

Unknown Soldiers of the Civil War by Joyce Ramay

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Good morning.

Today we are gathered together to celebrate our national Memorial Day. I am sure that all of you have many memories of gatherings with family and friends on this day throughout the years. Let's look at some of the history behind this holiday.

On May 5, 1868, an organization of Union army veterans — the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) — established **Decoration Day** as a time for the nation to decorate the graves of the Civil War dead with flowers. By the start of the 20th century, ceremonies were being held on May 30 around the country. After World War I, the holiday was expanded to honor all American war fatalities. Congress recognized Decoration Day as a federal holiday in 1938, and the name “Memorial Day” became more commonplace after World War II. In 1971, Congress standardized the holiday as "**Memorial Day**" and changed its observance to the last Monday in May.

I was born in 1939, so I grew up during World War II. It was a time when soldiers were a central focus of our attention. All of us had family members and friends who were serving, and we listened on our radios for news of where the troops were. In the 1940's, Decoration Day was a particularly special day when we visited cemeteries to place flowers on the graves of those who had served, and sometimes other deceased relatives. It was a time for grateful **reverence and reflection**.

In my little town of Owatonna, Minnesota, we gathered at Central Park, where the high school band marched and played patriotic music, including my brother who played trumpet. Then the ceremony would begin on the stage of the park's bandstand. Our only black man in town was Harry Brown, who would bring tears to our eyes as he sang “**God Bless America**” with his majestic voice. That song was written by Irving Berlin and introduced in the fall of 1938, as fascism and war threatened Europe.

Then the speakers would begin with our mayor reciting the Gettysburg Address. After that, other speeches and prayers were delivered.

In 1957, Meredith Wilson introduced his hit musical play, *The Music Man*, which perfectly captured the essence of how we celebrated holidays in my town. By the way, Meredith Wilson grew up in Mason City Iowa, which is just 74 miles south of Owatonna on US Highway 65. He may have been inspired by our own highly esteemed band leader, Harry Wenger, who was often called the Music Man.

After being music director at our high school for several years, Wenger formed Wenger Music Company to manufacture everything from special music chairs and music stands to acoustic curtains, orchestra platforms and portable stages. The company's products are still used worldwide in schools, concert halls, parks and sports arenas.

As you can see, I have some deep and meaningful memories of this holiday from my youth. Today, it often seems that Memorial Day has become just another occasion for picnics, barbeques, a day off from work, the end of the school year, and the start of summer. I believe that it is important for us to **remember, reflect upon, and respect the sacrifices** that people have made for us through the years.

Here in Florida, and in other parts of the country, there is a strong movement against recognizing the role of blacks in our history. Social studies, civics and history books are being re-written or removed from our schools and the shelves of libraries. Programs to promote diversity, equity and inclusion have been eliminated from universities and government institutions. It is so bad that the NAACP has just issued a travel advisory for the state of Florida!! People of diversity are being actively deprived of the inclusion that they deserve!

NOW is the time when we must draw attention to our complete history.

I grew up with family stories about the Civil War. My Great Grandmother Mary Goodnature was born in 1854 in Springfield, Illinois, where Abraham Lincoln practiced law. She saw Lincoln there before he left to become President. (I have brought my statue of Lincoln to join us today.)

My Grandfather Floyd Frost told me about his grandfather, who had been one of the Minnesota volunteers to join the Union troops, and he served under General Sherman. So for me, the Civil War was not just some distant tale from history books. It was part of our family history.

Today, I am **emphasizing** the role of the unknown soldiers of the Civil War. Did you know that there were many **black soldiers** who served in the Union Army? Have you ever been told their stories?

In 1862, President Lincoln's **Emancipation Proclamation** declared "that all persons held as slaves" within the rebellious states "are, and henceforward, shall be free." That also opened the door for African Americans to enlist in the Union Army. Although many had wanted to join the war effort earlier, they were prohibited from enlisting by a federal law dating back to 1792. In May 1863, the War Department established the Bureau of Colored Troops for the purpose of recruiting African-American soldiers. These became the **United States Colored Troops (USCT)**.

Roughly **179,000** black men (10% of the Union Army) served as soldiers in the Army and another **19,000** served in the Navy. Nearly **40,000 black** soldiers died over the course of the war. Despite promises of equal treatment, blacks were relegated to separate regiments commanded by white officers.

Black soldiers received less pay than white soldiers, inferior benefits, and poorer food and equipment.

Who were some of the black civil war heroes?

Henry Flipper was the **first African-American to be commissioned** in the Army, or any other branch of the U.S. military. He became the first African-American officer to command African-American Soldiers when he assumed command of Troop A, 10th Cavalry Regiment, also known as the Buffalo Soldiers, at Fort Sill, Okla.

The most famous black soldier in the Civil War was **Alexander Thomas Augusta**, who was the **highest-ranking black officer** in the Union Army during the War. He was also the first African American head of a hospital (Freedmen's Hospital) and the first black professor of medicine (Howard University in Washington, D.C.).

And perhaps the most interesting one of all is **Harriet Tubman**. She was born a slave in 1822. In 1849, when she was 27 years old, she escaped. For eleven years she was one of the conductors on the underground railroad, which was a network of routes, places and people that helped enslaved people in the South to escape to freedom in the north. They called her “**Moses**” for leading her people to freedom.

During the Civil War, Tubman worked for the Union Army, first as a cook and nurse, and then as an **armed scout and spy**.

She also continued with other abolitionists to work with the Union Army to help slaves to travel to the North once they came behind Union lines. Tubman volunteered to gather intelligence for the Union Army behind Confederate enemy lines. In 1863, she became the **first woman to lead an armed military expedition** called the Combahee Ferry Raid that freed more than 700 from slavery. After the Civil War, Harriet settled with family and friends on land she owned in Auburn, New York. She applied for veteran's compensation, but it took her 34 years to get it finally in 1900. When she died in 1913, at the age of 91, she was buried with full military honors.

So now, as we celebrate our Memorial Day weekend, let us remember and appreciate all those who gave their lives in service to our country, and let us honor all the unknown black soldiers who helped to save the Union and end slavery in America. We are indebted to them and thank them for the sacrifices they made to help preserve this nation – of the people, by the people, and for the people!!

And may we all continue to do everything in our power to protect and preserve freedom, democracy, inclusion, justice and equality here in Florida and in these United States of America.