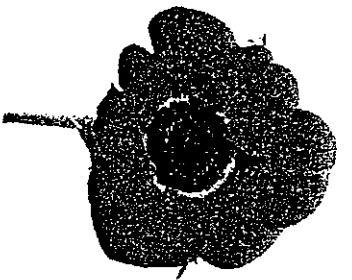


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MOINA MICHAEL

Poppy Lady

What does the poppy mean and who started it all?

The poignant symbol is due in large part to an amazing woman who exemplified the Auxiliary motto of Service Not Self.

BY DIANA LAZZELL

Well-mannered and well-off, Moira Michael was the tender age of 15 when she started her career as a teacher in her hometown of Good Hope, Ga., a town that could otherwise not afford a schoolteacher. Moira continued her successful career as a teacher in Georgia when she was caught overseas as World War I broke out in Europe. Although her vacation was interrupted, Moira helped thousands of stranded Americans book safe passage back to their homeland.

After America entered the war in 1917, Moira applied to volunteer with the YMCA Overseas War Workers, the only war effort that was open to a 48-year-old woman eager to contribute. She also gave a keepsake to each student who was deployed—her own private war effort. Moira traveled to New York City the following year to work at the YMCA Overseas Secretaries Training headquarters, with the hope of eventually being stationed overseas. She took a leave of absence from the University of Georgia in order to serve.

On Nov. 9, 1918, just before the Armistice, Moina was on duty at the annual YMCA Overseas Conference. While sitting, a little bored, in the room where servicemembers said their goodbyes to family members and loved ones, a soldier gave Moina a copy of magazine was a dog-eared page with the poem "We Shall Not Sleep" by Col. John McCrae, M.D., later renamed "In Flanders that magazine was a dog-Fields." The poem was written for a fellow soldier for whom McCrae had performed a burial

"IT SEEMED AS THOUGH THE SILENT VOICES AGAIN WERE VOCAL, WHISPERING, IN SIGHS OF ANXIETY UNTO ANGUISH...I PLEDGED TO KEEP THE FAITH AND ALWAYS TO WEAR A RED POPPY OF FLANDERS FIELDS AS A SIGN OF REMEMBRANCE AND THE EMBLEM OF KEEPING THE FAITH WITH ALL WHO DIED."

service. In it, the author notes the presence of blooming red poppies among rows of white crosses on the deserted battlefields of western Belgium and northern France. Moina was particularly struck by the last stanza:

*Take up our quarrel with the foe;
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.*

"This was, for me, a full spiritual experience," Moina wrote in her memoirs. "It seemed as though the silent voices again were vocal, whispering, in sighs of anxiety unto anguish...I pledged to KEEP THE FAITH and always to wear a red poppy of Flanders Fields as a sign of remembrance and the emblem of 'keeping the faith with all who died.'"

On the back of an envelope, Moina quickly wrote out her response to McCrae's verse, her own poem entitled, "We Shall Keep the Faith." The last stanza captures her idea to wear a poppy in honor of the war dead:

*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.*

After jotting down her poem, Moina excitedly declared, "I shall buy red poppies...I shall always wear red poppies....."
poppies of Flanders Fields!"

She showed "We Shall Not Sleep" to gentlemen at the conference and relayed her idea to them. The gentlemen were so excited about the idea that they gave her \$10 and asked for poppies to wear. Moina rushed out of the conference in search of the flowers. Finally she found a Wanamaker's department store that sold silk poppies and bought 25 to distribute to conference attendees.

"Since this is the first group to ask for poppies to wear in memory of soldier dead, and since this group gave me money with which to buy them, I have always considered that I, then and there, consummated the first sale of the Flanders Fields Memorial Poppy," Moina said.

Moina wore a poppy on her collar until she returned home to Georgia in 1919 and became known as the "Poppy Lady." She continued her teaching career by instructing a group of disabled veterans. She noted their need for financial and occupational assistance and lobbied The American Legion to have veterans assemble poppies for distribution. The poppy was made the official memorial flower of The American Legion in 1920 and the American Legion Auxiliary in 1921. The poppy program was made one of our national programs in 1924.