

Carroll County Times “Carroll’s Yesteryears” Articles

Memorial Day Traditions

Carroll County Times article for 28 May 1990

By Joe Getty, Executive Director, Historical Society of Carroll County

One of the proudest traditions in Carroll County is the annual Memorial Day parade in Westminster. This tradition was started in the late 1860s by Mary Shellman, who organized a children’s parade to decorate the graves of veterans in the Westminster cemetery. The parade has been held every year since then and is considered to be one of the longest Memorial Day traditions in the nation.

Mary Shellman was a prominent Westminster resident at the turn-of-the-century in Carroll County. She was a community activist who was well known for her work in many progressive causes of the time. Her political activities included advocacy of the temperance movement in Carroll County and organizing the Just Government League, which supported the women’s right to vote. In addition, she promoted local history projects and the Historical Society of Carroll County was founded in 1939 in order to preserve her house at 206 East Main Street in Westminster.

One of the accomplishments she viewed as most important was her establishment of the first Memorial Day in Carroll County and her work for over sixty years of organizing the children of Westminster to decorate Civil War graves on Memorial Day. There are many of Mary Shellman’s writings and letters preserved in the Historical Society’s archives. In one of her letters she states “so my Memorial Day laborers and my work in organizing the Boy Scouts in Westminster have perhaps done the most far reaching good if I have helped make loyal citizens of our young people.”

Mary Shellman became known far and wide as a excellent orator and patriotic leader in Maryland. She wrote and read the Memorial Day poem at the Antietam battlefield in 1888. She wrote the Memorial Hymn for Arlington National Cemetery in 1900 and the Memorial Day poem for Loudoun Park Cemetery in Baltimore. She was also an active member of the G. A. R., an organization devoted to preserving the memories of the Union soldiers who died during the Civil War.

Mary Shellman’s influence in stirring patriotism within the community was felt widely throughout Carroll County. Her next-door neighbor and close friend was Mrs. Harry M. Kimmey. A recent donation to the Historical Society is a speech made by Mrs. Kimmey on May 30, 1905 at the Westminster celebration of Memorial Day. An excerpt from this presentation provides an interesting perspective on the themes of past Memorial Days in Carroll County. Memorial Day orations frequently focus on the men who gave their lives, but in Mrs. Kimmey’s presentation she talked about the role of Carroll County women and the heroines at home:

"After these husbands, fathers, sons, brothers and lovers had received the patriotic and inspiring good-bye, we remember how the women of Maryland and Pennsylvania gathered themselves together and, through the blinding tears, sewed the havelocks and blankets made by the housewives, and, with many a sigh, the bandage rolls. Gray-haired grandmothers whose tottering steps were near the journey’s end sat up all night to help get the boys off, feeling sure that when they came back she would be beyond the veil. Or if they never came back, she would be on the other side to greet them.

As we talk of this picture, one comes up before each one of you in memories of glory that are your own. How you left home amid the tears of the loved ones. How they tried to be brave while the heart almost burst in its grief. I can go back in memory to one scene of this kind. Here in our own town the hero of which but a short time ago you laid to rest beside the gray-haired mother who lived to see him return – but he was not the ruddy boy she sent forth. A soldier brave and true but the marks of the soldier's life upon him which he carried to his grave. I speak of Captain Kuhn. His mother Mrs. Kuhn had cared for a baby girl whose young mother's spirit left the world when she came into it. And as I grew in years, I always was bound to her home by this link of kindness, as I learned it of others. So when it came for Mrs. Kuhn to send her only child Charlie to the war, do you wonder that I often stole into her home to speak a word of cheer and comfort. If I were an artist with either a brush or pen, I should like to put on record the brave struggle between love and duty that I saw fought by Mrs. Kuhn when she said goodbye to Charlie. This is only one mother's tears out of thousands.

You who have spent most of your life here as I have, remembered 1863 when upon the hills of Gettysburg was being fought that bloody struggle. How our grandmothers, mothers and sisters cooked, baked and made coffee for four days and nights without rest for both the blue and the gray. How the women of Pennsylvania and Maryland gathered themselves again together to pray for those who were in this strife. The thunder of the battle falling upon their ears as they prayed. And we believe their prayer was heard by the Great Father above the din of the strife. Women's words and smiles of love and encouragement made many a brave soldier faced the cannon's mouth.

An instance of this courage and loyalty was given me by an eyewitness. When marching to Gettysburg as one young soldier passed his home, his father and sisters were standing at the gate watching the regiment march by. Before they could realize it, the son and brother had left the ranks, kissed each one, and rejoined the rest of his regiment. Not a discouraging word fell from the lips of those sisters, but rather they would have said, "Fight brother, bravely and well. The enemy is on your native soil." We know not whether those lips ever again kissed those loved ones. They may have been silenced forever and lay with the thousand 'neath his native soil in the National Cemetery in Gettysburg.

