

Washburn During The War Years 1939-1945—Preparedness

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CS 6/23/11

On September 1, 1939 Germany invaded Poland, quickly defeating and all but destroying that helpless nation, followed by declarations of war by Great Britain and France. In the spring of 1940, continuing its campaign of aggression, Germany conquered Denmark and Norway, then France, Holland and Belgium. In June 1940, in a speech at the University of Virginia, President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared that the United States had abandoned neutrality for non-belligerency, meaning that the United States would support any nation opposing German aggression but would not become an active participant in the war. He announced that the nation would "pursue two obvious and simultaneous course"—make available the resources of the United States to those nations opposing Germany while at the same time preparing America to defend itself. Careful to avoid offending public opinion, which was still strongly opposed to the nation entering the war, he increased the defense budget, expanded the armed forces, and established war mobilization agencies.

While the American people were opposed to full-scale mobilization, there was strong support for increasing the size of the army, which at 187,893 men ranked eighteenth among the world's armies in September 1939. But expansion of the army meant conscrip-



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tion which the people opposed until the continued German aggression created a more favorable view of the draft. On September 14, 1940 the nation's first peacetime conscription law was passed by Congress with comfortable margins. A Selective Service System was established in which local draft boards made the final decisions, subject to an appeals process, for the classification of registrants and conscription of the men to fulfill the periodic quotas received from the state Selective Service System headquarters. While these volunteer boards—local groups of neighbors, rather than remote civilian or military authorities, made the conscription decisions, they were vulnerable to local pressures for favoritism.

On Wednesday, October 16, 1940 the men of Bayfield County, along with millions of men between the ages of 21 and 36 years, in every city and county in the nation,

registered for the draft. Governor Julius P. Heil proclaimed the day as "Liberty Appreciation Day," the irony of which, if it did not occur to the registrants at the time, probably did so later to those who were inducted and experienced the tender mercies of military discipline. In Washburn registration was held at city hall, where 312 men registered. The total for the county was 1,874, about 500 more than anticipated. The draft board assigned a serial number to each registrant, which was reported to state Selective Service System headquarters. The next step was to determine the sequence in which the men would be called through a national lottery, held in Washington on October 29th, amidst widespread publicity. In what President Roosevelt called a "most solemn ceremony," a blindfolded Secretary of War Henry Stimson drew from a transparent bowl filled with capsules, one containing the serial number 158, duly announced by the president. This meant that the man who held this serial number was the first to be eligible to be drafted by each of the 6,400 draft boards throughout the nation. Subsequent withdrawals by "lesser dignitaries" over the next 17 hours established the sequence of eligibility of the registrants with each local board for the first draft call. Lists of the sequential serial numbers were then sent to the local boards. Who was actually called from these

lists depended on the classification of registrants by the local draft boards. Bayfield County's quota for the first draft call in November 1940 was two. The first two men on the sequence list were called, one of whom failed the physical examination, while the other one volunteered, along with six other men. The general procedure for the groups of draftees and volunteers was to assemble in the courtroom of the courthouse, on the day they were ordered to report by the draft board, where they were given instructions and a group leader was appointed. After a program of music by the high school band and inspirational talks by local notables, the group marched to the Goody Shoppe, escorted by a Legion color guard. There they boarded a bus for Ashland, from where they took the train to Milwaukee. This ceremonial march to the bus depot, reminiscent of the attention lavished on men leaving for service during the World War I, was later discontinued. This process of registration, lottery, and draftee induction into the service was repeated numerous times before and during war.

The first man to be inducted nation-wide was James B. Manning, a native of Washburn and a 1932 graduate of Washburn High School, who was then living in Illinois. He was killed in action in France on June 26 1944.