

MEMORIAL DAY CELEBRATION

May 30, 1868, was the first observation of Memorial Day—a day set aside to remember Union soldiers who died in the Civil War. Yet the remembrance had its beginning in a Confederate cemetery near Richmond, Virginia.

The day was first called Decoration Day. Families living in and near Richmond, took flowers, ribbons, flags to cemeteries to place on the graves of veterans honoring all who had participated in wars up to 1868.

General John A. Logan, commander-in-chief of the Grand Army of the Republic, planned to visit the scarred battlefields of Virginia with his wife and Colonel Charles L. Wilson who was editor of the "Chicago Journal". However, congressional business prevented him from taking the trip, but he urged his wife and others to go.

Mrs. Mary S. Logan later described that trip and the horrors wrought by the war. Grave after grave had upon them small bleached Confederate flags, faded flowers and wreaths that had been laid upon them by loving hands. General Logan was so moved by her description, that he issued an order that members of the Grand Army of the Republic remember their dead comrades in special ceremonies on May 30. This date was chosen after it was decided flowers would be their most beautiful at that time of year.

According to Alvin Whitaker's records, Morgantown area veterans marched to the two cemeteries (Baptist & East Hill) in May of 1866, after the Civil War, to honor their dead.

An article in a Martinsville paper dated June 3, 1886, tells of a large Memorial Day celebration. An excursion train left Martinsville with 63 passengers at 9a.m. and stopped at Mahalasville. There the group went to the Methodist Church where the exercises were under the direction of Frank Stimpson. Dr. Jarvis J. Johnson of Martinsville gave the prayer. After some vocal music, A. W. Scott delivered an eloquent message and Major Grubbs spoke extemporaneously. Next, the graves of the soldiers buried there were visited and flowers were distributed. At 10:45, a considerably enlarged excursion proceeded to Morgantown where they arrived at 11a.m.

At 1:30, an immense crowd assembled at the Baptist Church where Peter Fesler read the program of events to follow. A procession to march to the cemeteries was formed in the following order: GAR and soldiers; chaplain and orators; children and citizens. They walked first to the Baptist Cemetery (north Church street) where Reverend Ragsdale offered a prayer and flowers were distributed. Next, they marched to the Methodist cemetery (East Hill) where a quartet composed of Charles Fesler, Oliver Fesler, G. W. Jones and Luther Morris sang "The Voice of Freedom". Graves were then decorated.

The procession then moved to the Methodist Church which was filled to capacity. They were entertained by a choir, and Major G. W. Grubbs gave an address. Charles Teeters sang a solo: "I'm Coming Home Again." A. W. Scott spoke with eloquence and paid beautiful tributes of praise for the Union soldiers. The program ended with Dr. J. J. Johnson speaking of his local ties. His closing remark was: "Mothers, teach your children loyalty and love of country next to the love of Jesus Christ."

The group that has sponsored local Memorial Day celebrations after Civil War veterans died off is not known in its entirety. But Jim Crawford, Reuben Rundell, M.G. Murphy, Marvin Elkins, Alvin Whitaker, Mary Meredith, Wilbur and Phyllis Cooper

honor of all veterans. Alvin got the Fort Benjamin Harrison Military Police Division to participate and every division that was stationed at Camp Atterbury. Alvin was instrumental in getting a concrete speaker's stand built in East Hill cemetery. Beginning in the 1940's, there was and continues to be a roll call of all veterans buried in East Hill, Baptist Cemetery, overseas and Arlington, followed by the playing of Taps. The grave of each veteran is decorated with an American flag.

Participants in the annual parade are too numerous to mention, but at one time, several thousand people would spend the day in Morgantown for this special observation. All businesses closed, there were no yard sales or vendors of pork chop dinners. Churches would be filled to capacity for services in the morning, and many families invited visitors home for Sunday dinner prior to the parade. Many people referred to Alvin Whitaker as "Mr. Morgantown" for his unselfish and devoted attitude in planning this annual event, probably the biggest day of the year for the town.



Since the first observance, Morgantown citizens have displayed a fine community spirit. In 1908 the music was provided by the Silver Cornet Band of Morgantown.