

## A Long Weekend

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It started as Decoration Day in the 1860's because it was the day that the graves of Civil War soldiers were decorated with flowers. It became Memorial Day in the 1880's, and as other wars and other generations followed, the 30th of May was established as a day of patriotic oratory and commemorative services.

But times and priorities change. Pragmatism, rather than patriotism impelled Congress to move Memorial Day to the last Monday in May in the interest of a more recent national observance, the long holiday weekend. Both patriotism and oratory are out of style. Even the trauma of Vietnam has dulled. And memory grows shorter all the time.

There are less painful Memorial Day memories. The 30th of May is the symbolic start of summer for many who celebrated it as the last day of school, with the rapture of release and the promise of long, hot days of freedom ahead. For the more daring, it was the occasion of the first cold swim of the year. For all, there

was the luxury of light evenings and the first home-made ice cream; activity moved on to front porches across the land. And when this was a more bucolic nation, it also meant the flowering of fields and gardens and the start of the easy, outdoor pleasures. The summer of the year, and of life, gentled the observance of death.



America will place its wreaths as usual this year, even if the date has been slightly skewed. To many, mourning remains close and real, even though there are young people who do not even know what Memorial Day means. There was a time, before World War II, when someone in a small town could follow a procession to the gravesites and realize that he knew each name. That loss is greater than the erosion of the national conscience and of compassion; memory is history, as well.

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