

Buffalo Tales

September/October 2018

Buffalo County Historical Society

The Veterans of World War I Inc. Part I

By: Broc Anderson

World War I, “the war to end all wars,” began a new chapter of military tactics and technology, but also a turning point for veteran rights. Upon returning home from war, promises of fair payments to soldiers during war time sparked a different struggle at home. To facilitate positive relationships between the federal government and soldiers, several laws promised fair payments and additional bonuses as a continual good faith effort to take care of veterans. At the turn of the 1930s, many World War I veterans struggled financially because of the Depression. For many vets, they needed these bonuses immediately to feed their families or pay off debts. After several protests and marches against the federal government, veterans received their benefits and became a formidable political force, however, it was not until 1959 that the United States chartered the Veterans of World War I Inc., VWWI.

An organization specifically for World War I veterans nearly forty years after the end of World War I raises many questions about the group. Why was this veteran’s organization formed so late? Why would World War I veterans need this organization when they had other veteran organizations they could join? Did the VWWI distinguish themselves from these other veteran organizations? The unusual circumstance of Congress chartering the Veterans of World War I inc., VWWI, can be broken down into three main parts. The first, includes discussing the history of a few VWWI more significant members and consulting congressional records for reasons why for such a strong push to form a World War I veterans association. The second and third reasons are often difficult to separate at times, but are distinct from one another. The group’s political and social presence in local, state, and national communities varied from barracks to barracks and whether or not they sought political or social goals often intertwined with Americanist ideologies, securing veteran benefits, and working with the Women’s Auxiliary. By more closely examining the local barracks in Buffalo and Hamilton counties in Nebraska, we can more fully understand the VWWI.

World War I veterans who served abroad or at home were not denied access to their local American Legion or a Veteran’s of Foreign Wars, VFW, however, maintained a need for their own organization. The VWWI, American Legion, and VFW all actively sought veteran’s rights throughout the late twentieth-century, however, distinct differences that separate the VWWI from the other two organizations is that this veteran organization served primarily as an alternative social avenue to meet other World War I veterans and as a leading veteran organization promoting American patriotism in the community. The Buffalo County Barracks here in Kearney, the Hamilton County Barracks in Aurora, and the larger narrative around the country can we more fully understand why Congress officially recognized this veteran’s organization at the national level.

Another significant part of the local barracks in Nebraska is that the VWWI was an additional veteran organization on paper to support new bills and laws that benefited veterans. Like the VFW and the American Legion, the VWWI had political interests. In many instances, the VWWI lobbied for similar legislative bills, participated in similar social activities, and had members in the American Legion or the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Additional veteran organizations lobbying local, state, and federal legislators for continued financial support and veteran rights strengthened their efforts together. Local, state, and national politics discussions among other barracks at meetings, conferences, and conventions all around the country were of significant importance, however, sharing a meal with other veterans or sharing war stories often took center stage. While



the Buffalo and Hamilton County barracks participated in the political arena, the local barracks focused most of its' efforts in promoting patriotism in the local communities. The Hamilton County barracks more consistently engaged in local and state politics, but also had the important social elements that the Buffalo County Barracks made more mention of in their records.

Another important element to the VWWI is that they actively sought to distinguish themselves apart from the other veteran organizations. As an older generation, they distinctly thought of themselves different from a younger generation of veterans from World War II and the Korean War. While many members of the VWWI also had memberships in the American Legion and the VFW, something about this "other" organization held special meaning between World War I vets. Their shared experiences of going to war, fighting for fair payments, and maintaining the importance of supporting one's country all meshed within their generation and rallying against what they defined as "un-American." The Buffalo and Hamilton County Barracks are two examples in the larger scope of the VWWI that can help us understand how and why this organization developed.

Following the "Great War", World War I veterans were a strong influence in acquiring benefits after their service. For example, the potency of poison gas either killed the enemy or inflicted crippling damage to veterans for the rest of their lives. As a result of these horrible injuries, the creation of the Veteran's Administration and a chain of government sponsored hospitals sought to provide health care specifically for injured servicemen. In a greater example, the federal government owed thousands of veteran pensions on their return home, however, like previous soldiers, many came back to half-truth health care promises and few benefits from the government. By 1924, nearly five years after Armistice Day, Congress succumbed to a mounting pressure from the VFW and the American Legion for bonus payments to veterans. Amounts due varied from veteran to veteran, but a standard of "\$1 per day for each day served and \$1.25 for each day served overseas," with accumulating interest promised more money by 1945 when veterans could cash in on their service.

