

Sticking it to England — the birth of Presidents' Day

February is a dreary month, with all the clouds and the rain. However, it is redeemed with the positive of trucks leaving our state for wholesale growers, greenhouses and retail operations throughout the United States and Canada.

Many years ago, I wrote about Valentine's Day, but let's just say my story was a tad opaque. It was about the beheading of St. Valentine and the boom of rose production for the day. Pete Brentano, **Brentano's Tree Farm**, is a past president of the association and a good friend. He correctly asked me, "What the hell was that about?" Good question — but he has never forgotten that column.

So what about this year? Let's talk about the history of the presidency, starting with the first president, George Washington.

The origins of Presidents' Day

Before becoming president, Washington led the Continental Army against the British. Jeffrey Engel, the executive director of the Center for Presidential History at Southern Methodist University, said Washington looked to his foes for inspiration. Throughout the Revolutionary War, soldiers would celebrate Washington's birthday "as a snub to King George [III]," Engel wrote.

After Washington died in 1799, Americans still celebrated his birthday, but they did it informally.

February 22 was not officially recognized as a national holiday until 1879.

Another tradition was added in 1896. Since that year, the Senate has selected one of its members, alternating between the parties, to read Washington's 7,640-word farewell address in a legislative session on or around Feb. 22.

The modern version of Presidents' Day came in 1968, when Congress passed the Uniform Monday Holiday Act. This bill designated certain government holi-

days — including Washington's Birthday, Labor Day and Memorial Day — to be observed on Mondays.

Lincoln and the other presidents

It is commonly understood that Presidents' Day recognizes both Washington and the 16th president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln. Many states had already celebrated the Civil War president. The date of the third Monday in February is sometimes closer to his birthday (February 12, 1809).

When doing research on this column, I was astounded to find out two things. First, the apostrophe location making Presidents' Day a plural possessive, although Oregon adopts the singular possessive, "President's." Second, not all states recognize the federal holiday.

Less than half of the United States officially recognize Presidents' Day. More than a dozen do not observe it at all. States like Virginia and Illinois recognize their native sons individually, while other states are all over the place. According to a couple of sources, Missouri celebrates the birthdays of three presidents on three different days — Washington, Lincoln and Harry S. Truman, who was born in Missouri on May 8, 1884.

Kentucky has public holidays for the birthdays of Washington, Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Davis was of course the only president of the Confederate States of America. Kentucky recognizes his birthday even though it never left the Union.

Alabama and Mississippi celebrate the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert E. Lee, the Confederate general, on the same day in January. Georgia and Indiana take an entirely different approach to Washington's Birthday, which they celebrate around Christmas. Indiana and New Mexico celebrate Lincoln's birthday on the day after Thanksgiving.

Civics lesson at the Stone house

Many kids who get Presidents' Day off from school tend to sleep in. My daughters, Andrea Margaret and Carolyn Rose, both knew they wouldn't be so lucky. They were going to learn about the



Jeff Stone
OAN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

reasons behind the celebration.

The family is subjected to quizzes, statements of facts, and the outright and unsubstantiated opinions of an old U.S. Senate staffer (that being me).

We cover the basics. Presidents serve for four years at a time and are limited to two terms. Extra bonus points are given if this is uttered by my family, and they get ice cream if they say why. There are two real reasons.

In our republic, only one president, FDR, served more than two terms. He was elected to four terms of office, which broke with a two-term tradition all other presidents had observed. It made sense to return to that tradition.

After FDR, the people wanted to prevent any future president from holding office indefinitely and to preserve the democratic principles of the American system of government. The 22nd Amendment to the Constitution of the United States was introduced in 1947 and was ratified by the states in 1951. It was crafted by the Hoover Commission and signed by FDR's successor, President Harry S. Truman.

More than a day off

In my house, when we talk birthdays, I assign presidents to the birth year. I am a Kennedy baby, but just barely. He was assassinated when I was 19 days old. My wife Jennifer was born under Lyndon Baines Johnson. Andrea and Carolyn were born under Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, respectively.

They roll their eyes every time I mention this, but this day is about more than shopping sales and a three-day weekend. Happy Presidents' Day. ☺