

# Remembering

Barbara McMahon

Published by Barbara McMahon, 2016.



# Remembering

by

Barbara McMahon

Happy Birthday America

Ashley Bennet stepped out onto the wide wooden porch that spanned the front of her old frame house. Coffee in hand, she went to lean against one of the support posts gazing over her yard with the colorful flower beds and century old oak tree in the center. It was already hot and humid. By noon the temperatures would soar. An occasional car drove by as she tried to damp down her disappointment. Today was Independence Day. Traditionally her family had gone to the local cemeteries and placed American flags on the graves of family members who had answered the call to arms over the past two hundred years. Longer, actually, since that first Thomas Duke had stood his ground at the town square when the British had tried to march through.

In the stillness of the early morning she could almost hear the echo of the footsteps of the farmers and merchants who had fought for freedom so long ago. They'd marched from Balfour's Mill to the town square on the road that ran in front of her. This house had not yet been built. Fields and meadows had lined the dirt road in those days. Probably no one had stood where she was standing as the ragtag militia marched by. Peace-loving men who had gone against the most powerful army of its time. And won.

Letting her imagine carry her, she could envision their march with muskets and swords, determination and resolve. The war had started in far off New England, but had come to the Carolinas

where everyone who yearned for release from the tyranny of Great Brittan had stood against the foe. No uniforms. Few drills. Personal weapons. And men convinced they were in the right.

She blinked and the present came into focus.

“Is it so much to ask that we honor them today?” she said softly.

Sipping the last of her coffee she sighed. As long as she could remember Independence Day had been about family. Her mother and father had carried the tradition passed down from their parents. Flags fluttering above the tombstones looked amazing. She could still remember her mother relaying information about each of the grandpas as they stood by the graves. Since they were family, no matter how many generations ago, they were all Grandpa.

“If it’s meant to be, it’s up to me,” she said, with a last look at the empty street. Lifting her empty coffee cup in silent salute, she turned.

Her husband had already left for his golf game. Her mother was involved with a bridge tournament at the senior center. Josh was still sleeping and Rebecca had insisted she had to get to her friend’s home early as they were working at the booth at the town picnic this afternoon and she had to make plans. Like they hadn’t been talking about it all week.

Ashley rinsed her cup, then went to the garage and found the box that held the American flags. She might be alone this year, but she was not going to end the tradition started with Decoration Day more than a hundred years ago. She would remember the men of her family who had stood for freedom.

Grabbing a hat, trowel, small rake and the flags, she stowed them in the back of her car. In no time she was driving out Highway 9 to the old family cemetery still lovingly tended.

Arriving at the farm that had once belonged to her family, she turned onto the drive way and wound her way past the house and out to the small graveyard. Only long ago members of her family

were buried here. When the Dukes owned the land, it was proper they be buried near their loved ones. In those early days, it was a long drive into town by horse or wagon. No one suspected that many years in the future the farm would go to strangers.

Still, she was thankful that each owner had kept up the small cemetery.

Taking the trowel and rake and flag from the car, she opened the small wooden gate and entered. She and her mother had cleaned the cemetery for Memorial Day. It still looked tidy. Only seven graves—Thomas, wife Annie, the two little boys who had died so young, a grandchild and two unmarked graves, unknown—their names forever lost to time.

She raked a few leaves from the grave of Thomas Dukes and stood studying the native stone with his name and dates carved deep. It had stood the test of time, as had the new country for which he'd fought.

"Thanks, Grandpa Dukes." She pushed the flag pole into the soft dirt, making sure it was straight and centered in front of the tombstone. She could hear the echo of her mother's voice telling how her grandmother had told her the story told to her by her grandmother. On back until they repeated the story Thomas himself had told his grandchildren in the waning years of his life.

He'd been a very young man. Only a few years older than Josh was now. When the call had come, he'd responded. Training with the older men of the small village, promising to fight if needed, he had thought the war would be settled in the New England colonies. He'd never expected the war would come to their small village. Orangeburg wasn't Charleston with its large population and thriving port. Just a small village of farmers who wanted to live free.

It had been a hot day when the British had marched. Much like today, Ashley thought, looking around. This had been his home. He'd left it and marched all the way to the village square. Each step had taken him closer to an armed clash from which he might

not have returned. She turned to look at the site of his old farm house, almost totally gone, only the stone chimney remained. The newer house had been built several hundred yards to the east. Had his wife stood by the door watching as he left? Had his young children had any idea of the momentous event?