Six years later, the Great Depression severely deepened a financial need for veteran benefits. What is known as "The Bonus Army," led by Walter Waters, organized 28,540 World War I veterans, family members, and concerned community members in the summer of 1932 on to Washington D.C. in protest. Having fought President Coolidge and now FDR for immediate payment, their protests met fierce opposition. FDR ordered General Eisenhower and other military personnel to remove protestors from D.C. or risk going to jail. Finally, despite FDR's strong stance against issuing early pensions, the U.S. Senate overrode the president's refusal for early payment and dispersed World War I veteran bonuses immediately. Of Water's official roster, veterans from 47 states, two men from Alaska, six from Canada, and one from the Philippines were participating in the protest. Oddly enough, no veterans from Nebraska were mentioned in Water's records protesting in Washington D.C. If organizers like Water's and organizations like the VFW and American Legion were already strong outlets for political grievances, then the Nebraska barracks in Buffalo and Hamilton counties did not necessarily focus their attention on legislative acts promoting veteran rights.

Jeff Patrick's article, *From Civilian Life to Army Life: Fred Pickering's World War I Narrative*, discussed how little records exist of Nebraskan's fighting in Europe during World War I with a vibrant population serving overseas. According to Patrick, nearly fifty-five thousand Nebraska troops were active duty for the United States armed forces during World War I. Among the statistics of soldiers from Nebraska, Patrick also highlighted Fred Pickering's story. A farm kid from Ulysses, Nebraska, in June 1918, he registered as a U.S. Army engineer of the eighty-eighth division and shipped out to Europe only six weeks later. The exceptional aspect of Pickering's experience is his detailed records training with many other Nebraskans at Camp Funston, Iowa through his last few months "cleaning up France" in June of 1919.

For many other Nebraskans enlisted in the Army and National Guard, they found themselves scattered across the country as replacement regiments for soldiers in Europe. Before war had started, on March 26, 1917, the state of Nebraska activated the Fourth Nebraska National Guard for training. On many occasions, these soldiers guarded important transportation local sites at bridges, railroad terminals, state arsenals, and the capitol. Not until Congress declared war that the Fourth Nebraska National Guard became federal troops and sent to Cody, New Mexico for further training. While in Camp Cody, Nebraska soldiers with other troops from Iowa, Minnesota, and Indiana became a part of the Thirty-Fourth Infantry Division that never deployed overseas. Only an estimated five-thousand Nebraska troops served overseas as replacement soldiers out of thousands more waiting for their call to duty.

One of these thousands who never served overseas is Arthur Crosby of Buffalo County, Nebraska. Born in a Buffalo County dugout in 1896, Arthur Crosby's early years consisted of extreme poverty. Alfred and Lillie Crosby began life in a dugout somewhere north of Kearney, where they gave birth to Arthur on February 1923, 1896. His family would

then upgrade to a sod house with dirt floors packed with left over rice straw from packaging for mail and heated with cow chips. Before he turned twenty, Crosby's had just recently started a career as a car salesman, however, his plans soon came to a halt when his draft number, 456 - 1604, printed in the *Kearney Hub*, called him to serve his country. On July 21, 1917 at the age of 21, Crosby registered as an Army pilot. He would then go on into an aviation program on March 11, 1918 in Texas at Kelly and Gretna Fields as part of Squadron C where he spent countless hours training. Although no records indicate he served overseas, Crosby was honorably discharged on January 23, 1919, and returned home to Kearney to continue his career as a car salesman. He and Irma Eickmier of Kearney, quickly fell in love with each other upon his return and got married a year later in 1920.

Unlike Crosby, Pickering served a short time overseas in Europe which made Pickering eligible to join local VFWs upon their honorable discharge and return home. Having formed twenty years earlier before the start of World War I, the VFW traced its' root to the aftermath of the Spanish American War and the Philippine Insurrection. For many soldiers, they returned home without medical care or any financial support to return to civilian lifestyle. In response to their miserable livelihoods, several veteran organizations across the United States formed lobbying for various benefits and rights following their service. By 1913, many of these veteran organizations consolidated into what is now the VFW and gained national recognition by the end of World War I. According to the VFW website, three criteria is required for admittance. A veteran must be a citizen of the United States, having served honorably, and served "in a war, campaign, or expedition on foreign soil or in hostile waters."