Let me give you another home picture. When the troops were marching on to Gettysburg, as they passed near Manchester, one strayed into a home and asked for something to eat as it was being prepared. He and the mother of that home engaged in conversation. She had a tear for the soldier boy as she told him she had a son wearing the blue. He asked his name. She told him Samuel Herr. "I know him," he replied. "He is now on his way to Gettysburg." Can you picture that mother's feeling! For even then she could hear the heavy firing as it reverberated through the mountain passes of western Maryland from those bloody fields. The mother and sisters of that home were entitled to tears but not a word of disloyalty; rather a prayer that the Gods of Battle would be his shield.

But the women at home had not only the privations of separation but also many of them had not enough to satisfy the needs of home. Ofttimes, the small pittance that the private in the ranks could spare to send home did not keep away the wolf of hunger from the door. As the husband and father rushed in to battle with what must have been the sting as the thought would flash through his mind "If I fall who will care for home." This same care rested upon the inmates of the humble home, but not a word of discouragement came to his ears from those anxious hearts. All wished the war was over, but none said, 'Come home.'

I have heard the soldier say one the saddest things to him was the loneliness and needs of the women and children left behind in the country through which the army was fighting. The sufferings were particular to devastated homes, crop less fields and empty barns, but they suffered and were patient in hoping that success would come to their cause. A friend who helped to bury the dead after the smoke had cleared away from Gettysburg, told me in the clinched hands of a dying man was found a photograph of three beautiful little girls. The last comfort he had – the last thought was a look at them. When the picture was sent back to the home with a statement from where it was found, what do you think was the measure of that wife's sorrow?

I should like to be able to tell you of the sacrifices and the noble women who formed the hospital corps. After the great battles these women nursed back to life many a brave boy and folded the hand and closed the eyes of many more. Thus they stood in the place of the loved ones far away. Nursing in those days did not mean what nursing means today. Conveniences were not at hand but it was to do the best with the least. Many of these women had to be the surgeon's helper and stand by the amputation tables and dress the ghastly wounds. But they faltered not.

So as we realize this Memorial Day, let us not only salute the men who have served and died for this country, but also the women and many family members who supported this dedication and service to the United States.

Up from the fields of memory,
 Green with the flight of years,
The names of our fallen comrades
 Come tenderly to our ears.
Heroes and early martyrs
 Offered at Freedom's shrine,
When slavery's chains were broken
 And blood poured out like wine.
Methinks I hear the bugle
 Calling them all away,
As they buckled on their armor
 And hastened to the fray.
From field and shop and anvil,
 They came eight hundred strong,
And offered youth and manhood
 To fight against the wrong.
Strong, and brave and valiant,
 Each heart with hope beat high
As they hastened to the battle
 To save our land or die.
Tall and strong and stalwart
 In manhood's early prime,
Cut down without a warning
 By the cruel scythe of time;

With patriot hearts of fire,
 They fought for Liberty,
Breaking the chains of slavery,
 And setting the captive free.
They came back from battle,
 Mangled and bruised and worn,
With crippled limbs and helpless,
 And hearts all bleeding and torn.
And some of our boys were pining,
 In horrible prison pens,
Tortured, forlorn, disheartened,
 Starving, in fearful dens.
And some of our boys were sleeping
 The sleep of the brave in death,
With the banner wrapped around him
 They blessed with their latest breath;
And we've met to do them honor,
 And drop upon each grave
The tears of a grateful nation
 In the land they died to save.
Down the vale of the shadow of death,
 With sound of muffled drum,
With measured tread and silent breath,
 The army of martyrs come.
And, from the heavenly bulwarks,
 We hear the honor roll,
The great Commander mustering,
 Each brave and valiant soul.
Down through the twilight stillness,
 Upon the evening air,
Their names are wailed to us,
 For all our boys are there.
Burns, Grogg, Royer, Ocker,
 Sullivan, Zentz and Gist,
Shaeffer, Lawyer, Oursler, Wolf,
 And all the martyred list.
Shriver, Webster, Rooney, Dell,
 Lemon, Frazier, Butler, too.
Whose hearts have ceased from beating
 Under their jackets of blue.
Carroll County, remember thy boys,
 Weep for each martyred, patriot brave,
Over the graves where they sweetly sleep,
 Let the old flag of Freedom wave.
Westminster, with thy spired hills,

Come in the beautiful twilight hours,
Shed the tears of affection here,
Cover your heroes graves with flowers.
Oh, god of the fatherless, now to Thee,
We lift our bleeding hearts and pray,
Grant thy favor to rest on us.
And bless our Decoration Day.
Help us remember with gratitude,
The debt our nation owes to Thee,
Who broke her captive children's chains,
And gave us victory.
Help us to honor our "boys in blue,"
Each year as the day comes back again,
Bless, our Father, our native land,
And grant her eternal peace, Amen!