

The Memorial Poppy

Remembering Those Who Gave Their Lives For Our Freedom

By Stan Wilson – Shafter Depot Museum Curator

Behind every artifact in the museum is a story. We have in our collection several red silk or paper poppies sold by the VFW or the American Legion. As we approach Memorial Day I thought it well to tell their story. For many years I remember, Cathy Morgan as the local poppy lady. Now I am sure there were many others distributing poppies as well, but it was Cathy who always seem to find me in a restaurant or on the street, and for a small donation I was given a poppy to wear on my person to remember those who gave their lives for our country.

In 1915, Canadian Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae wrote a poem, which describes how red poppies grew over the graves of fallen soldiers in France. In November of 1918, an American professor, Moina Michael read the poem, titled, “We Shall Not Sleep” in the Ladies Home Journal. She was so moved by the poem that she vowed to wear a red artificial poppy in remembrance of those who gave their lives and wrote a response poem. Following on the left is McCrae’s Poem and Michael’s response on the right.

We Shall Not Sleep

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie,
In Flanders Fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch, be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die,
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow,
In Flanders Fields.

We Shall Keep the Faith

Oh! You who sleep in Flanders Fields,
Sleep sweet – to rise anew!
We caught the torch you threw
And, holding high, we keep the Faith
With All who died.

We cherish, too, the poppy red
That grows on fields where valor led;
It seems to signal to the skies
That blood of heroes never dies
But lends a lustre to the red
Of the flower that blooms above the dead
In Flanders Fields.

And now the Torch and Poppy red
We wear in honor of our dead
Fear not that ye have died for naught;
We’ll teach the lesson that ye wrought
In Flanders Fields.

Michael purchased 25 silk poppies, put one on her coat and distributed the rest at the YMCA convention that she was attending in 1918. She soon began campaigning to get the poppy adopted as a national remembrance symbol. Anna E. Guerin, visiting from France, took the idea back to Europe, where paper poppies were sold to raise money for orphaned children and widowed women. The red paper poppy was soon adopted as a remembrance of the fallen soldiers in WWI and became widely distributed in most of the Allied Countries.

In 1948, the US Post Office Department honored Moina Michael with a commemorative stamp as the founder of the Memorial Poppy.



The American Legion –The Memorial Poppy

At a conference in 1920, the American Legion adopted the red poppy as their official symbol of remembrance. However the Legion was slow in endorsing the poppy for at the 1921 convention delegates chose the daisy as their official flower, even while the American Legion Auxiliary at their convention in 1921 adopted the poppy as their official remembrance. By 1923, the poppy became their official flower of the The American Legion Family in memory of soldiers who fought in WWI. By 1924, The American Legion Auxiliary had taken over the Poppy Program. Each year, American Legion Auxiliary volunteers distribute more that 25 million paper poppies in exchange for \$2 million in contributions to assist disabled and hospitalized veterans. In addition poppy making provides disabled veterans with a rehabilitation activity and a small personal income.



*1953 American Legion Memorial Poppy
Accession # 2386 A*



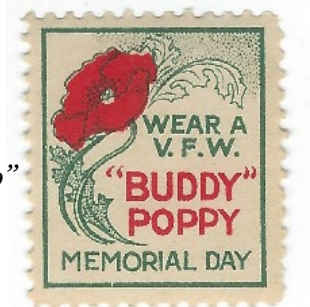
Veterans of Foreign Wars – The Buddy Poppy

The first national distribution of poppies in the U.S. occurred right before Memorial Day in 1922 by the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW). It soon became the official memorial flower of the VFW. The VFW arranged for the poppies to be assembled by disabled or needy veterans who would also be paid for their work. The veterans nicknamed the silk flowers, “buddy flowers” in remembrance of their buddies who had given their lives in the war. In 1924, the VFW trademarked the “Buddy Poppy.”



*VFW Buddy Poppy
Accession # 2386 B*

In the year 1989, the VFW sold almost 18 million poppies for an average donation of 55 cents, and has sold over three quarters of billion buddy poppies since the program began. As with the American Legion, proceeds from the flowers go for the aid, assistance, relief, and comfort of needy or disabled veterans, and their dependents, and the widows and orphans of deceased veterans. According to the VFW, “It’s all about veterans helping veterans and living up to VFW’s motto of “Honor the Dead by Helping the Living.”



VFW “advertising stamp”

This Memorial Day, remember those who gave their lives for our country and if a poppy lady asks you for a donation, make one, and wear the flower in remembrance.