

Picnicking for Peace

Genny Bove

In solidarity with all those marking Memorial Day in the US with messages of peace, Wrexham Peace and Justice Forum and Wrexham Women for Peace held a Picnic for Peace in Wrexham's Peace Garden on 26 May. Meanwhile, in Portland, Oregon, our friend Bridie from Wrexham read out a message of unity at the Memorial Day service organised by Veterans for Peace Chapter 72.



We don't usually mark Memorial Day here in Britain. Previously known as Decoration Day, this is a US holiday which remembers American men and women who have died in military service. Its origins are in the American Civil War and, following World War I, the memorial was expanded to include military casualties of any war. US peace and anti-war groups have more recently reclaimed Memorial Day, holding ceremonies to remember all victims of war, military and civilian, and to call for an end to all wars.

When Bridie told us that she would be spending Memorial Day in Portland, Oregon, with Sean Lewis, a member of Veterans for Peace (VFP), we were delighted to take up the offer of exchanging messages for peace across the Atlantic.

We feel that it is vital to acknowledge and strengthen the links between groups in different towns, countries and continents. It is perhaps particularly important to emphasise the links between peace groups in Britain and the US, since the 'special relationship' we hear so much about is essentially a collusion in death, destruction and disastrous foreign policy. Sending out a message that there are also peaceful people working in unity in the two countries can only be a good thing. So it was in solidarity with our peace-loving friends and comrades in the US that we held a Memorial Day Picnic for Peace in Wrexham's Peace Garden on Bank Holiday Monday.

We sent the following message with Bridie to read out in Portland:

Our local peace and justice groups in Wrexham, Wales, UK, would like to share a message of peace, hope and unity with Veterans for Peace Chapter 72 in Portland, Oregon, on this your Memorial Day. Although so many miles apart, we are connected by a common purpose.

Our vision is of a just and peaceful world. We aim to make a difference locally and globally through sharing ideas and information, raising awareness and campaigning, and we are delighted to have this opportunity to send you our good wishes and support, to remember with you all those who have died in conflicts around the world, and to stand in solidarity with you and your cause.

Wrexham Peace & Justice Forum and Wrexham Women for Peace will hold a Picnic for Peace in Wrexham's Peace Garden as an expression of

our unity with all those who are marking Memorial Day with messages of peace.

Veterans for Peace Chapter 72 sent this message which we read out in Wrexham at the picnic:

We are all citizens of our communities, our nations, and the Earth. The goals of a peaceful world can only be achieved through international unity and support among the many thousands grassroots movements world-wide. Veterans for Peace welcomes and shares the message being delivered by Bridie to us this Memorial Day. Its message of solidarity in peace is particularly significant in these times. We are not alone. As US President Dwight D. Eisenhower once said, 'I think that people want peace so much that one of these days government had better get out of their way and let them have it.'

Around 20 people braved the very blustery weather to join us in Wrexham for the event. In a sheltered corner of the Peace Garden it was warm enough to sit and eat and chat, the rain held off and there was even some sunshine. Thanks to everyone who brought food to share; special thanks to Wrexham Veggies for the vegan hotdogs and truly delicious vegan homity pie.

The Picnic was ceremoniously closed with a splendid rendition of *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* through the megaphone by the youngest members of our group, pictured below.



Memorial Day in Portland

Bridie Przibram

'The one thing I never want to see again is a military parade.'
General Ulysses S. Grant, eighteenth President of the United States.



Memorial Day in the USA is a big event. It officially marks the start of Summer. Radio commercials (I didn't see any TV but I imagine they are the same) are filled with manic voice-overs exhorting the listener to get on down to their local SUV dealer and stock up on gas-guzzling off-roaders for the up-coming holiday season.

Officially, the day is equivalent to our Remembrance Day, when wreaths are laid at War Memorials, and parades are given by serving military. The public crowd into military cemeteries to lay flowers at the graves of dead loved ones. This year in Portland Oregon, the speechifying took place at the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington Park. The names of 801 fallen Vietnam Veterans were read out. Fox News covered the event.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the river, a smaller, angrier gathering was taking place.



Five years ago, Veterans for Peace Chapter 72, tired of the pontification and hypocrisy of the official Memorial Day parades, started to organise their own commemoration, honouring the fallen by calling for an end to all war, and looking towards a day when military parades would be a thing of the past.

This year, the commemoration was held at the Korean War Memorial, to honour the fallen and the survivors of this largely forgotten war.

It was a small gathering of around 20 people, most of them members of VFP and their friends or family. The weather was cool and drizzly (the weather in Oregon is very similar to that in Wales – local humour has it that Oregonians have 14 different words for rain!) – which may have kept a few people away. VFP President Emeritus Grant Remington gave a short address, then read out a song written by a very well-loved former member of the Chapter, Sean Slattery, who passed away recently. Slattery was a nationally famous folk-singer and activist whose character and voice as both balladeer and mentor to many of the current members of the Chapter are keenly missed. I delivered my address from the WPJF and Wrexham Women for Peace, which was warmly accepted by all present. The size and intimacy of the gathering made the message of solidarity even stronger, I felt. The feeling that, although we may be banging our heads against a brick wall, if many small gatherings and groups like ours bang in different places, maybe some effect may be felt. We are not alone.

Taps was played, after which the small band collected VFP flags from Grant's car and made its way across the street to the Peace Memorial Park, stopping traffic as we went. The Peace Park is something very close to the hearts of all members of VFP Chapter 72. When the president of the Peace Park Foundation, Brad Perkins, was looking for an organisation to help sponsor the Park, VFP jumped at the chance. This area of the city is officially owned by the Department of Transportation, and

was adopted by the veterans through an 'adopt a greenspace' program, allowing them to landscape and maintain the area. The circular design (left and below) is believed to be the largest peace symbol on the planet! Every Spring, a local nurserywoman donates flowers and plants to keep the garden alive. The location is at a nexus of roads and paths used by buses, cars, cyclists, walkers and skateboarders, and features a small amphitheatre that is sometimes used for concerts and addresses, which has as its backdrop a most spectacular view of downtown Portland. Magically, the site is free from litter and graffiti. This may be due to the respect Portlanders have for their city in general, or because members of the Peace community regularly stop by with rubbish sacks and tidy up as they go along, or maybe it's something to do with the place itself. Who knows. There is a small memorial to Sean Slattery, where some of his ashes are buried, along with a pouch of tobacco and a dram of Irish whisky. It features the only US flag ever to fly at the Park.

Around the edge of the circular garden are twelve slots for flags. Into these we placed the VFP flags that we had paraded down from the War Memorial. There was no more speechifying at this point. People just stood around and chatted, reminiscing about people and events past, and generally absorbing the atmosphere of the place, reflecting on why it is there, and why it is still needed.

That evening at a local club, a benefit was being organised, featuring local blues artists and international singer David Rovics, to raise funds for Iraq Veterans Against the War. I understand it was extremely successful.

