Memorial Day

This is Lieutenant Roger McCort of The Salvation Army in Eureka with today's Community Comment.

One of my great passions in life is understanding history. And while my specialty is Biblical history, I do take an interest in more recent events from time to time.

Did you know that the American Civil War is responsible for over half of the combat deaths of American soldiers in all of the wars and conflicts our nation has ever been involved in? Both Union and Confederate losses were so great that enormous tracts of land were set aside to be used as military cemeteries for the fallen.

In October 1864 the women of Boalsburg, Pennsylvania began what would become an annual tradition of decorating soldiers' graves as a tribute to those who lost their lives serving their country. Not long after, on May 1 of 1865, African Americans in Charleston, South Carolina organized a ceremony to honor the Union Soldiers interred at a special burial ground there. Almost ten thousand people attended, most of whom were former slaves. Called "Decoration Day", the event included a parade, patriotic singing, and an outpouring of flowers that completely covered the gravesites.

These weren't the only celebrations of this kind. Along with dozens of smaller events that took place around the end of the war came a day in Waterloo, New York, spearheaded by General John Murray, a Civil War hero himself. On May 5, 1866, flags in the town were lowered to half-mast and decorations of mourning were raised everywhere. Military marches were played and the graves of soldiers were decorated while stirring speeches were offered up at a number of impressive ceremonies. The next year, these events were repeated with the intent of making an annual occurrence of remembering those who had died for their country.

In 1868, Major General John A. Logan, head of an organization of Union veterans, declared that May 30 each year should be set aside as a national "Decoration Day". The first official celebration was held in Arlington National Cemetery at the mansion which had once housed General Robert E. Lee with dignitaries such as General Ulysses S. Grant presiding.

Flowers were laid on Union and Confederate graves alike. Similar presentations occurred across the country.

The name Memorial Day was first used as in 1882 and slowly grew in popularity until the end of World War II really brought the holiday new meaning. It took until 1967 before Federal law declared Memorial Day a holiday. And in 1971 Congress moved it from May 30 to the last Monday of May to ensure we would get a three-day weekend.

Today, of course, is Memorial Day, May 30, 2016. However you spend your holiday, be it a cookout or a campout or a lazy day watching TV, please take a moment or two to stop and reflect on those who followed their consciences into military service and died to secure the freedom you and I enjoy today. Whether you agree with their decision or not, they represent the idea that there is no greater love than this: That someone would lay their life down for another.

Grace and peace to you today. This has been Lt. Roger McCort for the KINS Community Comment.