For Crosby and thousands of other veterans from Nebraska, they did not meet fundamental criterion for the VFW of having served outside the United States. Instead, soldiers who did not serve overseas could find membership in the newly chartered American Legion by Congress on February 16, 1919. Not only was this veteran's organization a voice for political means, but also a social hall for vets sharing their war stories in training or overseas.

By 1958, criteria to join only amounted to veterans who were active duty, honorably discharged, completed their years of service, or served during World War I, World War II, or the Korean War, their admission to the Legion was welcomed.

Congress chartered the VWWI in 1958 as a reconciliation effort for past grievances catering to an older generation of veterans seeking their own association outside the individuals who served in more recent wars. The VWWI Buffalo County Barracks No. 2528 first began in 1961, while the Hamilton County Barracks No. 2033 established itself two years earlier in November of 1959. Membership to a local barracks did not require veterans to serve overseas, however, veterans only serving during World War I were admitted to the group. In many cases, mem-

bers of a VFW, the American Legion were also members of the VWWI and vice versa if they qualified. Similar to other local chapters, the bureaucratic functions of the national VWWI established a strong movement seeking thousands of members across the United States.

Along with a desire to add members, the need for continuity and group cohesiveness in every barracks looked toward the organization in the U.S. Constitution's by-laws and rituals as a fundamental foundation to conduct business.

On July 18, 1958, the Public Law 85-530 established the Veterans of World War I of the United States of America Incorporated as the official name of the group. Within Public Law 85-530, sections 1 through 19 describe various duties, powers, and organizational characteristics dictated how the VWWI functioned as a veteran's organization. In Section 3 "Objects and Purpose of the Organization" stated that,

"The purpose of the corporation shall be patriotic, fraternal, historical, and educational, in the service and for the benefit of veterans of World War I..."

More specifically, Subsection 1 in Section 3 states that another essential aspect to the VWWI is,

"To provide for the veterans of World War I an organization for their mutual benefit, pleasure, and amusement, which will afford them the opportunities and means for personal contact with each other in order to keep alive their friendships and memories of World War I and to venerate the memory of their honored dead."

In other words, the VWWI is primarily a social organization serving the interests of an aging generation of veterans seeking each other for emotional support.



Lapel pin featuring the signature poppy flower and name of organization.

Stay tuned for Part II in the November/December edition!

**Coming Events and
Education notes (see website for additional details):**

First two weekends in Dec. (Dec. 1/2 and Dec. 8/9) from 1-5 pm: Open to the public: 31st annual Christmas Tree Walk *** Saturday, December 1 from 12-1pm: Members Only Preview of the 31st annual Christmas Tree Walk***-check out dozens of trees decorated by area not-for-profits that tie their mission into this year's theme. The 2018 theme is "Sum', Sum', Summertime-Christmas in July." Each theme is announced at the end of the current year's Tree Walk. ***All of November: Christmas Decorating (during regular business hours plus open late on Thursday, Nov. 1 for decorating)

Save the Date: Thursday, December 8, 2018: Give Where You Live event

Volunteers & sponsors are needed for these events. Please contact any staff or board member to help!

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Director's Report—Jennifer Murrish

The museum staff and volunteers have been heavily involved in preparing and executing a smashing success of "A Night at the Opera" event. Please help us thank the following 'Nato' event sponsors: Angus Burgers & Shakes, Dr. Charles M. Schaepler, DDS, BD Construction, Hawthorne Jewelry, Town & Country Bank, Mother Hull Home, Kearney Floral, JC Penney, Anonymous, and a grant from the Nebraska Arts Council. The performers were top-notch and we were excited to be able to live stream those performances via the Kearney Chamber. The exhibits that were displayed and created by volunteers were also a huge success. Specifically they were designed to highlight and tease about some of the collections we have in storage that we will be able to further expand on with larger displays in the future as we build Phase 2 of the Family History Center. The Opera House Curtain itself was restored via grant money and when word got out more curtains were donated and we happened to discover a few as we were moving into the new building. Therefore we are currently up to eight curtains on property! We have a game plan in place and we are trying to secure resources to get those on display for the public. Amazingly they're all in incredible shape and will not need much restoration. Looking forward, the staff and volunteers are working on our membership mailing, the upcoming annual Christmas Tree Walk, and numerous scheduled group tours. Thank you for letting us preserve your Buffalo County history!

Follow us on Facebook: "BuffaloCounty Historical Society" and "Kearney Cultural Partners". Not a Society member yet? Join Today! Volunteers, chairpersons, and sponsors are still needed. Please contact the office for more information on supporting your Buffalo County Historical Society!

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Broc Anderson and Blake Weeder, Editors

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