

The History of Ira Owen Kreager Post 384

On the first anniversary of Armistice Day, November 11, 1919, thirty-one veterans of Hoopeston under the leadership of Charles F. Dyer, as temporary chairman, and Clarence S. Miller, as temporary secretary, submitted an application for a charter as a post of The American Legion.

Charter members were: Charles F. Dyer, Lloyd P. Petry, Donald J. McFerren, Clarence S. Miller, Louis G. Willett, Charles D. Hinkle, William McFerren, Bert A. Knoll, Russell C. Finley, Frank B. Morgan, Earl W. Harkness, Thomas P. Smith, Glen O. Johnson, Everett Van Darn, Ivan L. Reveal, Orla Kreager (brother of Ira), Fred D. Swisher, Charles Phillips, Dewey Gossett, Wm. Stanley Green, Fred G. Green, Sylvester J. Murray, John Ross Boorde, Thomas Regalley, Christ V. George, Peter Chérekos, Fred E. Earel, Irby Downey, Carl A. Dodson, Maurice R. Foster, Frank S. Martin.

The National Executive Committee of The American Legion granted a temporary charter on December 31, 1919. On August 10, 1920 the Post received a permanent charter.

These ex-servicemen chose to memorialize the name of the first Hoopeston native to die in World War I and the Post is named in honor of

Ira Owen Kreager. Corporal Kreager was killed in action in France on October 28, 1918, less than a month before World War I ended.

With the return of Company "B", bringing with it the greater number of the local soldiers, the membership of the Post began to enlarge. At the first annual meeting, Captain "Jack" Steward was elected Commander to guide the destinies of the organization through the year 1920. It was a year filled with eventful things in the life of the young Post. Clubrooms were secured and appropriately furnished and the Post established itself as a going concern. A benefit carnival during that year was entered into with spirit and zest by both Legion members and citizens and netted the Post a considerable sum of money. It was such a success that Dr. Fred Earel, the chairman of the carnival committee, was appointed the Post Commander the following year.

Commander Earel's first official act was to appoint a membership committee with instructions to solicit every eligible man to become a member of the Post. As a result of the campaign, 153 members were enrolled and the Post became a recognized force in the community. An active committee promoted dances throughout the year and a Legion basketball team was formed.

Commander Sargent (1922) in his installation address gave an outline of his ambitions for the Legion and what he hoped to accomplish. Among those were the following: formation of a Ladies' Auxiliary, increased membership, greater member participation in meetings and to lay plans for a permanent home.

During the first few years of existence, the post conducted its meetings on the second floor of downtown store buildings. Records are incomplete, but it is known that meetings were in the old Commercial Club Building and at 114 1/2 East Main Street above the R&G Cafe.

However, these early members realized that the possession of a home is one of the best guarantees of permanence and progress that an organization can have and on November 10, 1928 moved into their new post home at 205 East Penn Street.

This home was one of the finest in Illinois for a post whose annual membership was approximately 170 members from 1930 until 1943.

By 1944, returning veterans of World War II began swelling the ranks of The American Legion until by 1948; the post had a membership of 605.

The Legion was very definitely suffering from growing pains and in need of larger quarters. On August 10, 1948 the membership voted to

purchase the William McFerren home at 502 East Penn Street and moved into their new home during December 1948.

By 1955, the facilities of the second and third floors of the home were recognized as being not only unsuited for most post activities but also even dangerous for large groups, so an addition at the first floor level to provide additional space was taken under consideration.

On September 29, 1955, the executive committee met with George Strader, an architect, and asked him to prepare preliminary sketches. On March 2, 1956, the membership approved the proposed plan for an addition and the appointment of a building committee.

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Blue prints and specifications were prepared, bids solicited and contracts let to Silver Brothers, general contractor; Fedco, electrical; Maurice Leigh, plumbing and heating.

The addition was completed in August 1957 after two years of planning and construction. It began under the administration of William L.

Johnson as commander and was completed as the term of Robert W. Brown was drawing to a close.

The Building Committee consisted of the following members:

Charles Johnson-Chairman

Louis Vince Jr.

W. A. Read

Bae Stewart

Kenneth Richmond

Glenn Bloyd

Dr. K. H. Hammond

Earl Herman

V. K. Viitanen

William Decker

Robert Pittman

Harold (Harkie) Wood

Norvan Spickard

Robert Roark

Michael Ward

Don Jessup

Robert W. Brown

Robert Weaks

Guy (Pat) Kersey

Paul McCreary

Walter Lawson

R.H. Leonard

William Johnson

Harry Mayer

Omer Russell

During the fall and winter of 1967-68 an extensive remodeling program was completed making the present clubrooms among the finest in the area. It has become a kind of community center with many clubs and civic organizations using the facilities each week for dinners and meetings.

