

Name: _____

Class: _____

The Poppy Lady

By Barbara Elizabeth Walsh

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Moina Belle Michael (1869-1944) was an American teacher who was known widely as the "Poppy Lady." In this informational text, Elizabeth Walsh discusses how Moina got her famous nickname. As you read, take notes on why Moina felt motivated to wear red poppies.

*And now the Torch and Poppy red
We wear in honor of our dead.*

*Fear not that ye have died for naught;
We'll teach the lesson that ye wrought
In Flanders Fields.*

— from a poem by Moina Belle Michael

- [1] One afternoon in November 1918, Moina Belle Michael hurried through the streets of New York. She wore a bright, red silk poppy on her coat collar and carried a bouquet of 24 smaller poppies. World War I was raging¹ overseas, and Moina was determined to do her part.



Maybe the red flower would remind people of the American soldiers fighting in Europe and the sacrifices many had made.

["Moina Belle Michael poses with soldiers on a ferryboat"](#) by Elinor Howard Cook (from Moina Belle Michael's scrapbook) is used with permission.

Moina was a teacher at the University of Georgia when war first broke out. Friends, neighbors, and students had gone overseas to fight. Moina planned to do more than knit socks or sweaters, or roll bandages for the Red Cross. She wanted to encourage the soldiers before they left for war.

Volunteering for the War

Moina traveled to New York City to care for soldiers at the YMCA headquarters at Columbia

1. **Rage** (*noun*) continuing with great intensity, will or strength

University. There was nothing she enjoyed more than sitting and chatting with the soldiers. She looked at photographs of their families and sweethearts and listened to their hometown news. She bought fresh flowers to brighten the room when the weather outside turned dreary.²

- [5] Earlier that November morning, one of the soldiers had left a copy of Ladies' Home Journal on Moina's desk. She turned to the marked page of the magazine and found a well-known poem, which began, "In Flanders fields the poppies blow / Between the crosses, row on row..."

Moina had read the poem before. She knew that Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae, a Canadian physician, wrote it while treating soldiers on the battlefields of Flanders in Belgium.

Remembering the Soldiers

Lieutenant Colonel McCrae's poem, remembering those men, always touched her. But that morning, Moina was struck by the last verse³ and accompanying illustration. Soldiers with sad eyes stared at a battleground blanketed in white crosses and bright red poppies. The soldiers seemed to speak to her. "Remember us," they asked.

Moina thought about her soldiers at the Y, and how they had left their families and homes to protect the freedom she enjoyed each day. To Moina, they were heroes.

Silently, she made a promise. She would always wear a red poppy to remember the soldiers. She wrote her promise in a poem.

- [10] Just then, three YMCA war workers stopped by her desk with a check for \$10. They thanked her for all she did to brighten the room.

There was no doubt about what Moina would do with the money. "I shall buy red poppies," she told them.

Creating a Symbol

Moina showed them Lieutenant Colonel McCrae's poem and her poem. Word spread quickly. Before long, everyone wanted to wear a red poppy.

It wasn't easy finding silk poppies on the streets of New York, but Moina was successful. Hurrying back to the Y, she handed them out. She dreamed of the day when every American would wear a poppy to remember the soldiers.

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2. **Dreary** (*adjective*) having nothing likely to provide cheer or comfort
 3. a line of poetry

Two days later, World War I ended and Moina returned to her students in Georgia. True to her promise, she wrote letters to leaders around the country, suggesting they adopt the poppy as a national memorial symbol.

- [15] But, as she taught returning servicemen, Moina soon realized another purpose for the small flower. Many of the servicemen had no jobs. No money. Some were wounded or too ill to work. Maybe the poppy could also help the veterans⁴ and their families.

Her hard work paid off. In 1921, the American Legion Auxiliary⁵ adopted the Poppy of Flanders Fields as its memorial flower. Other national and international veterans organizations followed. Disabled veterans who were members of the patriotic⁶ groups made crepe-paper⁷ poppies, offering them for donations. Pennies, nickels, and dimes poured in.

During the years that followed, the poppies raised millions of dollars in the United States and England to benefit veterans, war widows, and orphans, and the flowers reminded people of soldiers everywhere. To Moina's delight, the message of the poppies spread to 50 other countries. At last, her dream of helping soldiers was coming true.

For the rest of her life, Moina Belle Michael was known as the "Poppy Lady." She received citations,⁸ awards, and words of praise from around the world. But the Georgia schoolteacher did not feel like a hero.

"What I did, and am doing is no more than any other person would have done," Moina insisted. "I only thought of it first."

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4. **Veteran (noun)** a person who has served in the military
 5. an organization dedicated to veteran services
 6. **Patriotic (adjective)** having or showing great love and support for your country
 7. thin paper used for making decorations
 8. an official acknowledgement of someone's achievements

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement identifies the central idea of the text?
 - A. While Moina's use of poppies raised awareness about the war, it did little to offer actual support to returning soldiers.
 - B. Moina's commitment to remembering soldiers changed into a movement that helped veteran organizations.
 - C. John McCrae used red poppies to express his respect for soldiers long before Moina began wearing them.
 - D. Moina didn't fully realize that she was making a statement about soldiers when she first started wearing red poppies.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "She wore a bright, red silk poppy on her coat collar and carried a bouquet of 24 smaller poppies." (Paragraph 1)
 - B. "She turned to the marked page of the magazine and found a well-known poem, which began, 'In Flanders fields the poppies blow / Between the crosses, row on row...'" (Paragraph 5)
 - C. "Moina showed them Lieutenant Colonel McCrae's poem and her poem. Word spread quickly. Before long, everyone wanted to wear a red poppy." (Paragraph 12)
 - D. "To Moina's delight, the message of the poppies spread to 50 other countries. At last, her dream of helping soldiers was coming true." (Paragraph 17)

3. How was Moina impacted by her work at the YMCA?
 - A. It helped her realize how heroic the soldiers she talked to were.
 - B. It showed her how little support soldiers received when they came home.
 - C. It informed her on the extent of the dangers that soldiers faced at war.
 - D. It made her realize that few people showed their support for soldiers.

4. Which of the following describes how the information in the text is structured?
- A. The author discusses Moina's decision to wear red poppies and how the idea spread and grew.
 - B. The author compares how Moina decided to show support for soldiers, with how other citizens showed their support.
 - C. The author describes how the meaning of red poppies has changed since Lieutenant Colonel McCrae's poem.
 - D. The author compares Moina's views on war before meeting soldier at the YMCA, with her views after talking with them.

5. What is the connection between Moina's decision to wear red poppies and Lieutenant Colonel McCrae's poem?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Moina used poppies to remember soldiers. What are other ways that Americans respect and remember soldiers today?
2. In the text, Moina believed that soldiers were heroic. Why do you think she felt this way? Do you think Moina is a hero in her own right? Why or why not? What do you believe makes someone a hero?
3. In the context, how were soldiers affected by the war? How did their experiences impact Moina and motivate her to express her respect for them? Do you think that people are similarly affected by war today, as they were in the past? Why or why not?