

Mother's Day: A Tradition Rooted in Service

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Mother's Day is held annually on the second Sunday of May in the United States. The first celebration was held on May 10, 1908 at Andrews Methodist Church in Grafton, West Virginia. The modern day Mother's Day is an opportunity to shower our mothers and mother figures with love and attention and show our gratitude for what they have done for us. The history behind the tradition, however, is a testament to an amazing woman from West Virginia.



The Woman Behind the Tradition

Anna Maria Reeves was born in 1832 in Culpepper County, Virginia. In 1845, her father, a Methodist minister, was transferred to Philippi, West Virginia, located in Barbour County. In 1852, Anna married Granville Jarvis, and they made their home in Philippi.

The young couple, along with their two children moved a short two years later to Taylor County, West Virginia, where Granville planned to open a mercantile store. Soon, Granville turned his attention to building the family a home. Growing their family turned out to be a sad and tragic affair when one of her two children perished.

By 1858, the Jarvis family had added three more children. Of these three, only one survived to adulthood. Having lost three of her five children, Anna decided to form an organization called Mother's Day Work Clubs. These clubs were formed in local small towns including Philippi, Webster, Grafton Junction, Fetterman and Pruntytown. Her persistence ultimately led nearly every woman in those communities to join the clubs.

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Conditions Leading to Child Mortality

During this time, sanitary conditions were very poor. Sewage disposal was haphazard, tuberculosis was common, and milk and water supplies were unclean. The objective of the Mother's Day Work Clubs was to eliminate the unsanitary conditions that existed in these communities, which Jarvis believed were leading to the death of children.

The club members raised money to help poor families buy medicines. They hired other women to care for families in which the mother had tuberculosis. They also inspected water supplies and bottled milk for children.

In two years, the clubs became so successful that the doctors encouraged others to start Mother's Day Work Clubs in their own communities. Sadly, Anna's sixth child died after only living for two years. Tragedy spurred Anna to work even harder.

In the Context of History

Anna had strongly encouraged the members of the Mother's Day Work Clubs to remain neutral during the Civil War, but tensions increased with both Union and Confederate fighting near Taylor County. The members decided to treat all wounded, as well as feed and clothe soldiers from both sides. Near the end of the war, Jarvis organized a Mother's Friendship Day at the courthouse in Pruntytown to bring together members of the community to celebrate as one.

The Andrews Methodist Church and the Official Mother's Day

Anna's life revolved around church. She taught Sunday School at Andrews Methodist Church for 25 years. Her daughter Anna led a tribute to her mother's life at Andrews Methodist on May 12, 1907. This later became known as the first Mother's Day celebration. Afterward, daughter Anna dedicated her life to making Mother's Day a nationally-recognized day of celebration.

A bill to establish Mother's Day was introduced into the United States Senate on May 9, 1908, but did not pass. Six years later, President Woodrow Wilson signed a Congressional Resolution on May 10, 1914, which made Mother's Day a nationally-recognized holiday.

In the 1970s, the church was put on the National Register of Historic Places. In 1992, the church became a National Historic Landmark, one of only 16 in West Virginia. Now, the building is open to the public from April 15 until October 31. Mother's Day service is still held there each year.

The Dark Side of Mother's Day

Not surprisingly, daughter Anna Jarvis came to disapprove of the commercialism that eventually accompanied Mother's Day. She viewed Mother's Day as a time to spend the day with your mother and thank her for all she has done for you. However, with Mother's Day quickly turning into an earning opportunity for flower sellers, candy manufacturers and greeting card companies, Anna decided to spend her inheritance fighting against commercialization.

She eventually landed in a sanitarium, penniless and demented. While she could have benefitted financially from the fervor surrounding Mother's Day, she never did. Instead, she fought for the rest of her days to keep the sanctity of the day intact.

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