

Memorial Day

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This weekend, millions of Americans will be busily loading the family car and preparing their coolers for the Memorial Day weekend. Of those millions, probably only a small percentage is actually sure what exactly it is that they're memorializing. Are we commemorating the Civil War, or World War II? Or is Memorial Day perhaps a tribute to Abraham Lincoln and JFK?

Actually, Memorial Day commemorates the men and women who died while serving in the U.S. military. It began after the Civil War, when it was called Decoration Day, because people would decorate the graves of the fallen soldiers. Immediately following the war, the holiday was observed on different dates according to each state and region.

In 1863 roughly three years after the Civil War, a U.S. general declared that May 30th would be used as the day to decorate graves. On that first Decoration Day, speeches were given in Arlington National Cemetery and upwards of 5,000 attendees helped decorate the grave sites. Obviously, that explains a few of our current traditions, for example the annual observances at the Arlington National Cemetery. But it does not explain the date, or how Memorial Day came to be the first official weekend of summer.

Until the First World War the holiday was generally still called Decoration Day and commemorated only those who died in the Civil War. Post-WWI, the holiday was expanded to honor those who have fallen in any U.S. conflict and the term "Memorial Day" became the preferred nomenclature.

Memorial Day wasn't standardized until 1971, when Congress acted to make Memorial Day a federal holiday, and the date was changed to the last Monday of May. That was when the American modern Memorial Day tradition began, and when the meaning of the holiday began to lose some of its focus. Observed on a three-day weekend, Memorial Day weekend has come to mark the beginning of summer for many. It is the weekend when all the neighborhood pools open, which could just be a coincidence -- although it hasn't done much to help us remember those who fell in the service of our country.

War veterans do not have to be reminded of the meaning of Memorial Day. For me, who served in the Army for 28 years, for my father who fought in World War II, and for my son who served in Iraq and is still serving his country -- it is a day to remember the sacrifices of our comrades. It is a day honoring our fellow Americans who paid the ultimate price for their freedom.