





h Mother!

BY KATHERINE JAMIESON // ILLUSTRATION BY SHANE HARRISON

In this surprising history of one of America's most beloved holidays, we meet a woman who fought tirelessly for the establishment of Mother's Day, then later fought just as hard to get rid of it

WHEN YOU THINK of Mother's Day, bouquets of roses, perfume bottles, and pastel-colored cards with flowery script probably spring to mind. It's hard to argue with a day designated to honor the one who gave you life, but the road to birthing Mother's Day was far rockier than one would imagine. Its unlikely founder, an unwed, childless insurance clerk from West Virginia, spent almost a decade petitioning for the establishment of a day when children could thank their tireless, hardworking mothers, finally achieving her goal in 1914. But her triumph was short-lived. Ten years later, unhappy with what she saw as the bastardization and overcommercialization of her original intention, she devoted the rest of her life to the dissolution of the very holiday she had fought so hard to create, and her battle to defend her vision pitted her against suffragists, New York Governor Al Smith, Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt, and even mothers themselves.

Efforts to celebrate mothers in the U.S. actually began decades before an official holiday was finally established. In 1872, Julia Ward Howe, the famous author of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* and a social crusader, was the first American woman to propose a day dedicated to the maternal bond and its potential to instill pacifism. Dubbing it the Mother's Day for Peace, Howe envisioned a day to organize, pray, sing, and speak out against war. She wrote, "Arise, all women who have hearts, and say firmly: Our husbands shall not come to us, reeking with carnage, for caresses and ap-

plause. Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience." Not surprisingly, as the country was just gearing up for another century of carnage, Howe's idea flopped. Her husband threatened to divorce her, her own children told her to get out of the public eye, and even in Boston, her hometown and the only place where the holiday had achieved a foothold, she found herself largely covering the expenses for her annual peace rallies for mothers on her own.

Another 35 years would pass before a second woman took up the Mother's Day crusade. Anna Jarvis, the 10th of 13 (possibly 14) children, was inspired by the tireless work of her own mother, Ann Marie Reeves Jarvis. In 1860, Mrs. Jarvis had formed "Mother's Day Work Clubs" to teach women sanitation methods to protect their children's health. Refusing to take sides during the Civil War, Mrs. Jarvis and women in the clubs also helped nurse thousands of wounded Confederate and Union soldiers. After the war, Mrs. Jarvis again leveraged the theme of maternal care to promote peace in her divided community. She established a Mother's Friendship Day and, according to Olive Crow-Dadisman, director of the Anna Jarvis House in Webster, WV, brought Civil War veterans together in a room and "got 5,000 angry men to put down their weapons and hug and kiss."

Despite all Mrs. Jarvis' extraordinary work outside the home, Anna also heard her mother speak passionately throughout her life about the need for a day of rest for every-

day mothers from their non-stop routine of childrearing, cooking, washing, and sewing. When her mother died, on May 9, 1905, the second Sunday in May, Jarvis vowed to make her dream a reality. At the service, Jarvis' brother Claude heard her promise, "by the grace of God, you shall have that Mother's Day." But the road ahead would not be smooth; the idea of "women's work" was far from appreciated in the early 1900s. "She was laughed out of places," says Crow-Dadisman. "We have letters from men, saying, 'I love my mother, but I don't think she needs a day off.'"

In 1907, Jarvis began her campaign for the establishment of Mother's Day, writing hundreds of letters to businessmen, legislators, and executives across the country and around the world. She even bought the house next door to hers just to store her massive correspondence. But it wasn't until she joined forces with John Wanamaker, the founder of Wanamaker's department stores and now considered the father of modern advertising, that the movement took off. Though Wanamaker was credited in his time as a great philanthropist, his motivations for helping Jarvis are rather murky. Like Jarvis, he was a committed Christian, and he claimed this as his motivation for venerating mothers. But as a successful merchant and businessman, he must have also recognized the potential goldmine of another gift-giving day.

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In any case, his financial support and promotion proved crucial, and on May 10, 1908, he hosted a Mother's Day service in the Wanamaker Store Auditorium in Philadelphia. That day, an overcapacity crowd of 15,000 listened to Jarvis' 70-minute plea to bring Mother's Day into existence. Jarvis also sent 500 white carnations, the flower she had chosen as a symbol, to mothers in the congregation of the Andrews Methodist Church back home in Grafton, WV—the same church where her mother had taught Sunday school for over 25 years—along with the following telegram to be read at the service, outlining the primary tenets of the day:

"To revive the dormant filial love and gratitude we owe to those who gave us birth. To be a home tie for the absent. To obliterate family estrangement. To create a bond of brotherhood through the wearing of a floral badge. To make us better children by getting us closer to the hearts of our good mothers. To brighten the lives of good mothers. To have them know we appreciate them, though we do not show it as often as we ought...Mother's Day is to remind us of our duty before it is too late."

