

Veterans Remembered: The American Legion 1920-30

World War I began in August 1914 and ended with an armistice on November 11, 1918. When word of the armistice reached Washburn, people poured into the streets, celebrating with a cacophony of bells, whistles and horns, impromptu parades, speeches, effigy burning, and other expressions of gratitude that the terrible conflict had ended at last.

By early June 1919 most of the men had returned home, and later that month the community expressed its collective thanks for their sacrifices with a three-day soldiers' homecoming celebration. The following September, a number of veterans, under the leadership of Hubert H. Peavey, the captain of volunteer Company D, organized the Bayfield County American Legion Post. It was named the Bodin-Finstad Post after August Bodin and Carl K. Finstad, members of Company D, who were killed in action in France a few weeks before the war ended. The Post headquarters was in the former Hanson Building, located on Bayfield Street between Second Avenue West and Washington Avenue.

Among the activities sponsored by the Legion Post were dog derbies in which children riding on sleds pulled by dogs raced each other on courses marked out on Bayfield Street. The children were divided into age groups, with a prize awarded to the winner in each group. Another Legion-sponsored event was an annual three-day fall carnival, held in Legion Hall. There were games and many other activities on both floors of the hall, and a dance was held each evening with refreshments provided by the women's

auxiliary. The climax of the carnival was the crowning of the winner of the "popularity queen" contest, during the last evening. The Legion also sponsored annual farm festivals with exhibits of agricultural products, domestic arts, 4-H club projects, and a flower show. Entertainment was provided by a ferris wheel, carnival games, band concerts, a water carnival at Memorial Park, a parade, and a variety of other activities at the Legion Hall and elsewhere.

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Guest columnist

For Christmas 1934, Legion members collected used toys and games from the community, reconditioned them in a "Santa Claus workshop" at the Legion Hall and distributed them to needy children as Christmas presents. Other charitable activities at Christmas were "cheer barrels" placed in stores in which people could deposit food, clothing, and other contributions for the needy. On "poppy day," the day before Memorial Day, Legion men and women sold red paper poppies made by and for the benefit of disabled veterans. Reminiscent of the red poppies that grew in profusion in Flanders, they were symbols of the bloodshed in the horrendous battles that had taken place there during World War I.

The Legion Post also established a memorial forest and a park. The George

Washington-Bicentennial Memorial Forest, planted by Legion members, was dedicated in June 1932 in commemoration of the 200th birthday of the first president. Known as the Legion Forest, it is located in the Chequamegon National Forest, about two miles west of County Highway C on Brinks Road; an inscribed bronze plaque mounted on a large boulder marks the location.

And on Memorial Day 1934 the Legion Park, on the northwest corner of Bayfield Street and First Avenue East, built by Legion members, was dedicated. The park dedication was the climax of an elaborate Memorial Day celebration, attended by people from the surrounding region. In the morning the graves of dead veterans were dedicated with due ceremony, while the afternoon events began with a long and colorful parade. The parade marched on Bayfield Street to Eighth Avenue West then back to the Legion Park for the dedication ceremony. Among the units in the parade was a car bearing David Monroe, the Civil War veteran; another car carrying two Spanish-American War veterans; the Legion band; school children and other groups; followed at the end by the Ashland Drum Corps.

In addition to these events, Legion men and women were involved as sponsors of and participants in the city band, sport teams, community dances and balls, patriotic celebrations, picnics at Memorial Park, Christmas festivities, and numerous other activities, playing a prominent role in the civic and social life of Washburn during the 1920s and 1930s.