



MOINA MICHAEL

# *Poppy Lady*

What does the poppy mean and who started it all?

The poignant symbol is due in large part to an amazing woman who exemplified the Auxiliary motto of Service Not Self.

BY DIANA LAZZELL

Well-mannered and well-off, Moina Michael was the tender age of 15 when she started her career as a teacher in her hometown of Good Hope, Ga., a town that could otherwise not afford a schoolteacher. Moina continued her successful career as a teacher in Georgia when she was caught overseas as World War I broke out in Europe. Although her vacation was interrupted, Moina helped thousands of stranded Americans book safe passage back to their homeland.

After America entered the war in 1917, Moina applied to volunteer with the YMCA Overseas War Workers, the only war effort that was open to a 48-year-old woman eager to contribute. She also gave a keepsake to each student who was deployed—her own private war effort. Moina traveled to New York City the following year to work at the YMCA Overseas Secretaries training headquarters, with the hope of eventually being stationed overseas. She took a leave of absence from the University of Georgia in order to serve.



Photo Credit: *Courtesy of Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library / University of Georgia Libraries*

On Nov. 9, 1918, just before the Armistice, Moina was on duty at the annual YMCA Overseas Conference. While sitting, a little bored, in the room where servicemembers said their goodbyes to family members and loved ones, a soldier gave Moina a copy of that month's *Ladies' Home Journal*. Inside that magazine was a dog-eared page with the poem "We Shall Not Sleep" by Col. John McCrae, M.D., later renamed "In Flanders Fields." The poem was written for a fellow soldier for whom McCrae had performed a burial

*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.*

After jotting down her poem, Moina excitedly declared, "I shall buy red poppies...I shall always wear red poppies—poppies of Flanders Fields!"

**"IT SEEMED AS THOUGH THE SILENT VOICES AGAIN WERE VOCAL, WHISPERING, IN SIGHS OF ANXIETY UNTO ANGUISH... I PLEDGED TO KEEP THE FAITH AND ALWAYS TO WEAR A RED POPPY OF FLANDERS FIELDS AS A SIGN OF REMEMBRANCE AND THE EMBLEM OF 'KEEPING THE FAITH WITH ALL WHO DIED.'"**

service. In it, the author notes the presence of blooming red poppies among rows of white crosses on the deserted battlefields of western Belgium and northern France. Moina was particularly struck by the last stanza:

*Take up our quarrel with the foe:  
To you from failing hands we throw  
The torch; be yours to hold it high.  
If ye break faith with us who die  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
In Flanders fields.*

"This was, for me, a full spiritual experience," Moina wrote in her memoirs. "It seemed as though the silent voices again were vocal, whispering, in sighs of anxiety unto anguish...I pledged to KEEP THE FAITH and always to wear a red poppy of Flanders Fields as a sign of remembrance and the emblem of 'keeping the faith with all who died.'"

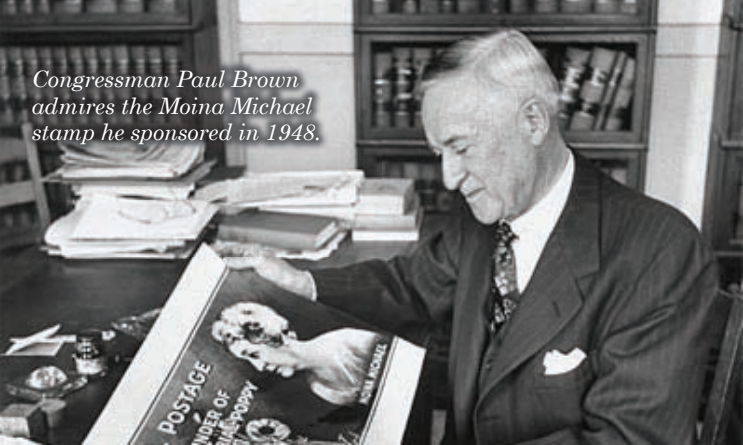
On the back of an envelope, Moina quickly wrote out her response to McCrae's verse, her own poem entitled, "We Shall Keep the Faith." The last stanza captures her idea to wear a poppy in honor of the war dead:

She showed "We Shall Not Sleep" to gentlemen at the conference and relayed her idea to them. The gentlemen were so excited about the idea that they gave her \$10 and asked for poppies to wear. Moina rushed out of the conference in search of the flowers. Finally, she found a Wanamaker's department store that sold silk poppies and bought 25 to distribute to conference attendees.

"Since this was the first group ever to ask for poppies to wear in memory of our soldier dead, and since this group gave me the money with which to buy them, I have always considered that I, then and there, consummated the first sale of the Flanders Fields Memorial Poppy," Moina said.

Moina wore a poppy on her collar until she returned home to Georgia in 1919 and became known as the "Poppy Lady." She continued her teaching career by instructing a group of disabled veterans. She noted their need for financial and occupational assistance and lobbied The American Legion to have veterans assemble poppies for distribution. The poppy was made the official memorial flower of The American Legion in 1920 and the American Legion Auxiliary in 1921. The poppy program was made one of our national programs in 1924.

*Congressman Paul Brown admires the Moina Michael stamp he sponsored in 1948.*



*A 3-cent stamp of Moina Michael was released 30 years after she started distributing poppies.*



*Lt. Col. John McCrae, the Canadian poet who wrote "In Flanders Fields," poses with his dog, Bonneau.*

Moina's efforts were complemented by the work of Madame E. Guerin in France, who heard of Moina's story on a visit to America. In 1930, Moina was awarded a medal for distinguished service at the American Legion Auxiliary National Convention in Boston. Through a lifetime of philanthropy and service, she became one of Georgia's most famous women.

ALA poppy distribution is still going strong. Last year, nearly \$2 million was collected from poppy distribution and allocated to disabled or hospitalized veterans. Moina Michael's teaching career lasted 54 years, but her lesson is still being taught today as poppies are distributed across America by Auxiliary volunteers, "teaching the lesson of Flanders Fields."

The Auxiliary adopted the poppy as its memorial flower in 1921, and, in 1924, instituted the national poppy program to protect the memorial poppy from becoming commercialized and ensuring that every Auxiliary poppy is made by a disabled or hospitalized veteran. Each year, American Legion Auxiliary volunteers distribute more than 25 million red crepe paper poppies in exchange for contributions to assist disabled and hospitalized veterans. One hundred percent of the donations received by Auxiliary volunteers for poppies and contributions to the poppy fund are used exclusively to assist and support veterans and their families. In addition, poppy making provides disabled veterans with a rehabilitation activity and a small personal income. The physical and mental activity of poppy making provides therapeutic benefits for these veterans, and all poppy making materials are provided to them free of charge. The more than 9,500 Auxiliary units distribute poppies, usually on Poppy Days or days of remembrance such as Memorial Day and Veterans Day. The poppy program also promotes the memorial flower in other ways, such as the Miss Poppy Contest and Poppy Poster Contest.