

The Memorial Poppy



The poppy as the memorial flower for the American war dead is a tradition which began in the years following the First World War. Veterans returning to their homes in this country remembered the wild poppies which lined the devastated battlefields of France and Flanders, and the soldiers of all nations came to look upon the flowers as a living symbol of their dead comrades' sacrifice.

A Canadian officer, Colonel John McCrae who was killed during the war, immortalized the flowers in his famous poem, "In Flanders' Field." Its opening lines are familiar to millions of people around the world,

"In Flanders' field the poppies blow,
Between the crosses row on row---"

Returning servicemen brought with them memories of the battlefield poppies, and the flower soon took on a sacred significance. The red blossoms became the flower of remembrance for the men whose lives had been lost in the defense of freedom. As a memorial emblem of the war dead, it underlined the plight of those men who did not die, but returned permanently disabled. The poppy soon became a symbol of honoring the dead and assisting the living victims of the war.

Soon after the Armistice, patriotic organizations in different countries began conducting poppy campaigns. The flowers, made by disabled servicemen, raised funds for relief work among handicapped veterans and their families. Wearing a poppy came to mean honor the dead and help the living.

Wearing poppies in honor of the war dead first occurred in New York City on November 9, 1918. A YMCA staff worker, Miss Moina Michael of Athens, Georgia distributed poppies to a group of men attending the 25th conference of her organization.

The homecoming of the 32nd Division in Milwaukee in June, 1919 marked the beginning of the American Legion Auxiliary's poppy program. A coffee and doughnut booth decorated with paper poppies was stripped of its floral ornaments twice, and the passers-by who took the poppies left contributions on the counter. Several hundred dollars was contributed for the benefit of disabled veterans.

One of the women in the booth, Mrs. Mary Hanecy, proposed that distributing poppies on the street at the time of Memorial Day would be an excellent way for The American Legion post to raise money needed for rehabilitation work. She presented her idea to George F. Plant, a member of Post No. 1 in Milwaukee, and as result this group conducted a poppy distribution on Saturday before Memorial Day in 1920. Post No. 1 distributed 50,000 poppies and netted \$5,500 during the first regular conducted Poppy Day on record.

Mrs. Hanecy was awarded a Certificate of Merit during the American Legion Auxiliary's National Convention in Portland, Oregon in 1932 for her Poppy Day idea.

When Miss Moina Michael returned to her home in Georgia during the summer of 1920 she interested members of The American Legion in wearing poppies as an annual memorial to the war dead. The Georgia Department of The American Legion adopted the poppy as a memorial flower at its 1920 convention. Then the Georgian delegation took the idea to The American Legion National Convention, held in Cleveland, OH, in September, 1920. The poppy was adopted as the American Legion Auxiliary's memorial flower.

The Auxiliary Program

The poppy program begins each year in the summer or fall when disabled veterans start making the flowers in government hospitals and special convalescent workshops maintained by the Auxiliary. In the following months these Veterans are given profitable employment shaping the red memorial flowers.

Manufacturing poppies aid the veteran both financially and psychologically. They are paid for the work they do regardless of any relief from long hours spent in a hospital ward. For many, it is the only opportunity to earn money during the year.

As each poppy leaves the hand of the Veteran it contributes monetary assistance for necessities and comforts, not supplied by the hospitals - a small amount of savings for the veteran toward the day he/she can leave the hospital and financial assistance for his/her dependants. These Veterans invariably ask the American Legion Auxiliary for permission to make more and more poppies, not only for money, but because the program offers them the opportunity to do something productive.

Poppy production is limited, however, to the number ordered by Auxiliary Units. It is a happy day in a hospital or workshop when a large order for poppies is received.

