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ARBOR DAY

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ARBOR DAY—A NEBRASKA CREATION

Michael Kuhns, Extension Forester

Arbor Day, the Tree Planter's Holiday, started more than a century ago in Nebraska and is still going strong today.

How did a prairie state, with few naturally occurring trees, become home to a worldwide celebration of the importance of trees? It all started when Julius Sterling Morton moved to Nebraska City in 1855. The area around his new home was described as a "treeless prairie". Morton and his wife Caroline quickly realized that trees, shrubs, and other plantings would make life easier and more pleasant in such an environment. They began planting immediately and the results of their efforts can now be seen on the grounds of Arbor Lodge State Historical Park in Nebraska City.

As editor of the "Nebraska City News", Morton began to spread his beliefs about tree planting and agriculture across the territory. He became president of the State Board of Agriculture and eventually served as U.S. Secretary of Agriculture from 1893 to 1896.

In January 1872, Morton proposed to the State Board of Agriculture that a tree planting holiday be observed in Nebraska on April 10, 1872. He proposed that the holiday be named Arbor Day and that its purpose be "to urge upon the people of the State the vital importance of tree planting". His efforts were successful and more than a million trees were planted in Nebraska that first Arbor Day.

The efforts of B. G. Northrup also helped spread the message of Arbor Day. At a meeting of the American Forestry Association in 1883, he proposed the observance of Arbor Day in schools. His perseverance helped Arbor Day become an important holiday for school children nationwide.

In 1885, Arbor Day became a legal holiday in

Nebraska, to be observed on Morton's birthday, April 22. It grew in popularity and is now celebrated in all 50 states and in many foreign countries. Many states celebrate Arbor Day on dates other than April 22 to coincide with the best tree-planting weather. These dates vary from January in the south to May in the north. Since 1989, Nebraska has celebrated Arbor Day on the last Friday in April.

Tree planting is as important to us now as it was to our ancestors. In fact, it may be more important since many trees must be planted just to keep up with the loss of forests to land clearing, fire, and urban development. By replacing these trees we can be sure we will always have forests for our future.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Arbor Day is its emphasis on the future. In the words of J. Sterling Morton, "Other holidays repose on the past. Arbor Day proposes for the future". We learn to plant trees to show our hope for the future and our concern for those who will come after us. The trees we plant today will provide shelter from wind and sun, wood products, wildlife habitat, erosion control, beauty, and inspiration for ourselves and our children.

Why is Arbor Day so important to Nebraskans? Certainly the holiday's origin in our state contributes to our enthusiasm. But even more important is the scarcity of trees and forests in Nebraska. We appreciate trees because we can easily see what life would be like without them.

Nebraskans should be proud of their tree planting heritage. We can feel satisfied in knowing we have made our state a more beautiful place to live and a better place for the future.



THE HEART OF A TREE

*What does he plant who plants a tree?
He plants the friend of sun and sky;
He plants the flag of breezes free;
The shaft of beauty towering high;
He plants a home to heaven anigh
For song a mother-croon of bird
In hushed and happy twilight heard,
The treble of heaven's harmony—
These things he plants who plants a tree.*

*What does he plant who plants a tree?
He plants cool shade and tender rain,
And seed and bud of days to be,
And years that fade and flush again;
He plants the glory of the plain;
He plants the forest's heritage;
The harvest of a coming age;
The joy that unborn eyes will see—
These things he plants who plants a tree.*

*What does he plant who plants a tree?
He plants, in sap and leaf and wood
In love of home and loyalty
His blessing on the neighborhood
Who in the hollow of His hand
Holds all the growth of all our land.
A nation's growth from sea to sea
Stirs in his heart who plants a tree.*

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