

THE GEO. E. MUDGE POST #324 OF THE AMERICAN LEGION, SIBLEY, IOWA.
1919 - 1988

By A. L. Sharbondy

As several generations have passed since this legion post was established and most of the members are post World War 2 veterans, I find that some of you have little knowledge of the struggles in the past to keep the Geo. E. Mudge Post #324 alive and active. This is an attempt to recall some of the events and problems of the past, to be placed in your archives and added to from time to time.

The original charter was granted by National Headquarters on the 12th day of December 1919 and listed the names of the following charter members; M. L. Stauffer, Jerry E. Ellerbroek, Leo M. Gallagher, A. F. Koopman, Ralph L. Chambers, Lesse M. Chambers, Charles Johnson, Geo. D. Hanon, Cline L. Ditto, Arthur Geo. Tott, C. Russel Overholser, L. D. Garberson, I. R. Meltzer, O. J. Ditto and B. F. Butler.

The post was named the GEO. E. MUDGE POST to honor the first soldier, from Sibley, to die in World War 1. I believe that he died of the flu while still in the states. The following year, 1920, was the first active year of the Post and the membership is recorded as ~~50~~ or 52.

I lived at Cloverdale and was not approached for membership until 1924. I have been a member ever since. The membership in 1924 was 110. It has varied from lows of 72 in 1927, 92 in 1939, to a one time high of 287. The membership lately has hovered around 200 with a final of 191 for 1988. Few WW-1 veterans remain alive, deaths have depleted our ranks so that it is difficult to maintain quotas established by the State and National Departments.

For 1920, the first active year, the officers were; Oran K. Parnott, Commander, Leo M. Gallagher, Vice-Commander, Clifford C. "Tip" Hannon, Adjutant, L. Dayton Garberson, Finance Officer, Walter L. "Pat" Carey, Chaplin, Lovett Polley, Historian and T. Chester "Chet" Tregilgus, Sargeant-At-Arms. I do not recall attending any regular meetings during these early years, but I do remember meeting in the court house, I believe in the room now occupied by the County Clerk, where we assembled for memorial days, armistance days and funerals.

It must have been in the early 1920's that the fair board built what we know as the pavillion. The Legion, looking for a way to make money, rented the building, put down a wood floor, and held public dances for many years until the legion building was built in 1931. Leslie C. "Les" Eddy booked the orchestras and managed the dances which were well attended and very popular at that time. All of the big bands played at the pavillion and later at the legion building. The only bands that I can recall are Kato's Vagabonds and Lawrence Welk's orchestra. The dances were very profitable for the legion. As an act of appreciation to the community, the Legion built a grandstand at the fair grounds, complete with roof and space for ^{beneath} concessions. For a short time, to complete payment, the legion sold tickets and collected for admission to the new grandstand during fair weeks. When the stand was paid for it became the property of the fair board. During this period, most legion posts sponsored Junion Legion Baseball. I believe that "Irv" Eddy headed this committee. Many dedicated members worked evenings, holidays, saturdays and week-ends coaching. Competitive games were played between legion teams over a large area. It was for this reason that the name AMERICAN LEGION FIELD was prominently displayed on the ~~front~~ short, steep roof on the front of the fairground grandstand.

After many years of service, the structure was destroyed by a wind-storm. It was never replaced. Bleachers were substituted and are in use today. The pavillion continued to be used, except for fair week, for legion dances and school basketball. until the legion building was completed in 1931. Later, it served as a garage for the school busses. This damaged the wood floor and caused it's removal. Helen B. Gates died in 1928. After the several stipulations in her will was satisfied, the balance of her estate, including a quarter section of land in Osceola County, was bequeathed to the legion post for a building as a memorial to her foster son George E. Mudge. Subsequently, a building committee of legion members, was appointed to sell the farm, select a site, plan and build the present building. The city, at that time, was in dire need of a ground floor office for the city clerk and council. Their office was upstairs in the old fire hall which was located on the south part of the lot now occupied by the present city offices. The only entrance was up a long flight of stairs with a landing half way up so the old folks could rest on their way to pay light and water bills. The floor was sagging under the weight of a heavy safe. On the ground level was a fire truck, some hose carts and the city jail or cooler. The building was in disrepair, there was no 24 hour supervision and a danger of fire, so when a drunk was put in the cooler, the cage had to be left unlocked for his safety. Under these circumstances, the city was ready for a proposition. After several meetings between the Legion building committee and the Sibley council, a deal was worked out to their mutual satisfaction. The legion would build on a site across the street from the old city offices. Space would be provided in the front of the building for the city clerk's office and council room with space in the basement for record storage.

