

Remember September: a commemorative mail art project

By Gail Ellspermann

(article featured on Artella web site, 2002)

What did you do last Memorial Day? If you are like most people, you had the day off from work and you spent it either at a family picnic or crossing things off your “to-do” list at home. And again, if you’re like most people, you didn’t go to a parade or spend much time in reflection of what the day is all about. Now please, I’m not being critical of you – I’m just discussing the reality of our current lifestyles. Most people younger than fifty will have trouble correctly defining Memorial Day or Veteran’s Day (Pearl Harbor Day seems easier to define but most people get the date wrong). Yet, these, and other important dates in American history are as important to our past as September 11, 2001 is to us today. The people around “back then” also said they would never forget, yet, somehow, later generations have.

We have said we would “never forget” 9-11-01. I came up with the idea of the Remember September Mail Art Memorial as a way for people to express their feelings and to reflect on the attacks, the heroes, the victims, their patriotism, and how our lives have changed. Just like Pearl Harbor Day, a parade does not seem an appropriate way to mark a day when so many people died. I thought that a better way to remember would be to take the time to create a small piece of artwork, a decorated envelope, and have your own private parade to the post office on September 11th to mail it each year. The envelope, with its September 11th postmark, would become part of the Remember September Mail Art Memorial, a living, growing collection.

The 2002 “call” for envelopes yielded nearly 150 submissions from all around the world. The artwork was heartfelt and beautiful and is the beginning of what I hope will be an enormous collection as years pass. Many artists contacted me to say that having this project to work on helped them to work through their feelings about the day. Two school teachers wrote to say that it gave them a way to discuss the day with children and give them an avenue to express their feelings. Participants were invited to insert a poem or private journal page in the envelope, which will never be opened, to give them a place to record their thoughts. The response to my idea has been heartwarming.

An article featuring many of the envelopes was in the September 2002 issue of Somerset Studio magazine and I’ve had someone express interest in a possible book project, a few years from now. I intend to make “the call” every year – I hope that you will share this article with friends, family, and children’s groups and that you will choose to keep the promise to “never forget” in this unique way. I encourage you to gather a group together with a box of envelopes and some basic art supplies to create envelopes for the project.

As for Memorial Day, the “official” Federal date of observation is the 4th Monday of May each year. It was originally known as “Decoration Day”, when people would decorate the graves of fallen soldiers from WWI. It later became known as Memorial Day and now includes honoring all war dead by decorating their graves with flags and flowers.

Veteran's Day is officially observed on November 11th each year. Originally, it was called Armistice Day, in honor of the WWI armistice signed at the eleventh hour on the eleventh day of the eleventh month. It also originally celebrated the Sanctity of Peace. In 1954, the holiday was changed to Veteran's day to honor all Veterans.

In defense of those who are confused, our Federal government has changed the names of both holidays and has monkeyed around with the dates of celebration several times. No wonder we are confused!

By the way, Pearl Harbor day is December 7th. They can't fiddle around with that date - or September 11th either.