

THE EARLIEST ARBOR DAYS

submitted by Trude Oliver, Arbor Day Organizing Committee

The earliest Arbor days were often markings of festivals or memorial days such as marriages or the birth of a child. In Saxony (Germany) for example, in the 1700's a marriage could not be celebrated until the bridegroom had proven that he had planted a certain number of oaks and six fruit trees.

North Americans, recognizing that there could be many benefits from such a custom not restricted to bridegrooms alone, introduced the practice and held intermittent celebrations since the nineteenth century.

Nebraska was the first state to observe Arbor Day on April 10, 1872. J. Sterling Morton, then a member of the Nebraska board of agriculture and later U.S. Secretary of Agriculture proposed the name 'Arbor Day'. He also proposed the plan of devoting a certain day each year to the public planting of trees.

In Prince Edward Island, Arbor Day was first celebrated in Charlottetown on May 24, 1884. On that first Arbor Day over three hundred hardwood trees of twelve different species were planted along the streets and in the squares of Charlottetown. The Daily Patriot of Monday, May 26, 1884 painted a vivid picture of the planting:

"The day, somewhat damp and showery, was nevertheless favorable for transplanting trees; and at an early hour numbers of men were to be seen on the different squares with their coats off, spade and shovel in hand, ready to commence work. Here and there stood a horse and cart loaded with trees, and on either side an arborist striving to get into the bowels of the earth."

Men were not the only participants: to mention but a few women, Miss Edith Beales and Mrs. Dr. Hobkirk planted three oaks and two birches in Queen's Square, while Rochford Square had female planters in the form of Miss Winnifred Cotton, Miss E. Wright and Mrs. W.C. Harris.

School students from both St. Peter's boys and girls schools, and Miss Harvie's school children were also reported to have taken part in the planting of elms and rock maples in Rochford Square.

That was the mere beginning of school group Arbor Day participation in Prince Edward Island. The day gradually developed into a school festival with special planting projects carried out following recitations and songs about trees or a band leading a parade of students to the planting site.

The scope and purpose of Arbor Day have greatly broadened. From the simple exercise of planting a single tree, it has become the occasion for impressing on the minds of school children and all individuals the importance of forestry.

Arbor Day continued to be celebrated in the 1900's in Island schools but during the war years, although celebrated on an intermittent basis, generally fell away to a school yard cleanup with the name 'Arbor Day' forgotten.

The date of Arbor Day celebrations varies from year to year, but since 1970 there has been a revival of that special day set aside for the planting of trees in Prince Edward Island.