"I didn't forget," Ashley said, touching the tombstone lightly. "Thank you." She felt a fierce sense of pride that she was descended from such a man.

The next stop was the church on the very square where her Grandpa Duke had defended their town. His grandson, Moses was buried here. Fallen in the War of 1812, he'd been brought home to be honored by his town for his service. The stone obelisk rose over the other tombstones in the churchyard cemetery. How his widow had wept, the story went. He never even knew he had fathered another child.

Placing the flag in front of the tombstone, Ashley surveyed the graveyard. Other flags fluttered in the slight breeze. It was quiet here at the back of the church. None of the noise from the square disturbed the peaceful rest of those buried here.

"Mom?" Josh said from the sidewalk.

"Hi," she smiled and walked over to him. "Finally got up, did you?"

"Yes, and saw you were gone. Sorry I missed Grandpa Dukes. I wanted to go with you. It's not right to sleep in when we could be placing the flags."

She smiled and patted his arm. Her almost man son. How many years before he'd be out on his own and maybe with a family? Too few. She hoped he never faced a war like Grandpa Dukes or Grandpa Moses had.

"So tell me about Grandpa Moses," he said.

She looked back at the tombstone and smiled. "He fought valiantly at the battle of Baltimore. He'd been near Washington D.C. when it burned and had been outraged as all Americans had been. While no major skirmishes were fought in South Carolina,

he was part of the militia that went to stand with other states and to supplement the militia in Maryland. He was killed by General Ross's troops, and brought back home to rest here as an honored soldier."

"And his wife Mary Ann already had five children and didn't even get to tell him she was expecting another baby," Josh finished. "She had no way to make a living, so went back to live with her father. When the baby was born, she named him Moses after his father. And that Moses had eleven children."

Ashley nodded, warmed that her son could recite the family history so faithfully. It was important to keep alive the memories of these soldiers and the sacrifices made in the name of freedom.

"So now we go to Sunnyside," Josh said, referring to the old city cemetery near Middleton Street. Once at the edge of town, it had long since been surrounded by residential homes and was a beloved part of the town's history.

The impressive stone pillars guarding the gate into Sunnyside Cemetery rose high above the stone wall surrounding the land and gave the cemetery a serene feel, isolated from the cares of those still living, it was quiet and peaceful. The rows were laid out neatly and orderly. It was a large graveyard with more than two thousand interments. Ashley knew where each member of her family was buried. First stop, Grandpa John Duke's grave, near the front wall.

They climbed out of the car and took the rake and flags to the plot surrounded by a curb of marble, with headstones in a straight row within. It took only a couple of moments to rake the area clean. Then they placed two flags, one on John Dukes' grave—a Union soldier who had lived to the next century and seen the War to end all Wars. The other flag was placed on his brother's grave. Peter had fallen defending the Confederacy.

"I used to think we shouldn't mark his grave," Josh said as he stared at Peter's tombstone. "He fought against the union."

“True, but he fought for what he believed in. And as President Lincoln said—with malice toward none and charity to all—I think it’s appropriate. He was your great-great-great uncle.”

“He was only a few years older than I am,” Josh said, studying the inscription. “Think of all he missed, dying so young.”

“All the more reason for you to live your life to the fullest, to make up somewhat for those who didn’t get a full life,” Ashley said.

Another car drove in and parked right behind hers. Rebecca and her friend Ruth jumped out to join them.

“I didn’t expect you,” Ashley said with some surprise.

“I know. But I was telling Ruth about placing the flags and we thought we should be here to help. It’s not the same if we ignore tradition. And Ruth wants to hear some of our family’s stories. She doesn’t know anyone besides her parents and grandparents. I told her I can tell her about all the families who have gone before, all the way back to Grandpa Dukes in 1776.”

“I think it’s wonderful that you mark the graves today,” Ruth said. “I wish I had a tradition like that in my family. It seems right, you know? We wouldn’t have independence if not for men like Rebecca’s grandpa.”

“So let me tell her about Grandpa John. He fought for the Union during the Civil War. Which horrified his parents, let me tell you,” Rebecca began. She embellished the story of his going north to join the army, of the horrors of the battlefields, and how he was stricken when he learned of his brother’s death.

“We have letters he wrote to his wife. She kept them and after she died, he found them. He gave them to my great-grandmother to have. We’ve all read them,” Rebecca ended.

“Wow, real history. That’s so cool!” Ruth exclaimed.

“As compared to fake history?” Josh asked.

“No, as compared to dry history in text books, dates and things. Not real like a letter from someone who lived through it,” Ruth said.



