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Peace Day 1915

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In May 1915 Superintendent of Schools D. W. Nelson announced that all Bakersfield schools would celebrate Peace Day. Historically, Bakersfield was late in observing it, and the year 1915 was the only time it did.

With the war with Spain ended, average Americans were ready for peace,¹ and in 1905 when Theodor Roosevelt brokered the peace between Japan and Russia it was widely believed that reason could triumph over war. Americans showed growing support for the peace movements that condemned war and the companies that profited from war. In general, Bakersfield and the rest of the county were similarly disposed.

In 1910 the Journal of Education offered the following activity for celebrating peace and harmony: "Sing both 'Yankee Doodle' and 'Dixie.' This is a good peace promotion. It [*also*] 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."² The voice of the progressive movement promised that people and society were perfectible via education and

¹ The Spanish–American War of 1895 gave the US control of Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippine Islands.

² Journal of Education, Mar 31, 1910

government, and Bakersfield believed it.³

In 1912 David Starr Jordan, who was president of Stanford University and a leader in the World Peace Federation's California branch, wrote to school superintendent Alfred Roncovieri of San Francisco,

"It is hoped that the schools of the county will observe Peace day by 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,⁴ together with quotations, readings, and recitations concerning peace."⁵ 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."⁶

That year California State Superintendent of Schools Edward Hyatt mailed notices to county and city superintendents throughout the state to call their attention to Peace Day. Observance was not required, but some California schools did observe the day. Sentiment for Peace Day grew nationally.⁷

In 1913 a Bakersfield newspaper wrote, "Indications are that its observance this year will be extended in [*the*] thousands."⁸ Although Peace Day was not observed here that year, it was in Seattle schools, where references to war were absent from the peace programs. Songs omitted were *Our Army and Navy Forever*, *Columbia the Gem of the Ocean*, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, and the *Star Spangled Banner*.⁹ Instead of them, programs featured *Angel of Peace*, *Thou Hast Wandered Too Long*, *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear*,

³ An example of this from Bakersfield of the time is *Mme. Brignaudy in the Bakersfield Tenderloin, 1905-33* at <https://www.historicbakersfieldandkerncounty.com/crime>

⁴ The 1904–1905 Russo-Japanese War ended on September 5, 1905 with the Treaty of Portsmouth. President Theodore Roosevelt won a Nobel Peace Prize for brokering it.

⁵ San Francisco Call, May 14, 1912

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Morning Echo, May 10, 1912 (Sacramento wire, May 9)

⁸ Bakersfield Morning Echo, May 4, 1913

⁹ San Francisco Call, May 15, 1913 (Seattle wire, May 14),

Peace On The Earth, and America The Beautiful.¹⁰

At Washington Elementary School in Bakersfield, in May 1914, Principal Cora Bender led her pupils in an observance of Peace Day.¹¹ Bender's program was the first in city schools to observe it. In two months Europe was at war.

In January of 1915 American activist Jane Addams led a women's peace conference in Washington, D.C., and the 3000 in attendance created the Women's Peace Party and elected Addams as chair. In her initial address she urged the "mother-half of humanity" to make all efforts to end the war. The Women's Peace Party platform was broad, and significant passages opposed U.S. militarism and the proliferation of armaments. The platform urged neutral nations to immediately involve the combatant nations in "continuous mediation".¹² Bakersfield newspapers reported it.

In February 1915 in the seas surrounding Great Britain, German submarines attacked the passenger ships of neutral nations. That March, 104 civilians died when the unarmed British passenger ship HMS Falaba was torpedoed.¹³ At Ypres, France, in April and May of 1915, the German Army released 150 tons of chlorine gas on French units.¹⁴

A month after the gas attacks forty-seven women representing US peace organizations traveled to The Hague to attend the International Congress of Women and joined more than 1000 representatives from nearly a dozen nations. The International congress called for disarmament, freedom of the seas, and mediation of the war. Bakersfield newspapers also carried stories about this congress.

On May 7, 1915, German submarine U-20 torpedoed the British passenger

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Bakersfield Californian, May 16, 1914

¹² 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

¹³ Detonated were nearly 13 tons of high explosives in the *Falaba's* cargo.

¹⁴ Future U.S. President Harry S Truman was captain of a field artillery unit that fired poison gas against the Germans in 1918.

liner Lusitania. One hundred twenty-eight Americans were among the 1198 killed. A few days later President Woodrow Wilson announced that America 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."¹⁵ War for Americans seemed closer than ever.

About this same time California State Superintendent of Schools Edward H. Hyatt proclaimed May 18 as Peace Day,¹⁶ and days later Superintendent of Bakersfield Schools D. W. Nelson announced that schools would observe it.¹⁷ The Bakersfield Californian advised, "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 programs will be presented in the various districts."¹⁸ The peace movement had major support and swept the county.

Ex-President William Howard Taft in an open letter to the nation 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."¹⁹

Alfred Harrell, editor of the Bakersfield Californian, described the exceptional need for Peace Day.

