

MOTHER'S DAY FOR PEACE

by Ruth Rosen.

Every year, people snipe at the shallow commercialism of Mother's Day. But to ignore your mother on this holy holiday is unthinkable. And if you are a mother, you'll be devastated if your ingrates fail to honor you at least one day of the year.

Mother's Day wasn't always like this. The women who conceived Mother's Day would be bewildered by the ubiquitous ads that hound us to find that "perfect gift for Mom." They would expect women to be marching in the streets, not eating with their families in restaurants. This is because Mother's Day began as a holiday that commemorated women's public activism, not as a celebration of a mother's devotion to her family.

The story begins in 1858 when a community activist named Anna Reeves Jarvis organized Mothers' Works Days in West Virginia. Her immediate goal was to improve sanitation in Appalachian communities. During the Civil War, Jarvis pried women from their families to care for the wounded on both sides. Afterward she convened meetings to persuade men to lay aside their hostilities.

In 1872, Julia Ward Howe, author of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic", proposed an annual Mother's Day for Peace. Committed to abolishing war, Howe wrote the famous [Mother's Day proclamation](#).

For the next 30 years, Americans celebrated Mothers' Day for Peace on June 2.

Many middle-class women in the 19th century believed that they bore a special responsibility as actual or potential mothers to care for the casualties of society and to turn America into a more civilized nation. They played a leading role in the abolitionist movement to end slavery. In the following decades, they launched successful campaigns against lynching and consumer fraud and battled for improved working conditions for women and protection for children, public health services and social welfare assistance to the poor. To the activists, the connection between motherhood and the fight for social and economic justice seemed self-evident.

In 1913, Congress declared the second Sunday in May to be Mother's Day. By then, the growing consumer culture had successfully redefined women as consumers for their families. Politicians and businessmen eagerly embraced the idea of celebrating the private sacrifices made by individual mothers. As the "Florists' Review", the industry's trade journal, bluntly put it, "This was a holiday that could be exploited."

The new advertising industry quickly taught Americans how to honor their mothers - by buying flowers. Outraged by florists who were selling carnations for the exorbitant price of \$1 apiece, Anna Jarvis' daughter undertook a campaign against those who "would undermine Mother's Day with their greed." But she fought a losing battle. Within a few years, the "Florists' Review" triumphantly announced that it was "Miss Jarvis who was completely squelched."

Since then, Mother's Day has ballooned into a billion-dollar industry. Americans may revere the idea of motherhood and love their own mothers, but not all mothers. Poor, unemployed mothers may enjoy flowers, but they also need child care, job training, health care, a higher minimum wage and paid parental leave. Working mothers may enjoy breakfast in bed, but they also need the kind of governmental assistance provided by every other industrialized society.

With a little imagination, we could restore Mother's Day as a holiday that celebrates women's political engagement in society. During the 1980's, some peace groups gathered at nuclear test sites on Mother's Day to protest the arms race. Today, our greatest threat is not from missiles but from our indifference toward human welfare and the health of our planet. Imagine, if you can, an annual Million Mother March in the nation's capital. Imagine a Mother's Day filled with voices demanding social and economic justice and a

sustainable future, rather than speeches studded with syrupy platitudes.

Some will think it insulting to alter our current way of celebrating Mother's Day. But public activism does not preclude private expressions of love and gratitude. (Nor does it prevent people from expressing their appreciation all year round.)

Nineteenth century women dared to dream of a day that honored women's civil activism. We can do no less. We should honor their vision with civic activism.

Ruth Rosen is a professor of history at UC Davis.