

Legionnaires, Auxiliary commemorate 90 years of history

Written by April Peregoy

“There is a special comradeship among men who have been shot at.” —Unknown

Members of the American Legion Post 90 and Ladies Auxiliary met at the Vets Club Monday night, March 9 to celebrate the Legion’s 90th birthday party.

During the dinner, many memories were shared about past wars and comrades, as well as moments shared together afterward in Legion activities. There was also discussion involving predictions and concerns for the future of the country, particularly with the current state of the economy.

However, amongst the friendly discussions, one concern seemed to weigh heavily on the minds of the Legionnaires: the future of the Legion itself.

“We have over a hundred members in the Legion,” said long-time active member Elton Oltjenbruns, “but only a handful are active members.”

This was made evident Monday night by the small crowd that turned out for the birthday party—approximately 15.

As the Legion loses more and more World War II vets every year, few others have stepped in to replace them, making the future of Post 90 uncertain. Considering the important role the Post has played in the history of the Holyoke community, it is something everyone should be concerned about, for its loss would not only be felt by Legionnaires, but by the entire community.

90 years of American Legion history

In 1919, a group of 20 officers who served in the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) in France in World War I proposed an organization of veterans that would soon be named The American Legion.

According to Post 90’s historian, Elton Oltjenbruns, the local chapter began meeting in the latter months of 1919 as well, though an official meeting was not organized until Jan. 20, 1920. A temporary charter was granted on Feb. 6, 1920, and an official National Charter was issued Aug. 10, 1920.

The Legion’s first home was in the basement of the Citizens State Bank building, which at that time had outside stairs. Then, in 1924, it purchased, on contract, the Behnfeldt garage building. It is unknown what the purchase price was, but records show the Legion borrowed \$2,000 in notes. It would take until 1936 for the Post to pay it off, but members were proud they never had to collect cash contributions or solicit for donations during those years.

Sometime in the years of 1928 or 1929, the Post bought four vacant lots next to its building, for which it paid \$500. Some years later, three were sold to the Co-op to use as a gas station. One lot was kept for parking.

In Leslie L. Kunkel’s History of the Post, which was written in 1975, Kunkel emphasized how it took a lot of volunteer labor and materials to turn the Behnfeldt garage into a suitable Legion Hall. At this point, Post membership averaged 40 World War I veterans. Kunkel said, “it is to them we owe a great debt of gratitude for taking on and discharging such a large load.”

Located at what is now the Trumper building, the building was described by Kunkel as having two stories in the front 25 feet of space. Upstairs were two small apartments. On each side of

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the wide, drive-in entrance was a small office or business room.

About 25 feet of the north end of the building was petitioned off for an auto repair shop. On the floor of the central part of the building, a 50' x 80' space, a hardwood floor with a raised platform at the north end was laid. This section was used for dances and public meetings.

Steam heat was piped in from the town's old coal-fired steam electric plant. According to Kunkel, the front two-story section of roof "was a continuing headache." Every year it needed repairs and in heavy snows, Legionnaires had to shovel it or risk roof collapse.

Shortly before the purchase of the building, in 1923, 16 Holyoke women decided to start a women's auxiliary to Holyoke American Legion Post 90. Charter members were all mothers, sisters or wives of American Legion members. The Auxiliary became heavily involved in the Legion's activities, and has sponsored many of their own as well.

American Legion Post 90 became one of the most active and respected organizations in northeast Colorado in the years between World War I and II. The new Hall became the popular site to hold weekly dances and was rented often for commercial uses. The money was used to pay off the building.

The Post also sponsored July 4th celebrations, hardball and softball tournaments and Armistice Day and Memorial Day programs. During this time, they built the Phillips County Fair lunch building, which was operated with Auxiliary help.

However, the largest single money maker for the Legion was the annual Legion Circus, which drew enormous crowds from towns all over the area. Instead of money, paper scrip was sold at the door and was the only thing that could be used inside. Merchants gave generously and vied to supply the scrip with their ads on the back. Most of the donations were used as prizes on a big punch board.

But the biggest profit maker at the circus was gambling. Legionnaires ran the tables and took a rake-off from the larger pots. It didn't really matter to the Legion how much the players won, as the money was all scrip and had to be spent before the circus closed, usually about 3 a.m. It was never redeemed for cash.

Soon after bars became legal again in Colorado, in 1933, a Legion member offered to loan \$6,000 to fix and equip the lounge. Slot machines were installed, which quickly made enough money for the Post to pay the loan back. The bar that was put in with the slot machines also made money, but not as much as the slots.

Unfortunately, the lounge was not well supervised for several years and a considerable amount of money got away from the Post before the organization realized it. When gambling became illegal and the slot machines were removed, the lounge continued to profit under better supervision.

The years during and after World War II were hard on the Legion, as dances and bingo games did not draw the crowds like they used to. In addition, the number of memberships increased dramatically, leading the Post to use its savings to fix up the old auto repair room for a bigger meeting place.

Though the Legion now consisted of more members, the World War II vets were busy working, making up for losses during their years in the service. On top of that, World War I vets were becoming too old to be very active, and the funds for the organization came chiefly from the lounge and slot machines.

Thanks to the money earned from the lounge, the Legion and Auxiliary began sending local youths to Boys and Girls State in 1953 to learn about government and patriotism.

In 1956, the Post was well aware of its need for a new home and purchased an old vacant

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tourist court. Buildings on the property were demolished and the ground leveled. Later, a 25' x 80' portion of the lot's west end was sold to Humble Oil Co. gas station for \$3,000, reducing total purchase price for the property to \$5,000.

For several years, the organization bargained and discussed with the Town of Holyoke, working on a deal to get the Town to buy the Legion's old home and parking lot. Finally, a price of \$18,000 was settled on by both parties. This price, plus savings of \$22,000, enabled the Post to contract for the construction of its new building at 229 E. Denver St. in 1962.

As the building neared completion, however, the contractor claimed to have lost \$5,000 of the amount to be used. Hearing this, said Kunkel, W.E. Heginbotham approached the Legion, asking if the organization had enough money to pay for the Hall's completion.

Members replied they did have enough for the contract price, but were leaving the cement block outside walls exposed until they could pay for the brick veneer. Heginbotham asked what the cost of this would be, to which members estimated about \$5,000. Heginbotham gave them the money.

On Saturday, Dec. 1, 1962, an American Legion Building Dedication took place with local and state members present as well as the city council and numerous community members.

Nearly 26 years later, on March 1, 1988, American Legion Post 90 and VFW Post 6482 merged into one corporation, known as the Holyoke Veterans Club. The American Legion Hall became the site for both organizations, with Stanton Smith acting as chairman of the board. Though the two clubs had now become one organization, each post retained its name and separate activities.

The former VFW Club, located at 205 N. Morlan, was remodeled and put up for sale.

Throughout its 90 years, American Legion Post 90 has been credited for the many services it has provided the community. This includes generous scholarship funding, Voice of Democracy awards, youth programs, aid to the elderly and sick and even the giving of food and money to destitute travelers during the Depression years.

Members still sponsor Veterans Day and Memorial Day programs, keeping alive and well the memories of those who have served and paid the ultimate sacrifice for our nation's freedoms. Unfortunately, despite efforts from Vietnam vets such as Terry Barth to revive the organization, the number of active members has greatly diminished in recent years. It is the hope of all Legionnaires that the organization continues long after the current members are gone.