

Memorial Day and Veterans Day—They are not the same

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

We do pretty much the same thing whether it is Memorial Day or Veterans Day. We visit the cemetery, check out the graves of our loved ones, and think loving and memorable thoughts about them.

If they were military veterans there is special attention on both days, since they sacrificed a part of their youth, and in some cases their life itself, for our freedom and way of life. There are similarities, but also significant differences in the days, however.

Both are national holidays, usually observed more faithfully than are the birthdays of Presidents or other famous men or events. Many graves are visited a few days before, so that they may be as tidy and attractive as graves can be.

Though Memorial and Veterans days seem pretty similar, they differ not only in their purpose but in their history and proper observance, particularly in regard to military veterans.

Memorial Day

This day was once called Decoration Day, and dated back to the Civil War, our bloodiest by far. It was established in 1868 by the newly organized Grand Army of the Republic in Waterloo, New York and quickly spread across the country.

The South already had a custom of flowers on the graves of its fallen youth in May. May 30 became the customary national date, but this was changed to the last Monday in May in 1968 by Congress, and is observed in most areas as a holiday. Because of its history, the emphasis on Memorial Day is for all dead, but with particular emphasis on those youth who fell in armed conflict.

Throughout the Nation the cemeteries are busy before and during this day. Many cities have somber military rites, observed in honor of the fallen soldiers. In other parts of the cemetery families may be honoring family members who died of natural causes, or causes unrelated to the military. For all, it is a day of reflection.

Veterans Day

This Day has a different history and a different purpose. It is always on the 11th of November, with special emphasis on the 11th hour of the 11th day, when peace was declared at the end of the First World War. As wars continued, it seemed logical to celebrate all veterans on that single day, rather than diluting the recognition by having a

day for every war. On this day, then, the emphasis is to also honor the living soldier who could remember the sacrifices and reminisce if he chooses on his part in the struggle.

Thus the flags from Memorial Day remain through Veterans Day at the graves of all who have died, in combat or in peacetime, thanks to military organizations such as the American Legion. The aging but living veterans are honored with gatherings at the Civic Center. In a few days the flags are removed for the winter.

Peace and statistics

Well, lasting peace had not been obtained in 1918, nor was it in 1945 or succeeding dates when hostilities ceased. For example, at the end of WW II some territories won by American troops were designated, by international agreement, to be administered by the Russian command. When American forces sought to enter the territory to remove the bodies of some of our fallen soldiers, we were denied entrance by the Russian occupiers. The writing was on the wall.

War statistics are depressing, but an article by Barbara Gannon in the Legion Magazine illustrates the enormity of the Civil War. In the Civil War "620,000 Americans were killed...to lose the same proportion of the U.S. population to war today, would mean the death of 6 million Americans."

So, honor on Memorial Day all of your departed family, but include especially those who fell in military service to our country. On Veterans Day, think also of the living veterans of previous wars, long ago or recently.