Jarvis' passion was not in vain: the next year, 45 states, Mexico, and Canada observed Mother's Day. From the beginning, Jarvis' conception of the day was unwavering. She envisioned an intimate day for every mother's child to express deep love and fidelity, a kind of once-a-year communion with your mom. And she was insistent about the placement of the apostrophe in the name: her vision was a singular Mother's Day—not Mothers' Day—honoring the individual, not the practice of mothering. It was not about uniting with mothers as a whole or using motherhood as a springboard for political action or change, as her mother had

done. She also said it must be on the second Sunday in May, both to commemorate the anniversary of her mother's death and to make it a "holy day," not just a frivolous "holiday." "She saw it as a home day, when you came back and paid homage to your mother," says Katharine Antolini, a history lecturer at West Virginia Wesleyan College who is completing a doctoral thesis on Anna Jarvis. "Anna idolized motherhood in a way that only a woman without children could," she says. "It was a very sentimental and childlike view. It was motherhood as the ultimate sacrifice."

Jarvis' image of Mother's Day, however, didn't quite jibe with the goals of those engaged in the growing fight for women's voting rights. In 1910, the suffragists were making more of a racket than ever, and the 19th Amendment was still 10 years away from being ratified. Jarvis herself initially dismissed the movement, prioritizing her campaign above all else (she later recognized the importance of the vote for women). And for some legislators, Mother's Day presented a more desirable option than giving women a real voice in running the country. As Lois Rudnick, director of American Studies at the University of Massachusetts at Boston, commented in a 1991 *Boston Globe* article, Jarvis' holiday appealed to many politicians because "enshrining a traditional view of motherhood was a way of mollifying some critics at a time

when women were asking for more than a maudlin moment of memory." As Americans fought over the role women would play in governing the country, the Mother's Day celebration became both a token concession and a decoy for true power.

Jarvis' crusade gained steam when William E. Glasscock, governor of WV, proclaimed on April 26, 1910 that "Mothers' Day" be celebrated henceforth in the state, to commemorate, "the noblest, sweetest, and best of all God's creatures." An article in the May 7, 1910 edition of the *Palestine Daily Herald* of Palestine, TX, noted that Jarvis' movement had grown with "remarkable rapidity" and expressed hope that it become an "international festival date, observed by christians [sic] the world over and possibly by Moslem and heathen—for it is the one subject on which mankind can unite in common reverence."

In 1912, Jarvis incorporated The Mother's Day International Association, which was headquartered in her home in Philadelphia. Two years later, on May 8, 1914, Jarvis sat triumphantly in the House gallery when Congress issued H.J. Resolution 263 calling for the second Sunday in May to be designated as Mother's Day. President Woodrow Wilson signed the Resolution, stating, "The American mother is the greatest source of our country's strength and inspiration." After seven years of perseverance, Jarvis' struggle had finally been vindicated.

If the story ended here, it would be worthy of the millions of schmaltzy Mother's Day cards sent each year. But Jarvis' choice to accept support from Wanamaker, and perhaps her own naïveté about the power of commercialism, made the next several years an unpleasant reality check. No sooner had the ink from Wilson's

signature dried than every American business was clamoring for a piece of the Mother's Day pie. According to Crow-Dadisman, Jarvis was initially tolerant of practical gifts for mothers, particularly those that would provide rest and comfort, like chairs and mattresses. But soon enough, the card, florist, and candy industries swooped in, and Jarvis had no tolerance for their profiteering. It was war.

Now in her 50s, Jarvis rapidly retooled, and with a gusto rivaled only by her own efforts to found the holiday, she set about trying to nullify it. Less than a decade after the holiday's recognition, in 1923, she was clashing with New York Governor Al Smith for failing to gain official authorization from her Mother's Day International Association for his proposed Mother's Day Celebration to benefit handicapped children. Claiming they were in trademark violation and had price-gouged the event's carnations, she threatened a lawsuit against him, as well as the mayor, a U.S. senator, two right reverends, and the police commissioner. The event was called off. That same year, Jarvis targeted candy makers with a similar vengeance. "Mother's Day was not intended to be a source of commercial profit," she ranted to the assembled membership of the Associated Retail Confectioners in Philadelphia, prompting the conventioners to recess in order to cut her polemic short.

