies cleaned and decorated the graves of all the Civil War veterans, North and South. Maybe that act of kindness and honor should exemplify Memorial Day?

Perhaps it is not important who began Decoration Day or Memorial Day. Union or Confederate, Blue or Gray, North or South, whichever takes credit for being first is fine. Today we should embrace our history as "One Nation Under God," and we should honor all of our fallen heroes and veterans on Monday, May 29th. So join the local American Legion and VFW members at the Memorial Day ceremony in downtown Cameron. Regardless of Memorial Day's origin, let's honor those who paid the ultimate sacrifice for our country's freedoms. We owe our veterans who served in all the Armed Forces our respect and appreciation. Don't just make Memorial Day a day off from work, but make it part of our American Heritage. Be sure to thank our veterans and remember the fallen. May God continue to bless America and Texas.