

The Holiday That Almost Wasn't

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Leigh Eric Schmidt writes in her fascinating little book, *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays*, “The success of Mother’s Day was an inspiration.” (Mother’s Day was first celebrated as a recognized American holiday in 1908 after Anna Jarvis led a national campaign. Later Jarvis campaigned against the holiday claiming it had become too commercial!) In 1910 Sonora Dodd promoted the idea of Father’s Day among churches in Spokane, Washington. It only seemed fitting to honor Dads as well as Moms. Father’s Day was celebrated first at the local YMCA, but people were opposed to Father’s Day on two counts. First, it was too feminine. For Mother’s Day people were encouraged to wear carnations. For Father’s Day they were told to wear red roses.

It took some strong sermons to make Father’s Day masculine. One of the first was by a Presbyterian, Conrad Bluhm who titled his sermon, “The Knight That Never Retreats.” Fathers were “rugged, husky, [and] stalwart.” He went on, “It was Father’s Day when Abraham left Ur of the Chaldees. It was Father’s Day when Noah built the ark. It was Father’s Day when Christ chose the Twelve... The Bible is a man’s book and its lessons are his life-task.” Bluhm continued, “The word Father is found in the Bible 1650 times;

mother but 311 times. It is a Father’s book!”

Father’s Day may have become more manly, but people were also tired of commercialism and it seemed like Father’s Day was just another ploy by retailers to sell pipes, socks and neckties so by the 1920s the fire of Father’s Day had nearly gone out - even in Spokane. Schmidt observes, “Father’s Day exchanges appeared as a kind of practical joke; Dad was bewildered by the attention or even somehow duped by these tokens of affection (some of which were clearly purchased more with the giver than the receiver in mind). Also, and this was a source of popular satire, Dad was seen as the one who, in the end, would have to pay for all these gadgets and trinkets. The bills for Father’s Day gifts were viewed as circling back to him, so that he was made to pay, quite literally, for his own undoing”

No wonder then it took so long for Father’s Day to be recognized as a national holiday. The first bill was introduced in congress in 1913. Woodrow Wilson went to Spokane to speak for Father’s Day in Spokane in 1916. Calvin Coolidge recommended it in 1924. The bill was defeated three times in congress. (The last one was rejected in 1957.) In 1966 Lyndon Johnson proclaimed the third Sunday in June as Father’s Day, but it wasn’t until Richard Nixon signed it into law in 1972 that Father’s Day became a national holiday.

Of course God was way ahead of congress and told us to “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.” (Exodus 20:12) As Paul observed, this is the first commandment with a promise. Happy Father’s Day Dad!



My father, John L. McKeel