

Ask the Undertaker

By Ryan Helfenbein

After a rough Winter, we all have been anticipating the long-awaited Spring and the official opening area of pools on Memorial Day. This holiday also offers a day off from work and school, when family and friends gather together for an outdoor picnic. But is today's Memorial Day celebration much different from that of our ancestors, or has modern culture pulled us away from its true meaning? Tie into your day the honoring of those who have gone on before us by placing fresh Spring flowers on the graves of fallen soldiers and you have a day of decoration that dates back to that of the mid-1800s. For families then, a day of memorialization developed into a significant holiday, because nearly every household in America lost a loved one in the Civil War.

During the Civil War, Americans, for the first time, experienced extensive casualties. This generated an overwhelming inability to cope with great loss, because deaths weren't occasioned by witnessed, peaceful funerals. Soldiers were laid to rest in mass graves on or near the battlefields where they fell. Local newspapers and fellow soldiers informed family members that their loved ones were "missing."

There were no survivor benefits at this time for families of individuals who gave their lives to this country. Prior to the war, there were no veterans cemeteries, and Arlington National Cemetery did not exist. There was no location for family members to visit or place flowers. Nor was there a national day of recognition to honor those who had fallen. The Civil War truly redefined the way Americans view death. Due to this new reality, government policies and procedures were implemented and the general need to cope with a loss was given form. Our government responded by providing veteran's cemeteries, survivor benefits and an identification process for those lost at war away from home. Ultimately, it brought about the creation of a national day to reflect on the lives of the individuals who fought for our freedom.

The remembrance day we have come to know as Memorial Day was something that began following the war. Southerners had multiple decoration days for honoring their Civil War veterans such as May 10, the anniversary of Stone Wall Jackson's death, April 26, the day of the final Confederate surrender, and June 3, Jefferson Davis' birthday. As for the Northerners, Gen. John Logan, commander of the Grand Army of the Republic, established in 1868 a formal day for the decorating of fallen sol-

diers. May 30 was established as Decoration Day, the forerunner of Memorial Day. Even though the concept is the same, in some areas in the South, this day is still observed on a day other than the last Monday in May.

The formal practice of what we know as Memorial Day actually started in Charleston, S.C., on May 1, 1865, by a small group of Southerners. During the last year of the war, an open-air prison was established for captured Union soldiers at a place called Planters Race Course. About 260 Union soldiers died and were buried in a mass grave just behind the grandstands of the race track. In February 1865, after holding out to the bitter end, the Southerners evacuated Charleston and the Union army moved in. The few Southerners that still remained in the city were freed slaves and loyal to the Union army. They collectively came together and reinterred each of those 260 Union soldiers into individual graves. None of them were properly named due to lack of identification. This team of Southerners went on to build a large white fence surrounding these graves, naming it *Martyrs of the Race Course*. On May 1, on its completion, a huge parade was held on the racetrack with 10,000 people in attendance. The Star Spangled Banner and America the Beautiful were sung by children's choirs and scripture read by a series of clergymen. After the parade they all went into the center of the racetrack and did what most of us do on Memorial Day - held picnics.

There were no pools to be opened then, but if there had been, they would have been opened to celebrate the lives each of those Union soldiers gave for that small group of Southerners' freedom. This Memorial Day, as you enjoy that picnic, take a moment to give thanks to all of those who gave their lives for our freedom over the many years during and since the Civil War.

Ryan, owner, supervising mortician and preplanning counselor at Lasting Tributes on Bestgate Road in Annapolis, offers solutions to high-cost funerals. He can be reached at 410.897.4852 or Ryan@LastingTributesFuneralCare.com

