

Washburn in The Great War — Part VII

By August 1918 the war had gone on for four terrible years and it did not seem in that melancholy month that it would ever end. In the spring the Germans had launched a massive offensive in one last effort to breach the Allied lines and reach Paris. They were stopped, however, and under unrelenting Allied pressure their lines slowly yielded. Then on November 1 a massive attack spearheaded by American forces cracked the German lines, turning their withdrawal into a rout. With disaster looming at the front, with its troops decimated by illness and its last reserves committed, confronted with possible mutiny in its army and actual mutiny in its navy, and facing an emerging communist revolution at home, Germany had no alternative but to surrender. An armistice, signed in a railroad car in Compiègne Forest in France, ended the fighting at 11 a.m. on November 11, 1918.

Word of the armistice and cessation of hostilities reached Washburn at 4:30 in the morning of November 11. Once the news had been confirmed, the city went "stark mad," according to the Times. A cacophony of bells, whistles and noise makers of all kinds enveloped the city, and

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people poured into the streets to celebrate. There were impromptu parades up and down Bayfield Street, "Thrilling speeches" at courthouse square, and an effigy of the Kaiser was ceremoniously shot, burned and otherwise abused, ending up in a makeshift hearse at the Catholic church, where there were more speeches. The Times proclaimed that "Never before was such a demonstration held in the city for the people were in a happy frame of mind, glad that the Kaiser had been overthrown, glad that the United States and her Allies had brought the German armies to their knees and glad that the boys who have helped to make the world safe for democracy would soon return again."

Meanwhile, in France an assault by the 32nd Division, on heavily fortified German positions in the early morning of November 11, was cancelled when word was received that the war was over. On November 17 the division began the long march to the Rhine River, occupying

the American bridgehead at Coblenz on December 12. There the division served as an occupation force until 1919, when it moved to embarkation ports in France for shipment back to the United States. The division arrived in New York in late May and by the first week of June most of Washburn's "soldier boys" had arrived home.

The people of Washburn expressed their thankfulness that the "war to end all wars" was over at last with the solemn observance of Memorial Day 1919. Ceremonies began at the lake front in the early afternoon with the "singing of 'America' by the audience . . . followed by a short talk by Rev. George Waters who called the roll of the soldiers and sailors buried at sea and for those buried across the seas. Young ladies, members of the Joan of Arc Circle of the Red Cross, dressed in white and wearing white crowns, acted as flowers girls. As the names of the roll were called a young lady carried a wreath of flowers to the waterfront and cast them upon the waters." Then a prayer was offered "for the boys whose lives had been given in the service of their country." A parade "wended its way to the cemetery," headed by a drum corps, G.A.R. (Civil War) veterans, parents of the boys killed in the war, Spanish-American

and Great War veterans, Boy Scouts and other groups, including a large contingent of soldiers in uniform. There more speeches were given, prayers offered, and graves decorated with American flags and strewn with flowers.

About 1,300 people from across Bayfield County served during the Great War, of which 27 died from various causes, including seven men and a Red Cross nurse, Anna Cosgrove, from Washburn. Two members of Company D, Carl K. Finstad, from Washburn, and August Bodin from Bayview, were killed in action, in August 1918. A number of other men were wounded. Washburn's most decorated soldier was Alfred O. Swanby. He enlisted in the Canadian Army in April 1915, and fought in several terrible battles in France during which he was repeatedly wounded. For bravery and for actions beyond the call of duty, Swanby was awarded several of Great Britain's highest military decorations.

Captain Hubert H. Peavy was authorized to organize a National Guard company, but there was little interest among the veterans, who had had their fill of military life. They turned to public service, establishing the Bodin-Finstad post of the American Legion, which was to play an important part in community affairs in future years.