



Decoration Day Dilemma

May 14, 1868
Columbus, Georgia

“I now call the Ladies Memorial Association of Columbus to order. Madame Secretary, will you read the minutes of the last meeting before we proceed?” Evelyn sat on the horsehair sofa, her back ramrod straight, her shoulders high and stiff and her waist tightly corseted. There was no denying that this president of the women’s society held her position firmly in hand.

Mary Ann, a woman that was almost as formidable, looked down at the leather journal in her hand and began reading off the motions and actions of the meeting held the previous week. The closer she got to the end of her recitation, the louder the bustle of rustling taffeta got as the other women shifted in their chairs.

When Mary Ann’s words trailed off to an end, Evelyn cleared her throat. “Are there any objections or corrections?”

No one uttered a peep of rebuttal.

“Then do I have a motion to accept the minutes, as read?”

Lizzie Ellis, one of the founding members of the original woman’s group, before it was reorganized and renamed, raised her hand. “I make a motion to accept the minutes as read.”

A murmur spread through the room as the ladies showed their general approval.

Sarah Henshaw, a mousy looking woman with a perpetual frown, fidgeted with her hands in her lap before speaking up. "I second the motion."

Evelyn jerked her head towards the corner where Sarah sat. Surprise showed on her face, as Sarah didn't typically speak up at the meeting. "We have a second. All in favor?" A unanimous nodding of heads and raising of hands approved the formal minutes. "Before we start on our usual order of business, I have a matter of utmost urgency to present first."

Everyone turned towards the presiding officer, except Mary Ann, who was diligently recording the action on a clean page.

"As many of you know, my sister, a Northerner - bless her heart - lives in Illinois. She sent me this clipping from their newspaper." Lifting a folded, inky sheet that lay on the sofa next to her, Evelyn held it out in front of her and read aloud. "General John Logan, National Commander of the Grand Army of the Republic, proclaimed on May 5, 1868, General Order No. 11. According to his proclamation, May 30th shall be designated for the purpose of strewing with flowers, or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village and hamlet churchyard in the land."

"Damn Yankee!" The words flew out of Rachel Wilson's mouth without hesitation. "What's his claptrap have to do with us? It's not enough they won the war. Now he thinks he can be bossing all of us around?" She threw her shoulders back, set her jaw and an angry, red flush tinged her cheeks.

"Now, dear, he's simply trying to unify the country into honoring our deceased soldiers on the same day." Evelyn, as the president tried to soothe Rachel, who was known in the ladies group to be one of the more volatile members.

Timid Sarah, sitting in her corner, spoke up again. "Taint no reason for us to recognize their day. We just had our own celebration. April 26th. Confederate Memorial Day. Thanks to all the hard work our own Mary Ann Williams did two years ago to get this going." She nodded a head in Mary Ann's direction, the current presiding secretary. "With all her letter writing, that's what's made this so successful. That's why we reorganized to form the 'Soldiers Aid Society of Columbus Georgia' to the 'Ladies Memorial Association of Columbus'."

A murmur of assent echoed throughout the room as the women nodded their heads and voiced their agreement.

Rachel, with taut lines, etched around her mouth, piped up. "Sarah's right. Why, she lost her dear husband, James, at the hands of those Northern devils. Why should she have to remember and honor his death at a day those vipers chose, over our own Southern remembrance celebration?"

Mary Ann lifted her gaze from her writing to add her own thoughts. "Yes, dear. But we all lost loved ones in this horrendous war. Everyone in this room lost a husband, a son, a brother, or more."

Clearing her throat, Evelyn raised her voice and tried to regain control of the meeting. "Now, ladies, one thing to keep in mind is the unification of our cause. We want to remember the lives of our loved ones

lost in this great war between the north and the south. We must admit, even here in the south, we can't agree on a common date for this remembrance. We celebrate ours on April 26th."

"As it must be," Rachel declared. "That's the date that Lizzie Ellis chose, the first anniversary of Confederate General Johnston's final surrender to the snake General Sherman. That marked the end of the war."

"Yet, look around us," Evelyn persisted. "Alabama celebrates the fourth Monday of April. North and South Caroline observe it on May 10th. And Louisiana calls June 3rd Confederate Decoration Day."

Lizzie Ellis, who hadn't offered much to the conversation so far, added, "My sister lives in Texas and that state calls their day Confederate Heroes Day. They celebrate it in January, mid-month sometime. I think the 19th."

A heated conversation followed although it wasn't truly a debate. The ladies voted unanimously to continue with their own beloved memorial on April 26th. Southern customs, even when they're fairly new, die hard. With anger so fresh on their minds, and still grieving from their losses, the women were reluctant to let go of their own observances, to move the day to a date suggested by a Northerner, still an enemy in their minds.

But, time works its magic and eases the pain and despair. By the end of the 19th century, most observances were held on May 30th. After World War 1, the day was expanded to honor those who died in all American wars, not just the Civil War. Called both Memorial Day and Decoration Day, this national remembrance continued, until finally in 1971, Congress declared the last Monday in May to be a national holiday, Memorial Day.

The Truth Behind the Fiction

Here are a few of the snippets of factual information that I used to base this fictional tale on. In the story, Sarah and Rachel are fictional people.

From Wikipedia:

In early 1866, the Soldiers' Aid Society of Columbus, Ga. reorganized themselves into the Ladies Memorial Association of Columbus.[9] They elected Evelyn Carter as president; Margaret Ware, first Vice President; Mrs. J. A. McAllister, second Vice President; Martha Patten, Treasurer and Mary Ann Williams as corresponding secretary. Mrs. Williams wrote a letter urging Southern women to come together on April 26, 1866, to decorate the graves of Confederate soldiers with flowers. The letter was printed in newspapers across the south. In *The Genesis of the Memorial Day Holiday in America*, Bellware and Gardiner showed just how widely the letter was published. The ladies responded and the Memorial Day holiday in the United States was inaugurated.[10] It takes its name from the Ladies Memorial Associations that organized the observances. Two years later, on May 5, 1868, John A. Logan, Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), commanded all posts across the country to decorate Union graves with flowers on May 30. Thereafter, the April holiday became known as Confederate Memorial Day. The May 30 holiday was commonly known as both Decoration Day and Memorial Day. The GAR officially adopted the name Memorial Day at their 1882 encampment.[11]

From <http://catawbascv.org/memday.htm>

Confederate Memorial Day, also known as Confederate Decoration Day (Tennessee) and Confederate Heroes Day (Texas), is an official holiday or observance day in a number of states in the Southern United States as a day to honor those who died fighting for the Confederate States of America during the War Between the States.

In the spring of 1866, the Ladies Memorial Association of Columbus, Georgia passed a resolution to set aside one day annually to memorialize the Confederate dead. Additionally, the secretary of the association, Mrs. Charles J. (Mary Ann) Williams was directed to author a letter inviting the ladies in every Southern state to join them in the observance. The letter was written in March 1866 and sent to all of the principal cities in the South, including Atlanta, Macon, Montgomery, Memphis, Richmond, St. Louis, Alexandria, Columbia, and New Orleans.

The date for the holiday was selected by Mrs. Elizabeth "Lizzie" Rutherford Ellis. She chose April 26, the first anniversary of Confederate General Johnston's final surrender to Union General Sherman at Bennett Place, NC. For many in the South, that marked the official end of the Civil War.