

Arbor Day's Beginnings

On January 4, 1872, Morton first proposed a tree-planting holiday to be called "Arbor Day" at a meeting of the State Board of Agriculture. The date was set for April 10, 1872. Prizes were offered to counties and individuals for planting properly the largest number of trees on that day. It was estimated that more than one million trees were planted in Nebraska on the first Arbor Day.

Arbor Day was officially proclaimed by the young state's Gov. Robert W. Furnas on March 12, 1874, and the day itself was observed April 10, 1874. In 1885, Arbor Day was named a legal holiday in Nebraska and April 22, Morton's birthday, was selected as the date for its permanent observance.

According to accounts from the *Nebraska City News*, April 1885, the City celebrated Arbor Day with a grand parade and a speech by J. Sterling Morton. Students of different grades met at their respective school rooms in the morning for the purpose of planting at least one tree. Each tree that was planted was labeled with the grade, the time planted, and was to be specially cared for by that grade.

When the plantings were completed, 1000 students formed a line to begin the parade from the various schools to Nebraska City's opera house. In the parade, each class carried colorful banners made of satin with silk lining and trimmed with gold fringe. The letters on the banners were painted in oil colors. By the time the parade reached the opera house the throng numbered well over the 1000 as townspeople joined the march. Every available foot of space in the opera house was occupied, the students having the front seats and gallery while the older persons stood. At 11:00, the throng of celebrants was addressed by the founder of Arbor Day, J. Sterling Morton.

Mr. Morton was listened to with much attention, and loudly applauded at the close of his address. At the conclusion of the ceremonies, the students sang "America," and the large audience was dismissed.

This ended the first celebration of Arbor Day as a legal holiday, and, as reported by the newspaper, "... to say that it was a complete success but faintly expresses it. A celebration of this kind results in good to all, and is worthy of imitation by every school in the state."

During the 1870s, other states passed legislation to observe Arbor Day, and the tradition began in schools nationwide in 1882.

Today the most common date for the state observances is the last Friday in April, and several U.S. presidents have proclaimed a national Arbor Day on that date. But a number of state Arbor Days are at other times to coincide with the best tree planting weather, from January and February in the south to May in the far north.

Arbor Day has now spread beyond the United States and is observed in many countries of the world.