“You’re welcome to come by one day and read them yourself,” Ashley suggested.

“Oh, and don’t forget the ones we have from Cousin Cora. They were written after the war, when everyone was so poor. Even Grandpa John was when he came back. It didn’t matter he’d been on the winning side, no one in the South won,” Rebecca added.

“Grandpa John lived until he was 98,” Josh said. “He even lived through the Great War. His grandson joined and was sent to Black Jack Pershing’s headquarters in Europe.”

“Wow,” Ruth said. “I wonder if my ancestors were involved?”

“You can find out,” Ashley said. “Ask your parents and work back.”

“I can help you get started,” Rebecca said.

“Next we go to Grandpa Charles’ grave. He served in World War II,” Josh said. He took the rake from her mother. “We have to drive, he and his family are farther back in the cemetery.”

Just as they reached the cars, a third vehicle arrived—Ashley’s husband and mother.

“Oh, my gosh, what’s this?” Ashley asked, walking to her husband’s car.

“Wasn’t the same. I can get a tee time later,” he said with a wry grin.

“I can’t imagine what got over me thinking bridge was more important than this,” her mother said when Ashley leaned over to see her through the window. “We went to the old family cemetery first, saw the flag and knew you’d been there. So we checked out the churchyard and now here we are.”

“Great.”

And it was. Her entire family was once again participating. The warm glow that Josh had started spread. She wasn’t the only one to pay homage. “Grandpa Charles is next,” she said.

“We’ll follow you,” her husband replied.

When Ashley stood by the tombstone of her grandfather, her family surrounded her. Each had plans for the day. She herself had

plans for later. But for a short time, they united to pay tribute to those of their family who had gone before. Who had laid the foundation for freedom, who had paid the price, made the sacrifice and passed on the legacy to her generation and her children's generation.

"Grandpa Charles fought in World War II," Josh said as he stuck the flag pole into the ground. "He saw action in Italy and Germany and came home without a scratch. But inside, he never forgot the fighting, never forgot the brave Americans he fought beside. He told me about some of it before he died," Josh said. "I was just a kid then, but I remember."

"As do I," Ashley's mother said softly. "He was my father and I admired him so much. He never talked about the war, until we went to see the memorial to World War II vets in Washington. As the water in those fountain poured, so did the reminiscences pour from him. I taped much of what he told me."

"Oh, wow, that is so cool," Ruth said. "I wish my family had traditions like this."

"You can start it," Rebecca said. "Find out more about your family's past and celebrate the cool things your ancestors did."

Ashley hugged her daughter. "Tell Ruth your poem."

"Oh, Mom, it's dorky."

"It's special. You wrote it when you were younger, but I was so proud of you then, and now."

Rebecca looked at her friend and gave a wry expression, then began,

"Militia Soldiers everywhere;  
thank you for this land so fair;  
When another war came again;  
thank you family who stood the pain;  
A nation split half in two;  
but still we have the red white and blue;  
Others abroad threatened our land;  
Again our soldiers took the stand;

They sacrificed, fought and died;  
So I in freedom may reside.”

Ruth grinned, as did everyone there. “Very cool.”

“Remember, I was only eleven when I wrote that,” Rebecca said with a shy smile.

“And it’s now incorporated in our tradition,” Ashley said. “You’ll be able to tell your children and grandchildren.”

Rebecca rolled her eyes, then grinned. “Another part of the tradition.”

“Exactly. That’s what traditions are, passing from one generation to another. We don’t think about Grandpa Dukes or Grandpa Charles every day, but when we remember them on special occasions, we honor their lives and what they did for us.”

“I’m glad I came,” Rebecca said. “I almost missed it.”

“I’m glad, too,” echoed around the family.

“Now let’s go celebrate the greatest holiday this country has,” Ashley said with a heart full of love. Yet another year had come full circle and her family remembered the past to go forth to the future bright with hope and promise and with gratitude to those who had gone before.



## Also by Barbara McMahon

### **Cowboy Hero Series**

Bluebells On The Hill

Cowboy's Bride

One Stubborn Cowboy

Crazy About a Cowboy

Never Doubt a Cowboy

### **Elite Security Mystery Series**

Trusting Jake

### **Rocky Point Series**

Rocky Point Hero

### **Tropical Escape**

Island Rendezvous

Island Paradise

Come into the Sun

Destination Romance Box Set

### **Standalone**

I'll Take Forever

The Paper Marriage

Jared's Promise

The Banished Bride

Remembering