



The Forgotten Holidays: Memorial Day

By Monroe S. Miller

There are so many things I like about this business of golf course management that it would take more pages than this journal has to enumerate them. As one matures in the profession he quickly recognizes, however, that you must take the bad with the good. And there most definitely are some features and aspects that are at least uncomfortable if not actually bad. The worst of them is losing three important and fun holidays from our lives - Memorial Day, the Fourth of July and Labor Day.

These three summer holidays are great ones for golfers. At our Club there are a host of special events - simuttee starts on two of the three weekend days, couple tournaments, family golf and more. These require that we focus a lot of attention and a whole lot of work making the golf course as enjoyable as it can be for the players. The result is working in split shifts, putting in long hours and in essence, losing the true meaning of the holidays because of the effort expended. I don't like it.

Memorial Day should have special and deep meaning to Americans; too often it does not. Many associate the Day with the start of summer. It is the time of the great 500-mile auto race in Indianapolis. For some it merely marks the beginning of the vacation period - a weekend for fishing and camping and golf and lolling at the beach. Ask many about its significance and they cannot tell you.

But this certainly has not always been so. In its origins it had a far different and more serious significance. It all started two years after the Civil War. The New York Tribune carried a brief news paragraph reporting that "the women of Columbus, Mississippi have shown themselves impartial in their offerings made to the memory of the dead. They strewed flowers alike on the graves of the Confederate and of the National soldiers." Chauncey Depew, a famous orator of the time, described the effect of this act: "As the news of this touching tribute flashed over the North it roused, as nothing

else could have done, national amity and love and allayed sectional animosity and passion. Thus out of sorrows common alike to North and South came this beautiful custom."

And it did become a custom. In 1868 John A. Logan, who was the commander-in-chief of the Grand Army of the Republic (as the veterans of the Union Army were known) designated May 30th "for the purpose of strewing flowers or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village, or hamlet churchyard in the land;" and he expressed the hope that "it will be kept up from year to year." So the custom began and it quickly became an official holiday in most states, North and South alike. It was called Decoration Day until 1882 when the GAR decided it should be known as Memorial Day. I still recall my grandfathers calling it Decoration Day.

It is almost with a sense of guilt that I'm writing these thoughts; I've lost sight of the importance of Memorial Day in my recent adult years. Too much attention has been given to the golf course I'm responsible for - the preparation has consumed too much interest. But that was not true during my youth. In our town, Memorial Day was something very special. It meant a parade with veterans stuffed into military uniforms that no longer fit. It was a church service held to remind the congregation of what the day meant. It was an honor guard and a 21-gun salute honoring fallen comrades. And for two years while I was in high school I had the overwhelming privilege - indeed, honor - to recite the poem "In Flanders Field" before the crowd gathered in our community building. It is a beautiful poem that commemorates those men no longer with us:

*In Flanders Field the poppies grow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still loudly singing, fly*

Scarcely heard amid the guns below...

For those fulsomely self-righteous, cynical deprecators of patriotism who suggest that Memorial Day is little more than a glorification of the military, I remind that most of those fallen men we are honoring were very young and neither had a wish to die nor a career in military service. They were merely serving a call to service given them by their country, to defend freedom somewhere in the world. Their dreams and hopes for happiness in America were dashed and it seems little to ask to set aside this one day to keep alive the idealism they died for. It is only natural I feel this strongly. I am a proud veteran of military service. It does not matter to me that it was duty in our most unpopular conflict. What is important to me and others involved in that war is that we served, rather than moving to Canada or elsewhere to avoid responsibility of citizenship in this country. And I cannot forget seeing hundreds and hundreds of body bags flown in from the far reaches of Vietnam, on their way home - their final trip to anywhere. My family has a long history of volunteering or answering the summons of our government for military service. My father and uncles and theirs before, clear back to the 1700's when many of mine were fighting as revolutionaries and minutemen at Lexington and Concord.

My father's young brother gave the ultimate in conflict when German artillery took his life in France at the tender age of 18. The world lost a wonderful young man when Malcolm Miller was killed in World War II - it took him and millions like him. Is it asking too much to honor their memory for one day of the year?

Our golf course will be ready this year, as in other years, for all the pleasure the game can give on this Memorial Day weekend. The lilacs will be beautiful, the earth will be warm and the flowers will be blooming. I am the lucky one, and so are you. We are here to enjoy them. Let us all tell the unlucky ones that we do care and do appreciate what they gave - their lives for our country in its lengthening history of freedom and justice. We should do no less.