

## THE FIRST MEMORIAL DAY

Mary Ellen Campbell dreaded the day, even though some said that it had been her idea. Well, not the idea to strew flowers on the graves of their Confederate soldiers. Strewing flowers annually on graves had been done ever since Mary Ellen could remember, and she was now almost fifty years old. And strewing flowers weekly on the grave of her Confederate-militia husband had become a comfort to her in the eight months or so since he had died in battle. Her only contribution was the date on which it was to be done collectively, by all the women of the South, and the reason for that date.

April 26, 1866. One year to the day from the time over 90,000 Confederate soldiers surrendered to the Union Army in Morrisville, North Carolina. Mary Ellen argued that April 9, the date of Robert E. Lee's surrender, was not the end of the war, since the Battle of Columbus, right where they were debating the date, right where she was speaking, took place a week later. Many of the soldiers whose graves they would be decorating died on that day, April 16. So how could they celebrate the anniversary of the end of a war on a day the war had not yet ended?

But why not decorate the graves at the Columbus City Cemetery on April 16? That idea seemed to be gaining preference at the meeting of the Soldiers Aid Society in Columbus, Georgia in January of 1866. Then came Mary Ellen's most telling point: This should not be, she said, just a local event. All Southern women should decorate the graves of their soldiers, their sons and husbands (here she could barely continue), on the same day. And April 16 was a day of only local significance. April 9 was not the end of the war. April 26 was the proper day, the day the war was actually over. And the Soldiers Aid Society should take ads in all the major Southern newspapers urging every community to decorate the graves of their soldiers on that day. What a demonstration that would be – that although they had been defeated in battle, they had not been defeated in spirit! The South was still the South and knew how to honor its dead!

And so the resolution had passed, the ads were taken out, and it seemed that Mary Ellen's vision was about to become a reality. "We can keep alive the memory of the debt we owe our fallen soldiers by dedicating at least one day in each year to embellishing their humble graves with flowers," the ad read. "Therefore we beg the assistance of the press and the ladies throughout the South to help us in the effort to set apart a certain day to be observed."

The Soldiers Aid Society transformed itself into the Ladies Memorial Association, symbolizing the transition from aiding the living to memorializing the dead. A great day, and a great tradition was born. Decoration Day.

But now that the first Decoration Day was here, Mary Ellen dreaded it.

What was most bitter was that her son, William Ellis, was buried up north, somewhere in Pennsylvania, beyond her memorialization if not her love. She wondered whether anyone would ever strew flowers on his grave, would do anything but spit on it and curse it and trample on its ground. Would she ever even see it, all that was left to her of him but memories?

Also bitter was that her husband, William Paul, died at the Battle of Columbus, on that last skirmish on the last bridge over the Chattahoochee. He hadn't been supposed to fight, but he was in the militia, and they had called up every able-bodied man for the defense of the city. There was no way William Paul

would not have gone, would not have pushed his way to the front of that skirmish, would not have killed every Yankee he could in revenge for the death of his son. She knew when he kissed her goodbye in the parlor and left for the upper bridge that it would be the last time she would see him.

She had been to his grave, of course, with flowers, many times in the past year. But she knew that on the visit this day her grief would be like a bird digging its talons into her insides and pecking at her guts. Already she was shaking with the strength of her sobs. How would she ever manage her speech?

It would be for the two of them, her two Williams. She would have to pull herself together and do them proud. They deserved at least that from her. All of them, all their dead, they deserved at least this one day.

So out the door she went, followed by her black servant Harriet carrying two wreaths of roses and assorted bundles of wildflowers that her black coachman, Lewis, had picked in the fields around the house. Lewis had the carriage just outside her door. Mary Ellen alighted with his help and then leaned over to take the wreaths and wildflowers from Harriet.

“Make them graves look pretty, Miss Mary!” Harriet said, smiling as she handed her mistress the flowers. “And don’t you worry about that speech! You’ll do fine.”

