

## ARBOR DAY - FROM NEBRASKA TO NEW ZEALAND

PEOPLE of Nebraska are well acquainted with the fact that the Arbor Day movement was first promoted by J. Sterling Morton (1832-1902), editor of the Nebraska City News.

What they will not know is that 18 years later, in the distant South-west Pacific, a small town newspaper editor adopted Morton's idea, and in doing so brought Arbor Day to New Zealand.

Nebraska's J.S. Morton helped spread his idea to neighbouring states and eventually to all US states and many other nations. In fact New Zealand was a case in point for here the planting of trees finally became a national avocation.

Until Morton's time plains throughout the Omaha locality were substantially treeless. But in 1872, Nebraska State acted on his proposal. A proclamation urged settlers and homesteaders to plant trees for shade, shelter, fruit, and their ever changing beauty. On that first Arbor Day, in April 1872, more than 1 million trees were planted in Nebraska.

In June 1890, his New Zealand counterpart, Mr W.C. Nation, brought the idea to the attention of Greytown Borough Council in the Wairarapa, an extensive alluvial river valley at the lower end of New Zealand's rugged North Island.

Unlike Nebraska much of this country had been clothed in thick indigenous vegetation; a prolific mantle of dense and frequently impenetrable semi-tropical forest, commonly known as 'native bush.'

But since early European settlers arrived some 50 or 60 years before, increasingly large tracts of 'bush' had been felled. Then the land was 'tamed' and put under the plough for agricultural purposes.

It's interesting to note that Morton was sometime US Secretary of Agriculture and also Nebraska Territorial Secretary. And like so many early Wairarapa settlers he was both farmer and legislator. However his territory belonged within an extensive continent; not a group of oceanic islands.

Nation's original Arbor Day proposal was to simply plant ornamental and fruit trees on the roadside; and local councillors agreed. After all, there was no request for money. In addition trees would enhance the appearance of the fledgling town, for until that time nothing had been done to offset the effects of rampant forest clearing.

Nation may well have echoed Morton's words, "Other holidays repose upon the past, while Arbor Day proposes for the future."

Greytown Council formed a committee to put the plan into action without further delay. The minutes noted 'if it is worth doing, let us do it well and make the first Arbor Day an event to be long remembered by all who take part.'

Accounts of Greytown's first Arbor Day - Thursday 3rd July 1890 - tell us much about the local scene as it was in those pioneering days.

We know for instance that a local cartage firm lent four horse drays; each one decorated and designated for carrying the trees to their planting site.

When the great day came the Mayor, Mr.R.A.Wakelin and Borough Councillors presided, and a great procession of children from the school were in attendance.

Shops were closed and school pupils filed out, supervised by headmaster, Mr Bunting. Older boys held a 'Greytown School' banner while juniors carried flags which they waved excitedly.

Outside Greytown Post Office a local band assembled and it headed a colourful procession joined by the Mayor, councillors and chairmen of various local bodies.

Their route led to Greytown's southern approaches and as many as 800 local people turned out in force to line the road or to join the cavalcade. Local Maoris in traditional cloaks and skirts gave their own resplendence and majesty to the scene.

In preparation for the first Arbor Day workmen had dug 153 holes about 30 feet apart and these extended from North to South for almost a mile.

Mayor Wakelin climbed onto one of the drays and addressed the crowd; "We propose," he said, "as the seasons pass by, to plant trees on all the routes and by-roads of our little town and try to make it the most attractive community in the region."

Today, many visitors to the area, feel that aim of 114 years ago, has been realised.

As the ceremony continued mayors of nearby towns also spoke and a Mr Tenuiorangi addressed the gathering. Tenuiorangi was known to many settlers as 'Major Brown' and on that occasion he represented the Maori people.

"I think there should be a strong bond of unity between both races," he said."We will plant trees together and they will grow together. If the one I plant should wither, I will plant again and again, until the tree grows with the rest. My desire is to see children of both races trained and educated together so that there shall be no seperation in the future.

A Mr Mahupuku expressed his delight at taking part. He told of his good feeling at the mood established during two years in which Maoris had attended the Greytown Land Court. "I have a moki moki shrub in my hand," he declared finally, "and I wish to plant it beside the mayor's tree." Mr Mahupuku did as he had intended and the entire assembly joined in singing the British national anthem.

That night Greytown Palace Hall echoed to the revelry of an animated concourse as a local orchestra, Carterton Glee Club, instrumental soloists, and vocal performers provided the entertainment. Palace Hall had been built five years earlier and a narrow, two-inch thick circular floor was installed specifically for roller skating.

But early in the 20th Century, Palace Hall was destroyed by fire.

The final known witness to that 1st Arbor Day, a Mrs Constance Maxton, passed away in 1983, at the age of 93. Constance had been at the festive planting as a five-year-old, in the era of Queen Victoria.

Today the sole survivors are five of the original trees overshadowing the southern approach road from Wellington, some 50 miles beyond the mountains, to the south.

Though American Arbor Day celebrations are scheduled to coincide with the best tree planting time in each state, New Zealand's land area is far smaller and the official date is identical for each area. However there are significant climate and soil changes between regions and much of the planting may take place at other times.

In 1892 the New Zealand Government chose August 4th for Arbor Day and the day was declared a national holiday. This practice was discontinued during the First World War and not re-introduced until 1919. But by then it was no longer counted as a holiday.

In 1934 the first Wednesday of August was set aside as Arbor Day and finally, in 1977, June 5th was chosen so as to coincide with World Environment Day.

Today many people, especially those in rural localities, look upon Arbor Day as the symbolic start to their planting season.

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