

DUSTY ROADS®

STORIES OF

KEWANEE

PAST & PRESENT

Dean Karau

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Rufus P. Parrish

This morning while reading about various Memorial Day celebrations being planned in and around Minnesota, Kewanee popped into my mind. Here's why.

In Henry L. Kiner's 1910 book, *HISTORY OF HENRY COUNTY, ILLINOIS, VOL. I*, he wrote that in 1863, Kewaneean Rufus P. Parrish began a tradition of decorating military veterans' gravesites with flowers. Kiner said that in the same year, Parrish wrote to Union Gen. John A. Logan recommending that it become a national tradition. In 1868, Logan initiated what was then called Decoration Day. I've written stories about R. P.

Parrish, including repeating Kiner's assertion. You can find a link below.

Around Memorial Day (the name changed in the interim) in May 1903, an article found its way into over 100 Midwest newspapers attributing the motivation for the holiday to Parrish. But strangely, there was only one other article on that subject that I could find before then - Parrish's obituary in the Kewanee newspaper a month earlier, in April 1903.

Parrish's son, George Randall Parrish, had been released from prison a little while before his father's death. The younger Parrish had been convicted of various fraudulent acts a

ORIGIN OF MEMORIAL DAY.

Rufus P. Parrish of Kewanee Urged Commemoration of the Dead.

Memorial Day originated with a man who was recently followed to the grave at Kewanee, Ill., by one of the largest throngs of old soldiers that ever attended a funeral in a town of like size.

The name of this man was Rufus P. Parrish and it is admitted that a letter he wrote to Senator John A. Logan was chiefly instrumental in the action of Congress in establishing a day on which throughout the nation graves of the Union dead should be strewn with flowers and their brave acts commemorated.

It is a matter of history that the custom of decorating graves of soldiers was commenced in Kewanee in 1863, five years before Senator Logan secured the action of Congress appointing a memorial day. It is known here that Mr. Parrish, who had always taken the greatest interest in this observance, wrote an urgent letter to Senator Logan, urging him to take into serious consideration legislation that would set aside a day on which all could join in memorial services.

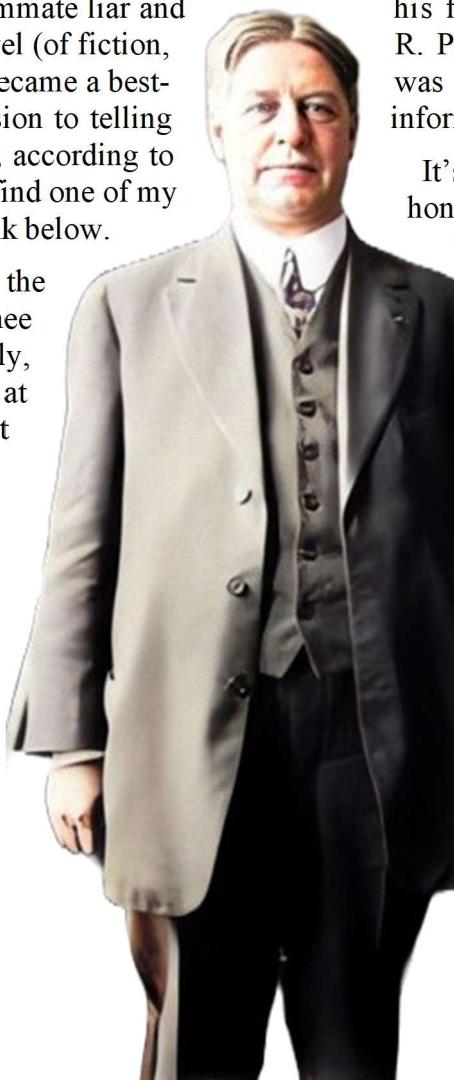
Aside from the interest that Mr. Parrish took in such patriotic movements he had a very interesting history. His grandfather on his mother's side carried a flint-lock musket in the Revolutionary War, and the father of his father was a recruiting officer in the war of 1812. He was one of fifteen men to organize the first Y. M. C. A. in the United States. During the war of the rebellion and before he was an outspoken abolitionist and figured prominently in underground railroad work by which slaves escaped to Canada. He was in the forefront of nearly every movement of enlightenment of the community serving to foster libraries and lectures.

Mr. Parrish was born in New Hampshire about eighty-seven years ago and came to Illinois in April, 1855. He is survived by his faithful wife, with whom he dwelt in wedlock for the unusual term of sixty-four years.

May 1903 story

few years earlier. He was a consummate liar and con-man. But in 1904, his first novel (of fiction, of course) was published, and he became a best-selling author. However, his aversion to telling the truth continued until his death, according to current family members. You can find one of my stories about G. R. Parrish at the link below.

The younger Parrish was in the process of returning to Kewanee when his father died. Undoubtedly, he would have been the source of at least some of the information about



George Randall Parrish

his father which appeared in the obituary. (G. R. Parrish was a friend of Kiner's and likely was also the source for any biographical information Kiner included in his later book.)

It's very odd that the elder Parrish's idea for honoring fallen soldiers was never reported until his death. Unless, of course, the younger Parrish concocted the story from whole cloth.

Just sayin.'

RUFUS PARKER PARRISH KEWANEE'S MAN OF BOOKS:<https://kewanee-history.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Rufus-P-Parrish.pdf>

THERE'S MORE TO THE STORY OF G. RANDALL PARRISH:<https://kewanee-history.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/George-Randall-Parrish.pdf>