Across the hall would be public toilets, open 24 hours a day, to be maintained by the city. For this, the city would provide heat, light, water and insurance on the building for a period of 20 years. This was a good deal for both parties and endured for ^{over} ~~about~~ 40 years. After the city clerk moved to the new building, the city police occupied the office for about 2 years. This arrangement ended when the county sheriff took over the policing of the city. It should be said here that, at the beginning, the legion officers advised the members to dabble in politics to always keep 3 ^{loyal} legion members on the city council. This, we ~~did not~~ ^{failed to} do. To summarize, the city moved their office into our new building and for 40 years ^{or more} occupied it at a net rental cost of about \$100.00 per month. To enhance his position, City administrator Parrott, cancelled any remaining agreement with the city. Since 1979, we have paid for all utilities. Before the west wing of the central school was available, the city considered the legion building for a senior citizens center. The legion offered the city a 50 year lease, retaining the upstairs club rooms for meetings, the city to maintain the building and do minimum alterations. This was refused, as the city did not want to spend money on a building that they did not own. Owing to the manner in which the building was made possible, the legion, in good conscious, could not give absolute ^w onership to the city. A nominal rent to keep the rest rooms open to the public was also refused by the city. Now I will go back to 1929-1930. The farm was sold for \$125.00 per acre, or \$20,000.00. The legion had accumulated about \$7,000.00 from dances and other activities. With the \$27,000 on hand, a contract was made to build the legion building at a cost of about \$30,000. After the dedication, dances continued to be held and the place became known as the dance palace of northwest Iowa.

5 "Les" Eddy continued to book the big bands and manage the dances..

The new building was an attraction, couples danced shoulder to shoulder and had a gala time. When enough money was accumulated to pay off the mortgage, a public meeting was held for the burning of the mortgage. I attended that meeting and saw Leo Gallagher set fire to the document. The building and furnishings were now paid for, free of encumbrance, and to the best of my knowledge, ^{has} remained so to this date. As all good things come to an end, so did the big band dances. Attendance began to wane and the legion had to revert to other means of income. High school basketball had been played in the auditorium with bleachers on the stage and both sides of the court but this was seasonable and did not produce much income. Your Post then scoured the community and obtained enough recruits to persuade the Government to establish a National Guard Unit in our building. This entailed the purchase of a locker for each member and a separate office for each of the officers of the unit. This accounts for the many lockers that we sold a few years ago. What was originally the ladies' lounge was enclosed and partitioned into two offices. One office was above the kitchen and, I believe, a junior officer occupied the janitor closet. The rent received was about \$1,200 per year. Officers ^{were} ~~had to be~~ selected and trained from the unit. The National Guard lasted until it was called up for WW-2. Your Post then promoted a State Guard unit which, I believe, lasted for about two years. It was difficult to keep the unit recruited up to quota. To bolster this effort, I joined the State Guard and attended one encampment at Camp Dodge. My enlistment expired and I was discharged Jan. 25th, 1943. Then Little Oscar's band was booked. Little Oscar put on a farce playlet followed by a dance. This proved to very popular and played to full houses.

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 In the beginning, we had the choice of renting on a percentage or a flat rate of \$100.00 for each month's appearance. The post chose the flat fee which turned out to be the wrong decision. Robert Fox handled the Little Oscar venture which ended on the death of Little Oscar. At about this time, someone looked in the auditorium one morning and found that the beautiful wood floor had buckled in the center from north to south. It had been nailed to wood cleats imbedded in cement. There had been no vapor barrier below the cement nor air space above so the wood absorbed moisture and blew up. The cleats were deteriorated to the point that they would not hold nails so the entire floor was removed and a terrazzo floor installed. This was a severe setback to the finances of the Post.

