

APRIL 22

It was 1868. Among the many sources of concern—even disquiet—in the country that year were a presidential election (Grant won, thanks in part to freedmen—black men*—votes in some Southern states), Reconstruction was gradually re-incorporating former rebellion states back into Union, the world was getting on its feet again economically after an international financial crisis, and for the first time, the Cuyahoga river—which flows through Cleveland, Ohio—caught fire and burned. It would burn another dozen times over the next century. The last time it caught fire was noon, June 22, 1969. The outrageous images of a river on fire met a rising tide of concern for “Mother Earth” and popular sentiment combined with scientific research to create the political will for change. An enormous oil spill happened in California also, Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin and others worked to raise the issue of environmental protection to President Nixon.

Richard Nixon pulled together the scattered bureaucratic nodes in government and formed the EPA. It stands as one of his lasting accomplishments. To this must be added an astonishing array of related Federal government undertakings which he supported, including OSHA, the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts, and much more, which were passed or developed during his time in office.

Earth Day, April 22, is 50 years old today. The first celebration was fairly modest. The Nixons planted a tree on the White House grounds (photos show Mrs. Nixon wielding shovel). Virtually every nation on earth has some observance of Earth Day now. And, with the international concerns about covid-19 restricting travel, etc, we are seeing parts of the world on display as no one living has ever seen them.

I thought today about this 50 year social movement and the wide-spread and rapidly growing concern for conservation as a political and social necessity which shaped that time half a century ago. Our present concerns are not new. These subjects, which ran hot and obvious then, are now pervasive and unremarkable viewpoints now.

A very modest example of how the language and imagery used back then has become a simple declaration of our new self-awareness is found in our prayerbook on page 370, where in Eucharistic prayer C we say, “At your command all things came to be...this fragile earth, our island home.”.

Some of you will remember that by the canons which govern the Episcopal Church, the language of a proposed new prayerbook passes through a decade of review, use, assessment, and adoption. The language we now find familiar was new language throughout the 1970's and was at last approved as the prayerbook of the Episcopal Church in 1979.

Happy Earth Day.

*Black women, Asian, and Native American women as well did not secure suffrage until deep into the 20th century!