

## Memorial Day 2017 –



By Anna Von Reitz

Very early in the morning, before the sun was above the horizon and while the world was still wet with dew, my Grandmother or Mother would come shake my shoulder to wake me. There was always a silent sense of urgency in the air on Memorial Day, as if we had an appointment and couldn't be late.

Then it was out into the cool damp morning, into the woodlots and pastures and gardens to gather armloads of the flowers that bloom this time of year: sweet-smelling Bearded German Iris, Blue Flags, peonies, and early roses, white and pink and lavender and deep purple lilacs and Bridal Wreath and ivy and rosemary and other herbs. We'd carry them home through the dawn light in shiny tin buckets and into the farmhouse kitchen, where we would sort it all out and make individual bouquets.

Purple Iris for Grandpa's grave, peonies and roses for Aunts long dead, lilacs and roses for Cousin Pearl Marie-- and so it went, remembering each one and choosing the flowers just for them. By eight o'clock we'd joined the throngs of other families threading our ways through the cemetery rows and among the moldering stones, mostly quiet as we stabbed the wire prongs of the green metal flower vases into the ground, but sometimes there would be the odd sound of someone laughing or a child chattering too loud.

Grandma would get a little lost in the labyrinth and for a few minutes here and there we'd have to stop and let her recall where Aunt Olga was buried--- yet always she and we persevered and remembered and found their headstones and adorned them with flowers. By nine o'clock the sacred appointment had been kept. Nobody in our family slept on unremembered. The bouquets stood as proof that we'd been there.

Last but not least we struggled up the hill to the War Memorial of our town, and placed our last bouquets among all the others already there, a great mountain of flowers of every kind and sort, our farmer's bouquets supporting great wreaths made of hot house roses and daisies that seemed oddly out of place, and nosegays made by children, stems tied with soft bits of satin ribbon, all clustered around the flag poles and the life-sized bronze statue of a single World War I Infantryman.

This enigmatic figure perplexed my childhood. It seemed that he should have a name and be someone in particular, with a history ---perhaps associated with the town, perhaps not --- but he was just a nameless soldier peering out from under his

old-fashioned helmet, come sun or rain, caught forever in the act of taking another stride forward, poised between the flag poles.

By ten o'clock in the morning, the Town Square and the courthouse lawn and the adjoining park had been invaded as if by opposing armies. Ladies in spring dresses and white shoes (you didn't get to wear white shoes until Memorial Day back then) fluttered and swirled across these normally empty spaces and uniformed men hurried around among them setting up tables and folding chairs. The imposing stage and podium was already there, festooned with red, white, and blue bunting. The Mayor in a black suit, white shirt and fancy gray silk vest paced back and forth, anxious to get everything done in time for the noon barbeque and one o'clock band concert.

By eleven, three distinct groups could be identified: the local militia wearing green olive drab and only a few simple insignias, the American Legion looking very modern with crisp uniforms and new pop coolers, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars, who always dazzled with their variety of uniforms and campaign ribbons and medals. These three groups and their ladies took up their positions, right, left, and center of the courthouse steps, set up their own tables and chairs, plunked their flags in heavy cement and iron flag holders, and manned their duty stations. Everyone had their job to do and role to uphold.

The American Legion always served the coffee and tea for the grown-ups and provided ice cold bottles of pop for the kids (ten cents each, donation). They also ran the hot dog and hamburger concession from a large tent behind their contingent.

The VFW offered free ice cold lemonade and ice water dispensed from huge glass jars with spigots at the bottom. This service to the poor kids of the community who couldn't afford the Legion's soda pop was always deeply appreciated by everyone and just as carefully never commented upon by anyone. They also provided three kinds of free sandwiches every year: egg salad, spam and relish, and peanut butter, all on the cheap soft white bread that kids forever love.

It always struck me, in those days anyway, that the Legion was there to make money and carry on, but the VFW was there to serve and remember and keep serving until they died, burdened by a knowledge only they had and which they didn't share.

The militia, being active duty, had a different air and they weren't as social nor as pretty to look at, yet they were impressive in their own way. They were the only soldiers present who carried actual guns, and together with the local police force, it was understood they were there to guarantee public safety and decorum.

Each year the local militia sold flags of many different kinds and sizes, also flag pins and decals. They also collected old and damaged flags for proper disposal at a ceremony carried out late in the day in the empty field next to the War Memorial. After all the speeches and singing and the band recital and whatever entertainments could be offered to the kids--- fish ponds and pony rides and puppet shows and skits-- these somber men in their dull green uniforms would march slowly back up the hill and play TAPS on a silver bugle as the sun was going down and burn the old flags in sight of the War Memorial.

Unlike all the other events, this one wasn't advertised as part of the program, but it was this one thing in the whole day that sent shivers up my spine and made me think hardest about what it is to be an American. I followed the militiamen out of pure curiosity to see where they were going and what they would do with the piles of old flags they collected in the process of selling new ones. I went alone without telling my parents.

Those flags were given a proper hero's funeral, a send-off any man would be proud of. Four uniformed militiamen, standing at each point of the compass, saluted their passing as the stars on the flags became lost in smoke against the stars in the sky----and though I was just a child, I was deeply moved by what I heard and saw.

Anyone who thinks that my attachment or loyalty to Old Glory is muted by the fact that I fly the Civil Peace Flag with vertical stripes today, would be wrong. An elder now, I have served my country in war and in peace. All the secrets of the VFW are now mine to keep and their service that just quietly bears on to the grave--- that too, is mine. Jim is a Lifetime Member of the AmVets.

I can tell you that most of our young men, our veterans, are lost-- wondering what it is all about, semi-outcasts in their communities, in touch with all that makes them brothers with every other American who has ever fought, but increasingly disillusioned. I think I can tell you why on this Memorial Day, or at least give you my opinion.

It's because they are never allowed to come home. It's because we have been kept embroiled in constant, perpetual war for a hundred and fifty years. It's because the Stars and Stripes wartime flag is the only flag they have ever known. It's because they have fought for this country, but been commanded by foreign mercenary corporations. It's because, in a way, they've been lied to and they know that in their souls.

The local militia here is weak and unobservant. They take their orders from the State of State Governor and never question the nature of his office, his loyalties to foreign corporations, his innate conflicts of interest. They don't interact much with their community and don't get funding worth spitting on in support of their hard work and lynch-pin importance as the bedrock of the American Government. Most of them don't even know that there is any difference between the United States and United States of America.

It's time they learned and time that we all remembered.

When I fly the Civil Peace Flag with vertical stripes it is with a catch in my heart for Old Glory, but also with the certainty that the Republic Flag is mine and that the Peace is mine: it's the peace, not the war that I have always fought for. It's the land and the people that I care about, not the foreign adventurism of USA, INC. My life has come and gone like a parade, a panoply of sight and sound---and in that time I have learned a great many things that are hard to bear, but one of the hardest to accept is simply this: I was betrayed by those I trusted to run my government.

In the present day only a very few elected officials stand tall as representatives of what our Founders had in mind, and it is painfully apparent that once again, we must all undertake the responsibility to govern ourselves and organize our communities

and re-educate our children, take up the reins of our lawful government, inform our militias, and remember who we are.

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