

This Day in History... November 9, 1918

Moina Michael's Poppy Campaign

On November 9, 1918, Moina Michael penned her poem, "We Shall Keep the Faith," and resolved to wear a red poppy every day in remembrance of the fallen. She became known as the "Poppy Lady."

Moina Michael was born on August 15, 1869, in Good Hope, Georgia. She began teaching in 1885 and also studied at Columbia University in New York City in 1912.

Michael visited Europe in 1914 and was in Germany when the war broke out in August. She made her way to Rome, where she helped 12,000 US tourists gain passage back to America and returned herself. Back in the US, she returned to teaching for a time but took a leave of absence after the US entered the war to volunteer at the training headquarters for YWCA workers.

On November 9, 1918, Michael was on duty at the 25th Conference of the Overseas YMCA at Columbia University. At 10:30 that morning, she found a copy of the November *Ladies Home Journal* and looked through it. The magazine reprinted John McCrae's poem, "We Shall Not Sleep," later named "In Flanders Fields." Michael had read the poem several times before, but this time it was accompanied by a graphic color illustration that, paired with the poem's lines, provoked a spiritual experience for her.

Michael was especially moved by the poem's final lines, "To you from failing hands we throw the Torch; be yours to hold it high. If ye break faith with us who die we shall not sleep, though poppies grow in Flanders Fields." Contemplating this line, Michael pledged that she would wear a red poppy every day in remembrance, "keeping the faith with all who died." Michael then reached for a piece of paper to write down her pledge and grabbed a used yellow envelope. On the back, she penned her pledge, the poem, "We Shall Keep the Faith."

Moments later, three men from the conference appeared at Michael's desk and gave her \$10 in appreciation of her efforts with the YMCA. Michael looked up and them and replied, "How strange. I shall buy red poppies – twenty-five red poppies. I shall always wear red poppies – poppies of Flanders Fields! Do you know why?" She then showed them McCrae's poem and they were intrigued. They asked to take the poem back to their conference to share her idea with the other members. The attendees were impressed with her idea and the men returned to her asking for red poppies to wear.



Poppy stamp from the Beautiful Blooms issue.

Michael didn't have any poppies, so she went into town to search. It took a while, but she eventually found some artificial poppies in a shop. When she told the shop girl why she was looking for them, the girl replied that her brother was sleeping among the poppies. Michael knew that her idea to honor the fallen with poppies was the right choice. She returned to the headquarters and handed out all the poppies she got that night. Since they had given her that \$10 earlier in the day, she considered this to be the first sale of the Flanders Fields Memorial Poppy.

Michael returned to teaching at the University of Georgia shortly after the war ended. There she taught a class of disabled servicemen. She soon realized that they needed financial and occupational support and developed the idea of selling silk poppies to raise funds for them. In 1920, the American Legion Auxiliary adopted the poppy as a symbol of remembrance. In 1924 they created the American Legion Auxiliary Poppy Program to raise money for injured veterans. Soon, several other organizations adopted the poppy as their emblems. For her part, Michael became known as the "Poppy Lady," and received several awards for her efforts. She died on May 10, 1944, the same year a Liberty Ship was named in her honor.



The Moina Michael stamp was issued on this day in 1948.

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