

Peace Day

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In May 1915 Superintendent of Bakersfield Schools D. W. Nelson, announced Peace Day would be observed in all city schools. The observance had been a long time coming, and it didn't stay long.

For many decades, world peace conferences had argued against growth of armies and the companies that profited from war. In 1905 America brokered a peace between Japan and Russia, and it showed that negotiated peace was possible.¹

The World Peace Federation that was founded in the United States in 1910 laid out goals that are still appropriate today: Promote education of the "people of all nations to a full knowledge of the waste and destructiveness of war and of the preparation for war, its evil effects on present social conditions and on the well-being of future generations, and to promote international justice and the brotherhood of man, and generally by every practical means to promote peace and goodwill among all mankind." ²

Sentiment for Peace was then strong in America. An issue of the Journal of Education from 1910 suggested several activities for Peace Day: "Sing both 'Yankee Doodle' and 'Dixie.' This is a good peace promotion. It will be especially good to sing 'The Wearing of the Green' and some popular German song. Let the day be one of real peace purpose and sentiment."³ In 1912 David Starr Jordan, president of Stanford University and the California branch of World Peace Federation, wrote to San Francisco schools superintendent Alfred Roncovieri.

"It is hoped that the schools of the county will observe Peace day by

¹ The 1904–1905 Russo-Japanese War ended September 5, 1905 with the Treaty of Portsmouth. U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt won a Nobel Peace Prize for brokering it.

² Robert I. Rotberg, *A Leadership for Peace: How Edwin Ginn Tried to Change the World*, Stanford University Press, 2007

³ *Journal of Education*, Mar 31, 1910

instituting into the minds of the pupils the broad idea of eternal goodwill by teaching the facts and principles of the two Hague Peace conferences. Such exercises might profitably include brief accounts of the settlement of recent international disputes by arbitration, together with quotations, readings, and recitations concerning peace.”⁴ Superintendent Roncovieri noted, “The observance affords the opportunity of impressing the reasons [*for*] the grand results and blessings of international peace, as well as the necessity for patriotism as expressed in charity and good will among ourselves.”⁵

In 1912 California’s legislature proposed Peace Day, but did not mandate it in the schools. The Bakersfield Morning Echo wrote, “State Superintendent of Schools Hyatt will probably send out circular letters to county and city superintendents calling their attention to the date.”⁶

The idea of Peace Day grew. The Bakersfield Morning Echo wrote in 1913, “Indications are that its observance this year will be extended in [*the*] thousands ...” No evidence was found that Peace Day was observed, but schools in Seattle observed—leaving out any that referred to war. Sidestepped were Our Army and Navy Forever; Columbia, Gem of the Ocean; Battle Hymn of the Republic; and Star Spangled Banner.⁷ The songs recommended were Angel of Peace, Thou Hast Wandered Too Long, It Came Upon the Midnight Clear, Peace On The Earth, and America.⁸

On May 18, 1914, in Bakersfield, Washington Elementary School Principal Cora Bender led her school in observance of Peace Day.⁹ A month after that, war was declared in Europe.

In January 1915 American social activist Jane Addams directed a woman's peace conference in Washington, D.C. Its 3000 delegates created the Women's Peace Party, and Addams urged the “mother-half of humanity” to act

⁴ San Francisco Call, May 14, 1912

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Morning Echo, May 10, 1912

⁷ San Francisco Call, May 15, 1913

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Bakersfield Californian, May 16, 1914

against war.¹⁰ Specifically, party's platform opposed U.S. militarism, called for the international reduction of armaments, and encouraged neutral nations assist "continuous mediation."

In February 1915 German U-boats around Great Britain attacked passenger vessels flying the flags of neutral nations. A month later the unarmed British passenger ship HMS Falaba was sunk and more than 100 civilians perished. Two months after that, in April and May of 1915, the German army discharged more than 150 tons of chlorine gas on French divisions dug in at Ypres.¹¹

Those attacks were ongoing in April 28 when forty-seven women from U.S. Peace organizations traveled to The Hague for the International Congress of Women where they joined more than 1000 delegates from a dozen other nations. They called for international disarmament, freedom of the seas, and mediation of the ongoing war by neutral nations.

On May 7, 1915 U-20 attacked the British passenger ship Lusitania, and 1198 passengers died, including 128 Americans. President Woodrow Wilson responded that the U.S. would "preserve the world's respect by abstaining from any course of action likely to awaken the hostility of either side in the war and so to keep the United States free to undertake the part of peacemaker."¹² Most Americas agreed with Wilson.

In May 1915 California State Superintendent of Schools Edward H. Hyatt proclaimed May 18th Peace Day, and shortly after that Superintendent of Bakersfield Schools D. W. Nelson announced that city schools would observe it.¹³ The Bakersfield Californian wrote, "Peace Day will be celebrated by Kern county schools on May 18 in accordance with a country-wide movement which has been taken up in California by the Department of Education. Appropriate

¹⁰ The Eagle and the Dove, The American Peace Movement And United States Foreign Policy 1900-1922, 2nd ed, John Whiteclay Chambers II, editor. Syracuse University Press, 1991

¹¹ Future U.S. President Harry S Truman was captain of a field artillery unit that fired poison gas against the Germans in 1918. Detonated were nearly 13 tons of military high explosives in the Falaba's cargo hold.