Harriet and Lewis were such a comfort! Mary Ellen thought. After the Battle of Columbus they could simply have left, free to go wherever they pleased, but they had chosen to stay, for wages, of course, and she had been glad to have them.

Lewis headed the carriage off to the cemetery, clip-clopping down the now-crowded streets. Carriages and women on foot, all bearing flowers, flowed down through the streets like a many-colored river, swelling, broadening out, as it approached the cemetery-sea. It was a lovely spring day (Thank the Lord for that!), bright, but not too hot, and though most of the women wore mourning clothes, the flowers made the scene seem festive, as was appropriate for a day called Decoration Day.

For just a moment Mary Ellen felt content with her purpose, her speech, her creation. Dozens of Southern cities had answered her call, and it seemed as though Decoration Day would establish itself as an annual exercise in memory, a way of keeping the South united, if not in triumph at least in sorrow.

Lewis parked the carriage among a large crowd of carriages lining the cemetery entrance. He carried one of the wreaths and the wildflower bundles while Mary Ellen carried the wreath meant for her husband. They made their way through the throngs of women at the gravesides laying their bundles and wreaths, pulling weeds, brushing headstones, weeping, gossiping, some waving to Mary Ellen as she passed by.

Her husband, having died in the last battle of the war, was buried at the far end, along with many of the others who had fallen there, Confederate and Union alike. There was some anger in the town over the burial of the Union dead in the town cemetery, right beside the Confederate dead, but at the time the Union army had been in charge. There had recently been much talk of reburying the Union bodies somewhere more remote, but so far nothing had come of it.

When she reached her husband’s grave, she felt the grief rise in her like an unexpected wave on a still lake. Ah, William! She thought. The rest of her life stretched out before her like a desert to be crossed with great pain and difficulty and with great loneliness. Here she was feeling sorry for herself again. It was her husband who had suffered and died, not her. There were so many things he would never see, so many pleasures he would never have again. Still, the wave of sorrow was for her, not him. She knew that. It was the truth, and truth was the only thing she could hang on to now.

Forgive me, William, she begged as she brushed the dirt off his stone in preparation for laying the wreath. Lewis knew better than to offer to help and stayed back, holding the rest of the flowers. This was her work, her way of honoring her husband, and she would do it by herself.

When she finished laying the wreath, she came back to Lewis for the second wreath, holding it awkwardly away from her chest, wondering where to put it. It was for her son, buried in Pennsylvania, so she had meant just to put it at the grave of whatever Confederate soldier seemed for whatever reason to have been neglected that day. That had seemed to her the most fitting way to memorialize her son. But now, at this moment, facing the rows of Union Army graves, not one of which was decorated or cared for in any way, she was seized by an inspiration that gripped her like a great hand and shook her with sobs until she could barely stand.

Yes! She thought. Yes, yes, of course! She would do for some other mother's son what she wished, begged, prayed some Northern woman might do for hers! Oh, William! I decorate your grave thus! she thought. And she laid the wreath on the grave of the nearest Union soldier.

She could hear a great gasp around her, but to her it was the sacred gasp of love. Weeping, weeping, she motioned to Lewis to come forward with the flowers and began to strew them on the Union graves, just a few on each, trying to make sure not to leave one undecorated, as though the neglected one might be just the one whose mother would decorate William's grave in Pennsylvania.

When she had finished, she looked around her and saw the officers of the Memorial Association staring at her in disbelief. They must have been called to the scene as soon as someone reported what she had been doing. And finally she realized what she had done.

"I'll explain it!" she said. "I'll explain it all in my speech!"

"That man," said Mrs. Markham, the Memorial Association's treasurer, pointing to the last grave Mary Ellen had decorated, "That man might have been the one who killed your husband!"

"I know," Mary Ellen answered. "You don't think I might have thought of that?" (Although of course she hadn't.) "I'll explain it all in my speech." Not that she had any idea what to say. The speech she had prepared had been obliterated by what she had just done, replaced by just a vague sense that she had found a way to memorialize her son. But it was something she knew she could explain. The words would come.

