On May 5, 1868, Memorial Day was officially proclaimed by Gen. John Logan, national commander of the Grand Army of the Republic, and celebrated that year on May 30 with flowers placed on the graves of Union and Confederate soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery.

Though it is believed that honoring the fallen soldiers of both sides in that conflict actually began during the war itself, the observance of this day to honor America's fallen heroes was to bring about a sense of reconciliation in recognition of their great sacrifice.

In those early days, Memorial Day was called Decoration Day, perhaps to recognize the effort by certain women's groups that decorated the graves of those who died during the Civil War.

New York was the first state to officially observe the holiday in 1873. By 1890, all of the northern states joined New York's lead. Southern states, on the other hand, refused to recognize this day, choosing instead to honor their fallen on separate days, until after World War I, when the holiday changed from honoring those who died in the Civil War to honoring those who died fighting in any war.

In 1915, Moina Michael came up with the idea to wear red poppies on Memorial Day in honor of those who died. She was the first to wear one and sold poppies to benefit servicemen in need.

The idea was adopted by a French visitor to this country who made artificial red poppies to raise money for war orphaned children and widowed women in her home country.

In 1921, the Franco-American Children's League sold poppies nationally to benefit war orphans of France and Belgium. When that organization disbanded in 1922, Madam Guerin asked the VFW for help and that organization became the first veterans' organization, in 1922, to nationally sell poppies.

By 1924, the VFW's first Buddy Poppy program was selling artificial poppies made by disabled veterans.

As we get ready to celebrate this special holiday in honor of our fallen soldiers, it's important to remember why we honor these veterans and why it is so important to always honor these brave men and women, who put their lives on the line over and over again to keep strong our sense of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

This is a free country, as we will know. But the cost of our freedom has been paid by the lives of these fallen whom we honor this Memorial Day, May 28.

When you attend a Memorial Day program in our county, and I hope that's just about all of us, put your hand on your heart in a silent salute and remember how much we have asked our veterans to give and how very little we sometimes have given back in return.

--Allyce Westphal