

The Poppy Lady

Moina Belle Michael wanted soldiers to have a symbol for their sacrifices.

By Barbara Elizabeth Walsh
Art by Hadley Hooper

One afternoon in November 1918, Moina Belle Michael hurried through the streets of New York. She wore a bright, red silk poppy on her coat collar and carried a bouquet of 24 smaller poppies. World War I was raging overseas, and Moina was determined to do her part.

Maybe the red flower would remind people of the American soldiers fighting in Europe and the sacrifices many had made.

Moina was a teacher at the University of Georgia when war first broke out. Friends, neighbors, and students had gone overseas to fight. Moina planned to do more than knit socks or sweaters, or roll bandages for the Red Cross. She wanted to encourage the soldiers before they left for war.

Volunteering for the War

Moina traveled to New York City to care for soldiers at the YMCA headquarters at Columbia University. There was nothing she enjoyed more than sitting

and chatting with the soldiers. She looked at photographs of their families and sweethearts and listened to their hometown news. She bought fresh flowers to brighten the room when the weather outside turned dreary.

Earlier that November morning, one of the soldiers had left a copy of *Ladies' Home Journal* on Moina's desk. She turned to the marked page of the magazine and found a well-known poem, which began, "In Flanders fields the poppies blow / Between the crosses, row on row . . ."

Moina had read the poem before. She knew that Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae, a Canadian physician, wrote it while treating

soldiers on the battlefields of Flanders in Belgium.

Remembering the Soldiers

Lieutenant Colonel McCrae's poem, remembering those men, always touched her. But that morning, Moina was struck by the last verse and accompanying illustration. Soldiers with sad eyes stared at a battleground blanketed in white crosses and bright red poppies. The soldiers seemed to speak to her. "Remember us," they asked.

Moina thought about her soldiers at the Y. How they had left their families and homes to protect the freedom she enjoyed each day. To Moina, they were heroes.

Silently, she made a promise. She would always wear a red



After the end of World War I, Moina Belle Michael poses with soldiers on a ferryboat.

In the United States, people wear red poppies on Memorial Day and Veterans Day.

poppy to remember the soldiers. She wrote her promise in a poem.

Just then, three YMCA war workers stopped by her desk with a check for \$10. They thanked her for all she did to brighten the room.

There was no doubt about what Moina would do with the money. "I shall buy red poppies," she told them.

Creating a Symbol

Moina showed them Lieutenant Colonel McCrae's poem and her

poem. Word spread quickly. Before long, everyone wanted to wear a red poppy.

It wasn't easy finding silk poppies on the streets of New York, but Moina was successful. Hurrying back to the Y, she handed them out. She dreamed of the day when every American would wear a poppy to remember the soldiers.

Two days later, World War I ended and Moina returned to her students in Georgia. True to her promise, she wrote letters to leaders around the country, suggesting they adopt the poppy


as a national memorial symbol.

But, as she taught returning servicemen, Moina soon realized another purpose for the small flower. Many of the servicemen had no jobs. No money. Some were wounded or too ill to work. Maybe the poppy could also help the veterans and their families.

Her hard work paid off. In 1921, the American Legion Auxiliary adopted the Poppy of Flanders Fields as its memorial flower. Other national and international veterans organizations followed. Disabled veterans who were members of the patriotic groups made crepe-paper poppies, offering them for donations. Pennies, nickels, and dimes poured in.

During the years that followed, the poppies raised millions of dollars in the United States and England to benefit veterans, war widows, and orphans, and the flowers reminded people of soldiers everywhere. To Moina's delight, the message of the poppies spread to 50 other countries. At last, her dream of helping soldiers was coming true.

For the rest of her life, Moina Belle Michael was known as the "Poppy Lady." She received citations, awards, and words of praise from around the world. But the Georgia schoolteacher did not feel like a hero.

"What I did, and am doing is no more than any other person would have done," Moina insisted. "I only thought of it first." 

And now the Torch and Poppy red
We wear in honor of our dead.
Fear not that ye have died for naught;
We'll teach the lesson that ye wrought
In Flanders Fields.

— from a poem by Moina Belle Michael

Learn how to make your own Veterans Day Poppy craft on page 29.