Lewis and Mary Ellen trekked back towards the entrance, followed by the women of the Memorial Association board and all the onlookers that had gathered at the scene. They made their way together towards the gazebo that had been set up as a rostrum from which to speak, decorated gaily with flowers. A brass band began to play as they approached.

The Mayor spoke first, of course, and then a colonel recently released from a Yankee prison. Then it was the women's turn: first Elizabeth Hunt, the President of the Association, and finally Mary Ellen, as Secretary. The first three speakers praised the Ladies Memorial Association of Columbus for their dedication to the memory of the South, vowing that the sacrifices of the Confederate soldiers and their widows, mothers, and sisters, would never be forgotten. "We may have been defeated in battle, but never in our hearts!" Elizabeth said to enthusiastic applause. "Every year we will honor our dead and hold our heads high! As long as the Lord sees fit to continue time, we will be here on April 26, decorating the graves of our fallen heroes!"

Then it was Mary Ellen's turn. She could barely speak. The great wave of grief on the still lake swept through her once again, and she shook with tears. The crowd waited impatiently below. Mary Ellen could sense their anger at the ready.

"I know some of you are wondering why, after decorating my husband's grave, I decorated the graves of Union soldiers" she began. "I know for some my reasons might be difficult to understand, perhaps even difficult to forgive. I didn't bring the extra wreath and flowers for that purpose. Believe me, I didn't. I brought them for some Confederate graves that might have remained undecorated, to decorate in the place of my son William, who lies in some forgotten, neglected grave in Pennsylvania. But then, right there, I thought: How might my son ever be memorialized, how might his grave ever be properly cared for, except by some Northern mother whose son might be buried here, in Columbus? Only if she has the pity, the faith, and the love to decorate my son's grave will he ever get his due! And if I must depend on her to care for my son's grave, shouldn't she be able to depend on me to care for hers?"

"Don't you see?" Mary Ellen begged the crowd, which seemed to have been touched by her tears. "How can we move on except together? Let this day be for all the dead of this terrible war, and let us take care of theirs that they might take care of ours. Every mother loved her son . . ."

And that was all Mary Ellen could manage to say, weeping so hard that no other words could emerge as she felt someone hold her and then lead her off the stage, down the few stairs to the lawn and a chair just below the rostrum where some other ladies came over to minister to her in her overwhelming grief.

And that was all. Decoration Day became, as Mary Ellen had hoped, first a former Confederate states' holiday and later a national holiday, although at a later date more appropriate to the bloom time of Northern flowers. Eventually the name was changed to Memorial Day. The Ladies Memorial Association of Columbus, Georgia, however, continued to celebrate the Confederate Decoration Day, and through the years the ladies joined Mary Ellen in her annual decoration of both Confederate and Union graves.

Ten years after the war, Mary Ellen traveled to Wake County, North Carolina, where the Wake County Ladies Memorial Association had arranged for the unearthing of the Confederate dead who had been buried hastily at Gettysburg and their reburial in Southern cemeteries. There she traced her son William's body to a cemetery in Richmond, Virginia, where at last, on Decoration Day 1876, she decorated the grave of her son.

No Northern mother had ever reciprocated her act of kindness and love, but that didn't matter to her. And the fact that the North had buried their own two months after the Battle of Gettysburg and left the Confederate remains to wooden markers and mass graves also didn't matter. What mattered was what she did, not what they had done. And what she did through love was longer lasting than what they had done through hate, as is always the case, and more healing and full of grace.

Mary Ellen continued to decorate both Confederate and Union graves in Columbus, Georgia until her death in 1888, after which the practice continued without her until another, more modern sensibility transformed all of the national holidays, Memorial Day included, and Memorial Day became merely an excuse for a three-day weekend and the unofficial beginning of summer.