

Mother's Day: A Tradition Rooted in Service

Gina Taylor, Interim Director, Extension Service Families and Health Program

Educational Objectives

1. Learn about the history of Mother's Day.
2. Learn how Mother's Day has changed over the years.

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. This celebration of cards and flowers did not, however, begin as it is now. The very first Mother's Day was not a day at all; it was a group of women who came together to fight against the poor sanitation practices that were killing children in small communities in 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. An accomplished singer and public speaker, Anna became well-acquainted with Granville E. Jarvis, whose father was the pastor at the Baptist Church and feed store owner. In 1852, Anna married Granville Jarvis, and they made their home in Philippi for their first two years together.



Photo Credit: www.wikipedia.com

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. After building a successful store, 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.

– continued –

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.

Conditions Leading to Child Mortality

During the mid-1800s, sanitary conditions in these communities 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.

Jarvis's first order of business was to contact two doctors to help the cause. Her brother, Dr. James Edmund Reeves, and Dr. Amos Payne were enlisted to teach the club members about health and sanitation. The two ultimately served as advisers to the clubs, setting out projects, handing out assignments and following up on finished jobs.

Under the advisement of the doctors, the club members raised money to help poor families buy needed medicines. They also 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 short years, the clubs had become so successful that the doctors encouraged other doctors to start Mother's Day Work Clubs in their own communities.

Sadly, even after the success of the clubs in cleaning up unsanitary living conditions, Anna's sixth child died after only living for two years. Tragedy spurred Anna to work even harder.

In the Context of History

Although Anna had strongly encouraged the members of the Mother's Day Work Clubs to remain neutral during the Civil War, tensions increased almost daily with both Union and Confederate fighting in the vicinity of 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, however, family and neighborly relations were strained with soldiers from both sides returning home to live in the same small towns. Once again, Jarvis took matters into her own hands and organized a Mother's Friendship Day at the courthouse in Pruntytown to bring together members of the community to celebrate as one. Despite fears of violence, the event took place without incident and was celebrated for several years afterward.



The site of the first Mother's Day celebration held at Andrews Methodist Church in Grafton, West Virginia. (Photo Credit: www.wikipedia.com)

The Andrews Methodist Church and the Official Mother's Day

Being the daughter and daughter-in-law of ministers, Anna's life revolved around church. Her husband, Granville took leadership over building Andrews Methodist Church in Grafton where the two later attended. Anna taught



Sunday School at Andrews Methodist Church for 25 years. Because of her history with the church, her daughter Anna led a tribute to her mother's life at Andrews Methodist Church on May 12, 1907. This later became known as the first Mother's Day celebration. Daughter Anna dedicated her life to making Mother's Day a nationally-recognized day of celebration. Two official Mother's Day celebrations were held on May 10, 1908 at Andrews Methodist Church in Grafton, West Virginia and at the Wanamaker Store Auditorium in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

A bill to establish Mother's Day was introduced into the United States Senate on May 9, 1908, but it failed to pass. A group of ministers, temperance groups and women's suffragists began to work on convincing 45 states to establish the holiday in their states. It took six more years before President Woodrow Wilson signed a Congressional Resolution on May 10, 1914, which set aside the second Sunday of May as Mother's Day, a nationally-recognized holiday.

In 1962, a group of citizens formed the International Mother's Day Shrine Commission. They set up the shrine at Andrews Methodist Church. Several years later Andrews Methodist and two other churches merged, so Andrews was no longer used as a church. The commission restored the church and converted the entire building into a shrine, which now houses many of the Jarvis family's papers, photographs, and stained glass windows and paintings that serve as reminders of Anna Reeves Jarvis.

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

during her remaining 40 years. 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. Unfortunately, the celebration began to spin uncontrollably away from its original intent and Anna Jarvis became very disturbed about the prospect. With Mother's Day quickly turning into an earning opportunity for flower sellers, candy manufacturers and greeting card companies, Anna decided to dedicate her inheritance to fighting this commercialization. Anna Jarvis spent a great deal of money filing lawsuits and organizing protests. She even attacked first lady Eleanor Roosevelt for using Mother's Day as a vehicle for fundraising. Once she crashed a conference of confectioners in Philadelphia. Later, she interrupted American War Mothers convention and was arrested for disturbing the peace. Her efforts eventually landed her 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.

Mother's Day Facts

- Approximately 122 million phone calls are made to moms on Mother's Day in the United States.
- The most common flower for Mother's Day is the carnation; pink and red for mothers who are alive and white for those who have passed away.
- Of all the flowers bought for holidays, one quarter are purchased for Mother's Day.
- The amount of money spent on Mother's Day in the U.S. is approximately \$14 billion.



-
- Mother's Day is celebrated in nearly 50 countries in different parts of the world.

Activities

1. Take turns recalling your favorite Mother's Day memory. It could be about celebrating your own mother or your children celebrating you.
2. Have each person in the room share the greatest lesson his or her mother ever taught him or her.
3. Visit Pinterest to find great ideas for Mother's Day crafts, gifts and keepsakes.

Resources

West Virginia Women's Commission. (1986). Missing Chapters II: West Virginia Women in History. *news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/05/140508-mothers-day-nation-gifts-facts-culture-moms/Mother's Day*, www.wvencyclopedia.org/articles/1416.
Anna Jarvis, www.wvencyclopedia.org/articles/982.
Andrews Methodist Church, www.wvencyclopedia.org/articles/223.
Anna Maria Reeves Jarvis, www.wvculture.org/History/jarvis.html.

2015

Programs and activities offered by the West Virginia University Extension Service are available to all persons without regard to race, color, sex, disability, religion, age, veteran status, political beliefs, sexual orientation, national origin, and marital or family status. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Director, Cooperative Extension Service, West Virginia University.

The WVU Board of Governors is the governing body of WVU. The Higher Education Policy Commission in West Virginia is responsible for developing, establishing, and overseeing the implementation of a public policy agenda for the state's four-year colleges and universities.

FH15-294