From then on, Jarvis became a quirky public figure, famous for her outbursts, scathing editorials, and willingness to go after any perceived enemy to the authentic spirit of Mother's Day, no matter how large or small. According to Antolini, part of Jarvis' frustration arose from the fact that she expected to control the commercialization of Mother's Day, and she was outraged when she could not. She considered Mother's Day her legal and intellectual property and trademarked the emblem of the white carnation, the words *Mother's Day*, and the phrase *second Sunday in May*. But as soon as the day became recognized nationally, the legal trademark began to slip from her grasp, and, in her words, "antimother propagandists" burst onto the scene. Jarvis would spend the rest of her life battling "the charlatans, bandits, pirates, racketeers, kidnappers, and other termites that would undermine with their greed one of the finest, noblest, and truest movements and celebrations."

Even the children trying to honor their mothers were not exempt from Jarvis' diatribes: "A printed card means nothing except that you are too lazy to write to the woman who has done more for you than anyone in the world. And candy! You take a box to Mother—and then eat most of it yourself. A pretty sentiment!" Over time, her position and actions became more extreme. Going up against the mothers she had originally intended to honor as part of her new cause, Jarvis quarreled with the American War Mothers when they held their own celebration. After breaking up a rally of a group selling carnations in 1932, she was dragged off by the police to a brief stay in jail. And to protest the flower industry's exploitation of the holiday, she suggested that people wear celluloid buttons of carnations instead and made them available free, from her association.

Jarvis' relationship to other influential women of the time was further compromised by her fanatical take on intellectual property. She never mentioned Howe by name or recognized her when speaking or writing on the history of Mother's Day, and she flat-out denied the existence of "Mother's Peace Day." When Frances Perkins and other leading feminists attempted to use Mother's Day to promote social causes, she criticized them harshly. In 1931, she even went after Elea-

nor Roosevelt for backing a Mother's Day tribute.

Jarvis spent the last of her years and her substantial family inheritance persevering in this countercrusade. By the 1930s, she had earned herself quite a reputation and made enemies from all sectors of society, so it's no surprise that stories written about her during this period tend toward defamation. *The New York Times* printed rumors that she had secluded herself inside a three-story brick town house that could be entered only after a secret knock, but Jarvis denied these stories. In fact, she had taken to the streets once again, this time going door-to-door canvassing and asking for signatures for a petition to rescind Mother's Day. "If the American people are not willing to protect Mother's Day from the hordes of money-schemers that would overwhelm it with their schemes," she vowed on behalf of her Mother's Day International Association, "then we shall cease having a Mother's Day—and we know how."

But Mother's Day had long since been adopted by American capitalism, and there was nothing Jarvis, or anyone else, could do to stop that now. Her health failing, she was put in the Marshall Square Sanitarium in West Chester, PA, in 1944, the bill for which was footed in part, unbeknownst to her, by a group called the Floral Exchange. This fact is usually touted as the crowning irony to Jarvis' life, that the very merchants she first made wealthy and then turned against were the ones to feed and clothe her in old age. But Crow-Dadisman sees it otherwise, arguing that it was not generosity but self-interest that prompted the floral industry's support. Citing records from the sanitarium, she says that Jarvis was not insane but "crushed" by seeing her life's work turned against her, and the florists just wanted to get her out of the public eye. Jarvis' death, in 1948 at age 84, was attributed to congestive heart failure, but Crow-Dadisman speculates that it was actually a "broken heart."

It's hard to say whether Jarvis can be considered a feminist. She certainly never thought of herself as one. Both a pioneer in identifying the great contributions of women's labor to society and an unwitting pawn of the antisuffragist movement, she was more concerned with intellectual property rights than the political ramifications of her holiday. Yet, paradoxically, she also stands as an example of the lasting impact of an independent woman, though it took her years to recognize the significance of the vote. Her rejection of the commercialization of Mother's Day is one of the first and most powerful examples of an individual going head to head with modern corporations, and foreshadows later losing battles to protect human relationships and rituals from commodification. The ultimate irony, which Jarvis never publicly acknowledged, was that she was able to pursue her cause with such vigor because she had personally rejected the traditional ideals she claimed to hold so dear. Unhindered by children or a husband and financially independent, Jarvis was free to loudly express her radical, unpopular views, public opinion be damned.

Regardless of Jarvis' considerable conflicts over commercial rights and the bastardization of her true vision, one thing is certain: Mother's Day lives on. It's the second-highest gift-giving holiday after Christmas, a peak day for long-distance phone calls, and the busiest day of the year for many restaurants. According to Hallmark, 96 percent of American consumers take part in Mother's Day. And in her day, even childless, Anna Jarvis was not exempt from the burgeoning celebration: each year until her death, she received thousands of Mother's Day cards. ■