

G'Burg

Memorial Day One Of The Oldest

If you've wondered about the local tradition of children walking in the Memorial Day Parade and scattering flowers on the graves of soldiers buried there, James Cole, executive director of the Gettysburg Travel Council, has come up with the answer.

Cole, in a news release from the council, says the local event is one of the oldest Memorial Day traditions in America.

"Although the Memorial Day tradition first began in Waterloo, N.Y., in 1866, nowhere is the observance more historic or more personally touching than at Gettysburg. For here, in 1867, an observance began that developed out of a tragic incident from the Battle of Gettysburg," the release says.

"On July 1, 1863, as the Confederate army of Robert E. Lee was successfully driving the Union forces of General George Meade through the streets of Gettysburg, one Union army sergeant who was engaged in a rear-guard action was mortally wounded in the town.

As the dying soldier felt his life slipping away, he removed an ambrotype photograph from his coat pocket. Knowing that he would soon expire he clutched the little frame that held the pictured faces of his three children. He knew that they were about to become orphans and he spent his last moments thinking of their mother who soon would be left to widowhood. Then, he quietly died.

Following the battle, the unidentified soldier was found with his hand still clutching the blood-stained photograph of the children. No other incident of the battle so touched the heart of the nation. For months following the battle, the soldier's name and the location of his home remained a mystery.

Finally, a Philadelphia doctor, J. Francis Bourne had the ambrotype

copied and began its circulation in newspapers and magazines throughout the country. He hoped that this would lead to the discovery of the family and the identification of the unknown soldier. Finally, in November of 1863 the search came to an end when a copy of the American Presbyterian, a religious newspaper, reached the home of a soldier's wife at the little town of Portville in Western New York. The soldier's wife learned that she was a widow and her little ones were now orphans.

The unknown soldier was identified as Sergeant Amos Humiston of the



THE HUMISTON CHILDREN

154th Regiment of New York Volunteers. The deceased sergeant, who fought with gallantry and who laid down his life for his country, was described by his neighbors as "a man of noble impulses, a quiet citizen, a kind neighbor and devotedly attached to his family."

On January 2, 1864, Dr. Bourne came to Portville and presented the original ambrotype to the bereaved family. The photograph was received as if it were a religious relic by Mrs. Humiston.

Dr. Bourne continued his interest in the family by raising funds for an orphanage through the sale of copies of the ambrotype. Finally, in 1866 the orphanage for the children of Civil War soldiers was established next to the Gettysburg National Cemetery. Mrs. Humiston and her three children, Frank, Frederick and Alice moved to Gettysburg and became some of the first of the 100 residents of the home.

In May of 1867, a tradition began that continues 114 years later: The orphans, in honor of their fathers who died in battle, began an annual parade to the National Cemetery to place fresh flowers upon their graves; including, of course, the orphans of Sergeant Humiston who, each year, would walk to the New York section, Row B, to Grave 14, and to the inscription, Sergeant Amos Humiston, New York Volunteers.

The story of Sergeant Humiston remains as one of the most touching vignettes of the history of Gettysburg because the attachment of this sergeant to his children became not only the

means of his own identity, but also the vehicle for the care of his own children, and the beginning of an American Memorial Day tradition.

Today, over 100 years later that

tradition continues with the children parading through the streets of the town to the Cemetery, and the time honored tradition of honoring "those who here gave their lives that the Nation might live." That Gettysburg

tradition, of a formal ceremony of placing flowers upon the graves and accompanied by the musical strains of "Safe in the Arms of Jesus," remains as a stirring and deeply moving experience."