¹² The Guardian (England), May 10, 1915

¹³ Morning Echo, May 4, 1915. "May 18 Peace Day In California Schools"; Bakersfield Californian, May 6, 1915. It was observed on the last day of the school year.

programs will be presented in the various districts."¹⁴

In an open letter to fellow citizens, former president William Howard Taft wrote, "The purpose of this observance has been to instill into the minds of young people the great laws of human brotherhood, to point out the historical significance of the progressive measures making for World Peace, as adopted by the two Hague conferences, and to emphasize the American idea of peace through justice The spectacle of human suffering and devastation should fire every boy and girl with a permanent revulsion against war, and the thought should be ingrained that war can be eliminated by the will of the people."¹⁵

In June 1915 Hurlbut Post, No. 127 and the Women's Relief Corps¹⁶ coordinated Bakersfield's observance Peace and Arbitration Day. The flag chosen was the Stars and Stripes with a broad white cloth band emblazoned Peace.

Alfred Harrell's Californian wrote, "May 18th [1915] is now an easily remembered date, requiring no especial reminder of its significance as the day devoted to peace and arbitration; but this year it makes a stronger appeal than ever before to the heart and conscience of our nation. While there are those who decry the entire peace movement at this time as a harping upon "peace when there is no peace," the best thought of the day is centered upon it, and the keenest intellects are studying the way to attain the much desired conclusion. In view of the events now transpiring across the sea, it seems incredible that war should be advocated by someone accustomed to look beneath the surface of things or who is interested in the future welfare of the nations or of the human race. For generations to come, posterity must pay the price, not alone in treasure, but in depleted efficiency and enfeebled manhood and womanhood. The phrase often quoted, 'the survival of the fittest,' does not apply in warfare, which devours remorselessly the finest specimens of the race, who are brought to perfection by training and discipline to become a 'shining mark' for the Grim

¹⁴ Bakersfield Californian, May 10, 1915

¹⁵ Bakersfield Californian, May 10, 1915

¹⁶ Hurlbut Post, No. 127, Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) was a fraternal organization of Civil War and Spanish American War veterans of Kern County. The Women's Relief Corp No. 115 was an auxiliary of the GAR.

Reaper of battleships, or, escaping death, to live through years of physical agony for which there is no adequate compensation. Stripped of romance and personal adulation, the folly and actual imbecility of the present carnage stands stark and grim against the desolation of lands and of people whom God intended for happiness and prosperity. Let every heart and every mind be opened wide to absorb the lessons of Peace and Arbitration Day, and alert to apply them when the opportunity shall appear, as in the natural course of events it must, in the not distant future."¹⁷

Two days later in Los Angeles, 60,000 school children observed Peace and Arbitration Day with singing and speeches stressing the uselessness of war and its slaughter and destruction.¹⁸ At Conley School in Taft the observation opened with the singing of America, followed by a poem set to music and called The Vacant Chair.¹⁹ At Lowell School in Bakersfield, the “essential points of the Peace Day program” were observed.²⁰

German submarine attacks, Pancho Villa’s incursion into Columbus, New Mexico, and horror stories from Europe were signs that Americans would be at war. In June 1916 Congress passed the National Defense Act that expand the Army and National Guard and created the Officers and Enlisted Reserve Corps and the Reserve Officers Training Corps. President Wilson was given authority to federalize the state National Guards. The U.S. government signed contracts for war material.²¹

Flag Day was held on June 15, 1916 at Beale Park’s Greek Theater, and 2000 residents attended. The Morning Echo wrote, “Rising behind the columns of the stage, the moon added its luster in the artificial lighting as the azure sky dimmed its stars that the banner of America’s freedom might the more wonderfully wave its star-hung folds in patriotic brilliance. Around the boundaries of the theatre in the dusk of the shaded lawn, groups of men, women and

¹⁷ Bakersfield Californian, May 15, 1915

¹⁸ Bakersfield Californian, May 18, 1915

¹⁹ Bakersfield Californian, May 20, 1915. Probably the poem by Henry Stevenson Washburn (1813 - 1903) and music by George F. Root (1820-1895)

²⁰ Morning Echo, May 21, 1915

²¹ The Act authorized construction of two nitrate-manufacturing plants, an industrial village, and a dam to provide hydro power.

children who could not find seats in the theatre listened to the program whose every tone of speech and song carried perfectly in the stillness of the night.” The orator was the Hon. William H. Owens of Fresno who advised the crowd, “I do not know whether we need a standing army of 400000 or 4000, but let us find that out and then have it. We can afford to have what we need. We do not want ‘Peace at any price,’ but we are willing to pay very, very liberally to get it.”²²

On April 6, 1917 the United States declared war on Germany. Days later San Francisco’s board of education “abrogated its own rule” approving Peace Day”, and it wrote, “the Constitution of the United States overrode any rules the board might make.”²³ Peace Day was not again observed in Bakersfield. There were residents who opposed the war, but after April 6, 1917 anti-war talk was increasingly considered as un-American, and citizens were encouraged to report incidents to the F.B.I. Members of the American Protective League were private citizens that worked with Federal law enforcement agencies during the WW I era to identify suspected German sympathizers and to counteract the activities of radicals, anarchists, anti-war activists, and left-wing labor and political organizations. At its zenith the APL claimed 250,000 members in 600 cities. Bakersfield was one.

²² Morning Echo, Jun 15, 1916, “Impressive Flag Day Celebration”

²³ Bakersfield Californian, Apr 17, 1917 (San Francisco wire, Apr 17)