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A History of Father's Day

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A History of Father's Day

Father's Day is a holiday to honor fatherhood, paternal bonds, and the influence of fathers in society. Since the Middle Ages, dating back to at least 1508, the Catholic countries of Europe have celebrated Fatherhood on March 19 as Saint Joseph's Day. Saint Joseph is said to be the Father of Jesus in the Christian religions. This celebration's tradition was brought to the Americas by the Spanish and Portuguese. In the United States, Father's Day is not an official federal holiday, but it is a recognized public observance. Father's Day now falls on the third Sunday in June each year. Many people assume that Father's Day is a holiday designed by greeting card companies to make more money. While there is a huge amount of money spent on cards, gifts, outings, and restaurants to celebrate with our father figures, it has a more meaningful history than just capitalism.

Some say that the first Father's Day was in 1907, to commemorate a horrible tragedy. In Monogah, West Virginia there was a mining disaster that killed 361 men. 250 of those men were fathers and it left more than a thousand children without a dad. While there was a service at a local church in Monogah, it never really caught on as an annual observance.

In May of 1909 a woman named Sonora Louise Smart Dodd was in her hometown church in Spokane, Washington listening to a Mother's Day sermon, and she thought that a similar day should be set aside to honor fathers. Her father, William Jackson Smart, was a Civil War

veteran. He raised his six children as a single parent after his wife passed away. Sonora wanted to honor her father for all he had done for her and her siblings.

On June 6, 1910, Sonora took a petition to the local YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) and the Spokane Ministerial Association as well as government officials, churches, and other local organizations. The petition outlined the idea for an annual observance to honor fathers. She asked that the celebration take place in June, the same month as her father's Birthday. She received a lot of support. Spokane held its first Father's Day celebration on Sunday, June 19, 1910. Churches all over town gave moving speeches and sermons to honor fathers. While many churches continued this tradition, many did not.

Over the next several decades, Sonora Smart Dodd continued to try to make Father's Day a nationally recognized holiday. The first U.S. President to celebrate it was Woodrow Wilson in June of 1916. He opened the church services of Spokane, Washington by telephone from the Oval Office in Washington D.C. In 1915 President Wilson had made Mother's Day a national holiday and he was pushing to do the same for fathers. Congress feared that it would cause more harm than good. They felt that it might take away support for the Mother's Day holiday and commercialize the day for fathers. Sonora Smart Dodd continued her mission and traveled around to speak publicly to fathers in the hopes of gaining their support. According to a newspaper in Spokane called The Spokesman-Review, the men laughed at her and said that they didn't want a "Father's Day". They told her "A national fishing day would be better." But she pressed on and slowly the observance of Father's Day grew in popularity. In 1924, President Calvin Coolidge urged states to observe the day nationwide, but he refused to issue an official proclamation for the holiday. In the 1930's there was an effort to combine Mother's Day and Father's Day into a single holiday called "Parent's Day." In 1938, men's clothing retailers formed the "Father's Day Council" and put money and energy into getting the holiday recognized. They were able to get calendar makers to mark the third Sunday in June with tie and pipe illustrations, but the general public had no interest in buying cards or gifts for dad that he probably didn't need.

In 1957, Maine Senator Margaret Chase Smith moved the father's role into the national spotlight. Congress had reached another stalemate on whether or not to make Father's Day

official. She wrote a very harsh memo that accused, “Congress has been guilty now for 40 years of the worst possible oversight perpetrated against the gallant fathers of our land...and should cause us to hide our heads in shame. Either we honor both our parents, mother and father, or let us desist from honoring either one. But to single out just one of our two parents and omit the other is the most grievous insult imaginable.” Sadly, it did not change the decision in Congress.

In 1966, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed an executive order and proclaimed the third Sunday in June as Father’s Day. This was more than fifty years after Sonora Smart Dodd first tried to get the holiday started, but it was still not officially recognized as a federal holiday. In 1970, Congress passed a joint resolution that would authorize the president to designate the third Sunday in June as Father’s Day. The resolution stated that “The President is authorized and requested to issue a proclamation calling on the appropriate Government officials to display the flag of the United States on all Government buildings on such day, inviting the governments of the States and communities and the people of the United States to observe such day with appropriate ceremonies and urging people to offer public and private expressions of such day to the abiding love and gratitude which they bear for their fathers.” Finally, in 1972, during president Richard Nixon’s re-election campaign, he signed an official proclamation, permanently setting Father’s Day for the entire nation.

To all of the dads, stepdads, grandpas, and other father figures out there, we are sorry that it took so long to put Father’s Day on the books and show you how much you “officially” mean to us, but we have always been grateful for your love, support, sage advice, and even your cheesy “Dad Jokes”. Thank you! Happy Father’s Day this Sunday!

In 1978, Mrs. Dodd died at the age of 96. Her grave at Greenwood Cemetery in Spokane reads:

Sonora Smart Dodd
Founder of Father’s Day
1882-1978

My Daddy Was the Best

By Penelope Torribio

I learned to dance by my daddy's hand when I was just a girl. Out on that dance floor we could really step and twirl. He danced all night with mom and me he never took a rest. Now I've danced with lots and lots of men but my daddy was the best and I wish I could dance with my daddy again, feel his arms around me see that great big silly grin. I wish I could dance with my daddy again, but I left home to see the world and I ain't been back again.

When I was young, I thought there were things I couldn't learn at home. I packed my bags, caught the Greyhound bus, and set out on my own. I must have gone a hundred thousand miles just to find, everything I need to know was back home all the time and I wish I could dance with my daddy again. Feel his arms around me see that great big silly grin. I wish I could dance with my daddy again. But I left home to see the world and I ain't been back again.

I wish I could dance with my daddy again, feel his arms around me, see my momma's loving grin. I wish I could dance with my daddy again, but I left home to see the world and I ain't been back again. I've danced with lots and lots of men, but my daddy was the best. Can I have this dance daddy?