



Memorial Day at Shiloh



A gathering of Shiloh veterans on Memorial Day

History Repeats Itself

History repeats itself...

What goes around comes around...

The more things change, the more they stay the same...

These pedantic phrases are often used flippantly, but they carry a great deal of truth to them. They particularly seem relevant when describing the Memorial Day activities at Shiloh National Cemetery. Through the decades of

memorialization and remembrance at Shiloh National Military Park, people have changed, sites have been altered, and the calendar has advanced. Yet, in all the change, the Memorial Day services at Shiloh have remained amazingly constant.

Continuity

The Memorial Day service is one of the long-standing traditions at Shiloh National Cemetery. Since before the park was established in 1894, locals and veterans have met each year at the cemetery to remember and memorialize. Although different in makeup, each service through the years has included the basics of well-known speakers, patriotic songs, and nationalistic poetry. The 1914 Memorial Day services ended with a moving rendition of "Home Sweet Home."

Another of the marks of continuity in the Shiloh services is the emphasis on people. Event organizers as far back as the 1890s tried to use people to provide an interesting, informative, and moving service. Local church choirs have almost annually sung at the event. Veterans, just

as today, have often been spotlighted for their services. On Memorial Day in 1907, sixty-five aged members of the 21st Missouri returned to the battlefield and were honored guests. And just as today, orators ranging from governors to judges to former generals have spoken eloquently about the need to remember the sacrifice of our nation's war dead.



Honor Guard representing America's wars



Shiloh National Cemetery

Decoration

A similar tradition is the decoration of the graves. As far as records show, which date back to the 1890s, American flags have been placed on each grave in the cemetery. Although responsibility for the placement of flags has changed through the years from veterans' groups to political organizations to today's National Park

Service, the simple gesture of individually recognizing each serviceman's sacrifice still remains. Similarly, the United States flag has traditionally flown at half-staff on Memorial Day from sunrise until noon. There is even a custom, dating back as far as the park's establishment, of decorating the Confederate mass graves in the park.

Rain, Rain Go Away

Despite the continuity, one particular tradition has hopefully changed. In the first years of the park, rain dampened (literally) the festivities on Memorial Day. Almost each year, the park's daily event ledger book records the similar words "rain occurred," "the usual 30th of May

rain fell," or "the 30th of May brought the customary rain." The crowds of course were smaller during rainy days, but sunny holidays would easily attract five-thousand people, with estimates of as many as twelve-thousand in 1906.

Continue to Remember

Times have changed, participants have been replaced, and the United States has many more war-dead to remember, but the basic idea of remembrance at Shiloh has remained the same, and the way it has

been accomplished at Shiloh has remained amazingly constant through the years. May we always continue to hold this day and the sacrifice it memorializes dear to our hearts.