There was a clamor for roller skating, the Chamber of Comm. encouraged us by a donation of \$200, so we purchased 250 pairs of used skates and equipment in January 1965. Donald Hanna was put in charge of this endeavor on commission. We had to install baseboards to protect the walls and skaters sat on the stage and knocked holes in the plaster with their skates. The skates were getting old, the terrazzo floor not suitable, the space not large enough for good skating, so the enthusiasm soon waned and the skating fizzled out. Luckily, George Van Engen found a buyer in So. Dakota who paid us \$850 for the skates. This is the last entry in my records. "Note that we have disposed of all of the skates but have retained six wooden benches and the sound equipment and show a gain of approximately \$500.00" Sold March 1971. Then came the small hot bands with ear splitting music. Couples danced hardly touching each other. They did their own promoting and paid us \$25 per night. Someone had to be there to collect as they were of the fly-by-night variety. My records show that we lost two.

7

When bingo became legal in 1973, we obtained a license and conducted bingo games, off and on, until it was discontinued for ~~lack~~ ^{lack} of attendance in 1979. I hand a hand in this selling tickets and paying the winners. The games were held on Saturday nights. Our mistake was in holding these games more for fun than for profit. Admission was only \$1.00, or 10¢ per game. In my opinion, a jackpot large enough to draw ~~a large~~ attendance cannot be paid without an initial admittance charge of at least \$5.00 for 10 or 20 games. After paying all expenses, including \$428.82 to the state for licenses and sales tax, we showed a gain of \$2,662.50 for the entire operation. From this we paid \$655.00 for blower and flashboard and \$1,230.00 for the black chairs and davenports, leaving the balance of \$777.50 ^{cash} as net gain.

We, figuratively, hit the jackpot for a short time during 1980-81 when a lady from Harris rented our building and equipment to hold high stakes bingo games. this ended with a change in the law. Rent collected during this period was \$2,585.00 This was about the time of the central school fire and crews had to be quickly found to set up the tables after basketball practice to be ready for bingo.

After our building was dedicated in 1931, it became a popular place for meetings of all kinds. There was no other public auditorium in Sibley. The public rest rooms were open 24 hours per day. Our members could obtain ^{a key} for 25¢ and were präviledged to use the showers/ room back of the men's toilets at any time. This was before most homes had this facility and was widely used. The showers under the stage were added later as a requirement of the guard units. Many benquets were held by churches and other organizations. The auxiliary owned a complete set of dishes, including soup bowls, to serve several hundred people. Most, if not all, of these dishes and eating utensils have disappeared. Many civic or promotional meetings were held rent free as the city was, in a way , subsidizing us at that time.

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I remember attending one such meeting when tearful bankers pleaded for signers on their 40% waivers after the bank closings in 1933. For a few years, an off beat church group held their annual district meeting in our building. While the passenger trains were still in operation, a group of Des Moines business men, sponsored by their Chamber of Commerce, chartered a train for trips around the state to promote business for Des Moines. Twice, they arrived in Sibley and provided a pre-arranged free evening banquet for all Sibley business men. Our legion auditorium provided the ideal place for these meetings. They brought a whiz of a toastmaster who also performed at our oil conventions in Des Moines. I was acquainted with this man who, the last visit to sad to say, died shortly after ~~visiting~~ Sibley. I was the commander of the G.E.O. E. Mudge Post in 1945, and, for lack of organization, assumed the post of county commander. I recall a county meeting in our auditorium. Patriotism was high at that time and we had a large attendance. The historian read the names of all legionaires who had died, in and out of the service, and the list was long even at that early date. When possible, if in a group, we gave a party for those leaving for the service and upon their return. Legionaires met the trains to escort the dead arriving in sealed caskets. I recall two, Jungers and Taylor. For funerals, color bearers, color guards and church services firing squads attended, with rifles stacked outside. In 1942, the post purchased uniforms consisting of coat, trousers and Sam Brown belt to be issued to and worn by the Commander, Adjutant, Chaplain, Bugler, Sergeant-At-Arms, firing squad and color detail. The uniforms cost \$32.75 each and the recipient was required to deposit one-fourth or \$8.25 as deposit or rent. This deposit was refundable in full upon return of uniform in case of non payment of dues, removal from territory or by death.