On February 2, 1979, a disastrous fire destroyed the community room annex and did extensive smoke and water damage to the rest of the clubrooms. A building committee was appointed to determine the feasibility of repairing the damage or whether to build a new facility. In the meantime, representatives of business and industry in the community expressed the need for a hall big enough to accommodate large crowds for meetings and dinners within the Hoopeston area and suggested that the Legion consider replacing the community room. On August 14, 1979, the Post membership approved the construction of a new Post home, which included a large community room, and to seek pledges from the community to assist with the financing.

The membership of the Post has consistently remained near the “500 member mark” since 1947 with a high year in 1962 of 647 members.

There are four basic areas of service within the American Legion: Rehabilitation, Child Welfare, Americanism and Community Service.

The founders of The American Legion recognized that a major concern of the organization would be the plight of the disabled veteran. Two of the oldest projects sponsored by the local Post for the disabled veterans are the annual Poppy Day sales and the Gifts for Hospitalized Veterans program.

Records show that the first Poppy Day was conducted in May 1926. Every year poppies are purchased and the Auxiliary solicits funds. These funds are used to provide rehabilitation programs at the Danville Veterans Administration Hospital.

The Illinois American Legion conducts the Gifts to Hospitalized War Veterans Program. In 1944, the late Mr. Eddie Cantor, nationally known entertainer, and the National Executive Committee sponsored the program to remember every hospitalized male and female War Veteran throughout this great land of ours.

The 35th Annual Program (1979) delivered 18,781 gifts to hospitalized War Veterans in eight Veterans Hospitals. The 18,781 veterans who received gifts through the 35th Annual Program were veterans who served in World War I, World War II, the Korean Conflict, and the Viet Nam Conflict. The Hoopeston Post has participated in the program since its

inception and each year solicits private contributions from individuals and companies.

Closely allied with its concern for the disabled veteran is The American Legion's interest in the welfare of the children of deceased and disabled veterans. After World War II, because of the greatly increased segment of the population that was classified as "veteran", it was evident that the majority of all children in the United States would be of veteran parentage. The American Legion recognized the need to place added emphasis on sound public programs for all children.

It was with this thought in mind that in the spring of 1953 the local post organized a summer baseball program for the children of this community. The program consisted of a Little League, Pony League and a Junior Legion Team. At one time, over 300 boys participated and a full time Director was employed to direct the program. Eventually the Hoopston Little League was formed and took over the Little League program.

From the very beginning The American Legion took as one of its major projects the preservation and furtherance of basic American concepts and principles.

As part of its Americanism program, The American Legion encouraged the recognition of students who display the highest qualities of citizenship. The American Legion accomplishes this through the presentation of The American Legion School Medal Award, which is the highest honor awarded American youth. In 1930, the post presented the first school medal awards to a boy and girl of the eighth grade in each of Hoopeston's elementary schools.

Another excellent youth program is Boys' State that originated in Illinois in 1934. Boys' State is a summer camp designed to educate our youth in the duties, privileges, rights and responsibilities of American citizenship. The Hoopeston Post has been sponsoring boys to Boys' State since the programs inception.

In addition to inculcating a sense of individual obligation to the community, state and nation an Americanism program must promote proper Flag etiquette and display. In the spring of 1960, following the approval of statehood for Alaska and Hawaii, The American Legion conducted a Flag Campaign selling the new 50 star flag to residents and businesses of the Hoopeston area to encourage the ownership and display of the Flag. The Post contributed the net proceeds and an added contribution to the Hoopeston Community Memorial Hospital fund.

Also, flags were presented to Scout Troops, schools, McFerren Park and Floral Hill Cemetery. The Post Honor Guard presented a flag and flagpole to the Hoopeston Community Memorial Hospital.

Perhaps, the two oldest community projects that have been carried on by the Legion are the annual Memorial Day services and the July 4th Celebration.

In the spring of 1921, the G.A.R. Post (Grand Army of the Republic - an organization of veterans of the American Civil War), feeling the responsibility too great for their declining years, asked that the Legion formally take charge of the Memorial Day service. Probably no greater honor shall ever be given the local Post of The American Legion than was bestowed upon them by this act of the G.A.R. The implicit faith that was shown when these older veterans of a former war turned over the memory of their illustrious dead to The American Legion was the greatest honor one American soldier could show another. And the Legion pledged to keep this day of memory sacred. In recent years The American Legion is ably assisted by the Hoopeston VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars).

The July 4th Celebration was taken over by The American Legion in 1924. The celebration was one of the greatest events ever staged by an organization in Hoopeston and it was determined at that time to make it an

annual Legion affair. The return of the World War II veterans gave the Legion the necessary manpower to continue the celebration, which became the leading July 4th celebration in the Illiana area. Due to a changing economy, the celebration has changed its appearance from that of a commercial enterprise to an old-fashioned community observance with various organizations participating.

There is an old saying that "behind every successful man you will find a woman" and it should also be said that behind every successful organization you would find an Auxiliary. The American Legion Auxiliary Unit received their charter on January 18, 1923 and has been supporting our Post ever since.

We all are very proud that the Ira Owen Kreager Post 384 has completed many years of service to the Community, State and Nation.