"May 18th 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

¹⁵ The Guardian (London), May 10, 1915

¹⁶ Morning Echo, May 4, 1915, "May 18 Peace Day In California Schools"

¹⁷ Bakersfield Californian, May 6, 1915. Peace Day was observed in Bakersfield city schools on May 21, which was the last day of the school year.

¹⁸ Bakersfield Californian, May 10, 1915

¹⁹ Ibid. Taft was U.S. President 1909–1913. He served as Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, 1921–1930.

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 Reaper of battleships, or, escaping death, to live through years of physical agony for which there is no adequate compensation."²⁰

Harrell continued, "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."²¹

Peace Day organization in Bakersfield was the job of Hurlbut Post, No. 127 and the Women's Relief Corps,²² but the actual date was advanced to match the conclusion of the school year.²³ And because Europe was at war, Peace Day was renamed Peace and Arbitration Day. The special peace flag that flew in Bakersfield was the Stars and Stripes with an attached, white band above emblazoned with the word Peace.

²⁰ Bakersfield Californian, May 15, 1915

²¹ Ibid.

²² Hurlbut Post, No. 127, Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) was a fraternal organization of Civil War and Spanish American War veterans living in Kern County. The Women's Relief Corp, No. 115 was a branch of the WRC, a national, charitable and patriotic organization and an auxiliary of the GAR.

²³ Bakersfield Californian, May 15, 1915.

The ceremony opened with a prayer followed by a song and speeches. After was a reading of the *Arsenal at Springfield*, then the Flag Salute, and then a song entitled *Angel of Peace*. The poem *Fatherland* was read,²⁴ and the program ended with singing God Bless America.

On May 18 in Los Angeles, 60000 children observed Peace and Arbitration Day with songs and speeches that emphasized the slaughter and destruction of war.²⁵ In Taft, California the observation at Conley School began with the entire school singing *America* followed by a poem called the Vacant Chair.²⁶ At Lowell School in Bakersfield the "essential points of the Peace Day program" were observed by all classes.²⁷

Ongoing German attacks on American shipping, the incursion of Pancho Villa into Columbus, New Mexico, and the horror stories from Europe told Americans that war was coming.²⁸ In the summer of 1916 Congress passed the National Defense Act which expanded the Army and National Guard and created the Officers and Enlisted Reserve Corps and Reserve Officers Training Corps. Congress gave President Wilson the right to federalize the National Guard, and the Government contracted for the production of war materials.²⁹ War was in the air, and Peace and Arbitration Day had evaporated.

²⁴ *Fatherland* was probably the poem by Sir Henry Parkes.

²⁵ Bakersfield Californian, May 18, 1915 (Los Angeles wire, May 18)

²⁶ Bakersfield Californian, May 20, 1915. The poem *Fatherland* was written by Henry Stevenson Washburn, 1813 – 1903 and was set to music by George F. Root, 1820-1895. An excerpt from the poem: "How he strove to bear the banner, Thro' the thickest of the fight, And uphold our country's honor, In the strength of manhood's might."

²⁷ Morning Echo, May 21, 1915

²⁸ See Heribert von Fleilitzsch's *The Secret War on the United States in 1915, a Tale of Sabotage, Labor Unrest, and Border Troubles*, (2015), ISBN 2014912991

²⁹ The National Defense Act authorized construction of two nitrate-manufacturing plants, an industrial village, and a complex to produce hydro-electric power for the plant.



Greek Theater at Beale Park

On the evening of June 15, 1916 a Flag Day ceremony was held in the Greek Theater at Beale Park. How was the attendance? The town's population was 16000, and 2000 crowded into the park. The Morning Echo wrote, "Rising behind the columns of the stage, the moon added its lustre 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 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." Orator of the evening was the Hon. William H. Owens of Fresno. He 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."³⁰

On April 6, 1917 the U.S. declared war on Germany.³¹ A few days later the San Francisco board of education "abrogated its own rule proving for celebration of Peace Day" when it told a committee of women who proposed observing Peace Day that "the Constitution of the United States overrode any rules the board might make."³²

³⁰ Morning Echo, Jun 15, 1916, "Impressive Flag Day Celebration"

³¹ On April 2, 1917 President Woodrow Wilson urged Congress for a declaration of war on Germany. He cited Germany's violation of its pledge to suspend unrestricted submarine warfare in the Mediterranean and North Atlantic and Germany's attempts to entice Mexico into an alliance against the United States.

³² Bakersfield Californian, Apr 17, 1917 (San Francisco wire, Apr 17)



In 1914 Principal Cora Bender had lead Washington School in observance of Peace Day, and in 1915 most Kern County residents felt strongly enough to observe it too. But after war came to America there is no evidence that Peace Day was ever observed in Bakersfield again. Besides, after war was declared, those questioning it were considered dangerously un-American.³³

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³³ See Gilbert P. Gia, *Sedition in Bakersfield, 1918* at <https://www.historicbakersfieldandkerncounty.com/civil-rights>