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Decoration Days and Memorial Days

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Abstract

By the time he came to Adams County in 1909, John Esch had been a Wisconsin representative to the U.S. House of Representatives for two decades. But today was not just any ordinary day in the life of a congressman. Esch came to speak in the Soldiers' National Cemetery; it was Memorial Day. "Except for the difference in the number here," the Gettysburg Times noted after a note on shrinking attendance, "Memorial Day 1909 was little difference from those of former years." (*excerpt*)

Keywords

Adams County, John Esch, Soldiers' National Cemetery, Helen Taft, Memorial Day, Civil War, Decoration Day

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Comments

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By the time he came to Adams County in 1909, John Esch had been a Wisconsin representative to the U.S. House of Representatives for two decades. But today was not just any ordinary day in the life of a congressman. Esch came to speak in the Soldiers' National Cemetery; it was Memorial Day. "Except for the difference in the number of people here," the Gettysburg Times noted after a note on shrinking attendance, "Memorial Day 1909 was little different from those of former years." Memorial Day was now routine, where once it was novel, fresh and deeply meaningful. The tradition was now 41 years old; Gettysburg's first Memorial Day was held in 1868.

Other, more exciting things for locals were happening in Gettysburg that May. The new great wonder in the county was the Gettysburg Ice and Storage Plant along North Washington Street at the railroad tracks. Just a week before Esch came to town, the plant held an open house for local citizens to marvel at the wonder of electrically-powered cooling equipment. "Sixteen hundred plates of delicious ice cream were eaten by over one thousand people from Gettysburg and all parts of Adams County," the Times reported. And the ice company knew how to throw a party. "Every visitor was given all the ice cream that he could eat," the Times smiled, "and many took advantage of the opportunity to give the palatable dessert a thorough inspection."

Without ice cream or brand new machinery at his disposal, Congressman John Esch still tried hard to make Memorial Day less than routine. And indeed, the topic he chose to speak on was revolutionary for the historical moment. "We would not only take to heart," the congressman urged, the lessons taught by the dead American soldiers men who fought to preserve the nation, "but also hold fast to the fruits of the irrepressible conflict."

The Civil War had brought a major

HISTORICALLY SPEAKING

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victory to America: voting rights. I have no sympathy for the demand in these later days for the repeal of the Fifteenth Amendment," Esch boldly proclaimed, knowingly adding that, "The right of suffrage the only protection the negro race had against oppressive legislation or private persecution." The right of everyone to vote was eroding. "The revision of the constitution of any state through grandfather clauses, or other artful devices, to nullify by indirection the Fifteenth Amendment," the congressman told the humble crowd gathered in Gettysburg, "should meet the censure of every loyal citizen."

Congressman Esch's speech – and the size of his crowd – was also overshadowed by alternate ceremonies planned for the following Monday: the dedication of the U.S. Regulars monument on the battlefield. President William Howard Taft would visit and, more exciting for many locals, so would his wife Helen Taft. The nation was waiting to see how the President's wife was recovering from a stroke earlier in the month. Gettysburg was her first public appearance.

Taft's address to the crowd contained little. In just under 200 words, the President did little more than list the combat history of the U.S. Army in broad strokes. Following the President, Secretary of War Dickinson tried to point to the war's meaning. "With one mind and heart the people of this great country," Dickinson claimed, Americans were moving forward, "looking to

the future with no rivalry, but in generous patriotism, and cherishing no hate, but only the glorious memories of this bloody field." And to those who spoke otherwise? They barely existed. "At this day there are but few, if any, dispassionate thinkers in the North who question the patriotism of those of the South who on this stricken field gave an example of American valor that will forever thrill the minds and hearts of mankind in all countries and in all ages."

A few days before Taft and Dickinson visited Gettysburg, Esch gave his speech. Certainly he was one of those few dispassionate thinkers. Americans, he conceded, had come back together as one nation. "The hand once raised in fratricidal strife," the Congressman intoned, "now scatters flowers on a brother's grave." But before that note of reconciliation came Esch's warning. Those dead men in the cemetery, "teach us that the emancipation of a race of Four million bondsmen, and the guarantee to them through constitutional amendment of both civil and political rights was necessary for the future peace and happiness of a people." Speaking his view of the truth in words the crowd might not have been quite ready to hear, Esch was blunt: "It took the mightiest conflict of the ages to purge the Declaration of Independence of its hypocrisy."

Stories of Decoration Days and Memorial Days in Adams County's history live on in the files and folders of the Adams County Historical Society. From 1868 to today, our communities have been honoring the patriotic dead. And at ACHS, we catalog and preserve those moments of remembrance, from the well-attended and famous to the overshadowed and lost. They are all here in the "county's attic."

John M. Rudy is a volunteer researcher at the Adams County Historical Society in Gettysburg. More information can be found at achs-pa.org.