

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, May 30, 2011

Memorial Day: My favorite time of year, Memorial Day, originally on May 30 each year, signifies the unofficial start of my favorite season and is also important for what it stands for. Sometimes called Decoration Day, it was established in the late 19th century in memory of those who lost their lives in the Civil War, but as late as World War II, it was not celebrated as a legal holiday in the South. Briefly, I was at Hunter Field, Savannah, Georgia, on May 30, 1945.

My father used to talk about riding his bicycle and later the trolley to Brandywine Springs to celebrate Memorial Day before and after 1900. My Aunt Helen Shallcross shipped peonies to market from her home in Middletown, Delaware, and kept them in an old ice house 15 feet below ground, accessible only by a ladder. I often took my mother to decorate family graves at Hockessin Friends Burial Ground, at Union Hill Cemetery near Kennett Square, and sometimes at Old Drawyers Cemetery just north of Odessa. It was usual to visit with friends who were also decorating graves in these familiar surroundings. My memory of this solemn day is that good weather usually prevailed.

The *Weekly News* of May 25, 2009, told of Memorial Day at Mercersburg Academy in 1942. A very impressive ceremony took place in the community cemetery of the small Franklin County town in south central Pennsylvania with the entire student body of the academy in attendance. A quiet and peaceful day just before the dreaded final exams could not foretell what was in store for the coming year. May 30, 1942, was just six months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Of the 200 students (seniors and post-grads) who would leave Mercersburg on June 8, just nine days after Memorial Day, about 90 percent would be serving in the armed forces within a year.

In 1943, May 30 was on a Sunday, so the “holiday” was considered May 29–31, to be celebrated as best it could be during wartime. On Friday after classes in Pre-Meteorology at Brown University, we were marching in formation through the streets of Providence singing mostly World War I songs, such as “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary,” “K-K-K-Katy, and “Over There.” A fellow named Mikesell from Muskegon, Michigan, changed a word to something obscene, and Sergeant Fryer heard it, but he knew not from whom it came. He asked the culprit to come forth, but no one did. Our entire squadron with its seven flights (about 150 young men) was quarantined to the barracks for the weekend, except when we marched to and from our meals. I lived with 11 others in a section of the top floor of an old Brown dormitory called Hope College, and the weather was hot. We got hold of some ginger ale and Coca Cola, but with no ice, the only place we could keep it cool was in the one toilet tank on our floor. This was the only unpleasant Memorial Day I can remember.

Over Memorial Day weekend in 1966, Wilmington & Western trains carried passengers between Greenbank and Mount Cuba for the first time since the 1920s, when the B & O Railroad abandoned passenger service from Philadelphia and Wilmington to Landenberg.