For some time, this detail of fifteen uniformed legionaires provided memorial days, etc. an impressive ceremony at many funerals. It was one of the highlights of the Geo. E. Mudge Post. As time elapsed, some of the uniforms had been purchased and taken out of the vicinity, ^{some} ~~others~~ became too small for their owners and ^{others} ~~some~~ could not be found for a detail. Eventually, the uniformed detail had to be abandoned. It may have been better if the legion had retained ownership of all uniforms and kept them at the club rooms.

I recall only three district conferences at Sibley in the 69 years, in 1932, 1968 and 1974. At the first conference in 1931 or 32, shortly after our new building had been completed, the boys were still young enough to raise a little hell. When they walked on the tables at Paul Lekas' palace cafe; that was a little too much for the staid citizens of Sibley. The business men did not approve of their antics in the streets. That was the main reason for the long period before another conference was held at Sibley. In ^h those earlier days, many of the large posts sponsored boy's drum or drum and bugle corps which appeared in the district conference parades. These units, with the colors from the several posts and usually a band or two, made up a spectacular parade that drew a large audience. Those times are past. The two subsequent conferences were successful and well attended. I worked with Commander Peter Menage on this one in 1968 and we showed a net gain of \$138.44. Alvin Buchholtz was commander for the 1974 conference. We were a little too free with the refreshments and netted \$86.90 after all expenses. Since Boys State was instituted 50 years ago, I recall only two years in which we did not send two boys. One year we had no candidates and this year, 1988, we have only one. Over the years, Boys State may ^{have been} ~~be~~ the best program that the George E. Munge Post has ever sponsored.

Several ideas have been advanced for making money, A bar was never seriously considered because on the location and lay-out of our building, the work involved, and that it would be in direct competition with legitimate businesses. During our roller skate try-out, the commander said "build a new building". In my opinion, that building would be vacant today. Another member strongly advocated a race track on the fair grounds. That was never considered as feasible for many reasons. Bingo is still possible ^{if ran as a business} but we are not allowed to pay wages and no-one wants to work for nothing. I once asked a good man to run for commander. He said no,; I was adjutant, I have did my duty. I checked and found that he had been adjutant for one year. It takes more dedication than that to keep an American Legion Post alive. Our income at present consists principally of dues, building rent, interest on savings, table & chair rent and sale of flag pole kits and replacement flags. Geo. Van Engen introduced us to ^{the flag} ~~this~~ program. Attendance at our meetings has been a problem for many years. Shortly after WW-2, with some money on hand, drawings were held help attendance. If the member was present when his name was drawn, he won a cash prize. The main result of this was that it helped to deplete our treasury. Many years ago, the best poker players in Sibley were members. They came to every meeting and held lively poker games long after the meetings were adjourned. I was elected Finance Officer in 1964. There was \$75.71 in our checking account at that time. This was more than off-set by outstanding unpaid bills. However, a building improvement fund of \$354.64 had been set aside for future needs. Dues for 1965 were \$5.00 of which we remitted \$3.50 to State and National. This compares with \$16.00 and \$12.75 today. Our tables cost \$26.25 in 1969, \$53.95 in 1980 and \$85.95 today in 1988.

The following is a partial list of expenditures made since 1964. -
Roof repairs \$9,036.28, Street improvement assessments \$1,571.44,
Rewire state area & switch-board \$2,480.25, Air conditioner \$2,682.81,
Two gas furnaces \$4,062.33. Boys State \$3,264.00 and grave markers
\$617.37.

This report has become too long. I tried to make it brief by omitting many details. I have just a few final remarks.

There have been complaints in the past that our Post has been run by cliques. Everyone now knows that an organization, such as ours, could not exist unless supported by a few dedicated members.

It should be noted that the American Legion, founded in France in 1919,¹ has been the prime mover in establishing the Veterans Administration and its network of veterans hospitals. These hospitals provide care for all needy veterans ^{of all wars} regardless of affiliation with any veterans organization.

Finally, let us not forget the American Legion Auxiliary. They have helped us in many ways in the past. They take an essential part in our memorial services. No successful conference could be held without the co-operation of the ladies of the auxiliary. We should give them more recognition.