

The History of Arbor Day

“Each generation takes the earth
as trustees.”

—J. Sterling Morton

Among the pioneers moving into the Nebraska Territory in 1854 was J. Sterling Morton from Detroit. He and his wife were lovers of nature, and the home they established in Nebraska was quickly planted with trees, shrubs and flowers.



His fellow pioneers missed their trees. But, more importantly, trees were needed as windbreaks to keep soil in place, for fuel and building materials, and for shade from the hot sun.

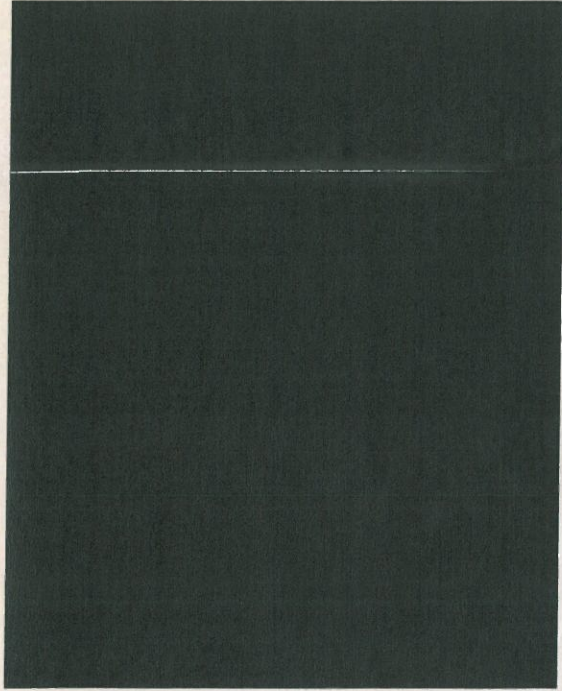
Morton was a journalist and soon became editor of Nebraska's finest newspaper. Given that forum, he spread agricultural information and his enthusiasm for trees to an equally enthusiastic audience.



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.



Morton not only advocated tree planting by individuals in his articles and editorials, but he also encouraged civic organizations and groups to join in. His prominence in the area increased, and he became secretary of the Nebraska Territory, which provided another opportunity to stress the value of trees.



Arbor Day was officially proclaimed by the young state's Governor 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.



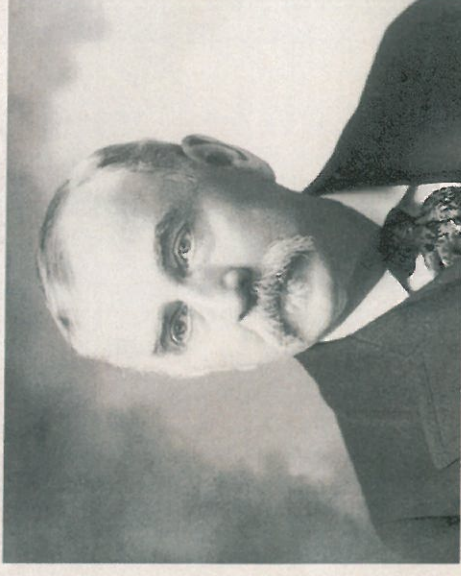
When the plantings were completed, 1,000 students formed a line to begin the parade from the various schools to Nebraska City's opera house.



In the parade, each class carried colorful banners made of satin with silk lining and trimmed with gold fringe. The letters on the banner were painted in oil colors. By the time the parade reached the opera house, the throng numbered well over 1,000 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 J. Sterling Morton. Mr. Morton was listened to with much attention, and loudly applauded at the close of his address. (Hear his speech.) 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."



Today the most common date for the state observance 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.

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

