

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

It's September 5, 2016, giving me the opportunity to share once again some of my love for history – in this case the history of the Labor Day holiday we are celebrating today.

September 5 is actually the day it all began – September 5, 1882, that is. On that date, one hundred and thirty-four years ago, Union organizers held what they called a “monster labor festival” in New York City. Like egg cartons, peanut butter, and the instant replay, the idea of a workingman's holiday came from our Canadian neighbors, who had begun their own labor parades a full decade before one came together in the U.S.

A union activist named Peter McGuire, a member and General Secretary of the Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, gave a speech at the Canadian rally that year. He was impressed by what he saw and began to agitate for a similar event as soon as he returned home to America. The challenge they faced was that few workers in that day had any kind of paid time off and there was worry that no one would lose a day's pay to join the rally.

As the morning of the event wore on, almost no one had appeared, and the organizers began to feel a very real concern that their effort would fail. But more trickled in as time went by, and the trickle became a rush and the rush a flood, until at last ten thousand people had joined the crowd which marched from City Hall to Union Square to call attention to their demands for better pay and better working conditions.

Over the next dozen years, unions became iron hard political machines, using strikes and corporate bargaining to bend industry towards greater social justice for workers. Up to that time, workers as young as five or six years of age worked twelve hour days, often seven days a week, trying to earn enough for them and their families to live.

Then, in the spring of 1894, a strike of railroad workers began which lasted for several weeks until federal troops were dispatched to break it up. The resulting riots ended with over a dozen workers dead and the U.S. Congress hopping to create an official federal Labor Day holiday in an effort to reduce the tensions. Six days after the end of the strike, President Cleveland signed the bill which had unanimously passed through the legislative process.

As originally intended, Labor Day was meant to include a parade of workers to show the power represented by union forces. A festival for the recreation of those workers and their families was to follow. Speeches were made and union banners were flown and the whole spectacle was dedicated to the social and economic achievements of American workers.

Over time, the social justice edge has largely worn away. Labor Day is now primarily celebrated as the end of summer. It's a day off, a day to use the barbecue one last time, and a day to hit the malls to participate in the largest retail shopping weekend outside of the Christmas season.

Well, however you choose to celebrate your day and whatever the reason you choose to do so, let me wish you a very happy Labor Day. Grace and peace to you.

This has been Lt. Roger McCort with today's KINS Community Comment.