

VETERANS' GROUPS: VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS

For as long as citizens have gone to war, there have been veterans' organizations of some sort. In 1879, local Civil War veterans formed the Fairport chapter of the Grand Army of the Republic, E.A. Slocum Post #211. Named after Edmund Slocum, who was killed at Gettysburg, the post worked for veterans' benefits, assisted indigent veterans and their families, and cared for veterans' graves. In 1899, veterans of the Spanish-American War formed Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) essentially to provide aid to needy or disabled veterans.

The Grand Army of the Republic's national commander, General John Logan, officially proclaimed Memorial Day on May 5, 1868, as a day to honor the war dead. It was first observed on May 30, 1868, when flowers were placed on the graves of Union and Confederate soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery. The first state to officially recognize the holiday was New York in 1873, and Fairport's chapter of the GAR oversaw the establishment of Decoration Day (now known as Memorial Day) ceremonies in Perinton. The E.A. Slocum Post closed in 1937 when Horace Waddell, its last surviving member, died. Aside from one photo taken in 1914, little else is known about the activities of the Post.

Those who fought in the Spanish-American War, the Boxer Rebellion, the Philippine Insurrection and the Cuban Pacification, as well as the numerous wars of the twentieth century, and were honorably discharged, have all been eligible to join the VFW, which was founded in 1899. At first the groups were small and widely scattered and as a result had little clout in trying to obtain government aid for needy or disabled veterans. However, after World War I, where about 4,000,000 American saw service, the organization grew to the point where they were able to lobby successfully for adequate pensions and medical care. World War II, in which about 16 million served, added to the size and influence of the VFW. The landmark GI Bill of Rights, passed in 1944 with VFW support, gave returning service men and women stipends, health benefits, access to higher education and loans for financing the purchase of a home or for starting a business. In effect, the bill contributed significantly to the rise of a strong educated middle class.

Locally, 95 Perinton and Fairport veterans established the Perinton Memorial Post #8495 of the VFW in November of 1946. Official recognition of the Post and installation of officers took place in the Cottage Hotel on North Main Street. Officers were Ted King, commander; Ken Maine, adjutant; Richard Hogan, officer of the day; Robert Laird and Thomas Streppa, color bearers; E. Sipple and Albert LaPietra, color guards; and William Zimmer, guard. The Post first met in various places, including the Green Lantern Inn, the Cottage Hotel, the fire hall, the American Legion hall, and in members' homes, but by 1948 had acquired land on Macedon Center Road where they planned to construct their own building. One of their many fund raising methods was the sale of 7500 "building blocks" at 25 cents apiece, eventually netting \$2, 321. The concrete blocks were to create the foundation for the building. Combining successful fund raising with the talent of many of their members, the VFW's new home was completed and dedicated in 1952.

Over the years, the VFW has sponsored many community events. A 1948 news article describes the All-Vets celebration, which was to feature a "gigantic military parade," with bands and floats and prizes for the best unit and for those who traveled the farthest; a concert by the VFW band; attractions on the grounds of the VFW facility including a Shetland pony and cart to provide rides, culminating with a "mammoth fireworks display." Carnivals, dances, concerts, and Christmas parties have all been activities sponsored by the Post as have various fund drives for those in need.

Today the VFW sponsors the Memorial Day parade and the ensuing ceremonies to honor those fallen in war. They have constructed “Freedom Hill,” a memorial at the Post’s home on Macedon Center Road featuring an M-60 tank, a Huey helicopter, and a walk with bricks that have been engraved with veterans’ names. Along with the American Legion, they see that flags adorn the graves of fallen service people and sell poppies to raise money. For over 20 years, Wednesday has been Bingo night at the Post and regularly draws nearly 100 players. Proceeds from the games allow the Post to support veterans’ and community causes which include, among others, the Perinton Ambulance Corps and Little League baseball. The plaque at Potter Memorial, honoring all those from the Perinton-Fairport community that served in the nation’s wars and memorializing those who died, was co-sponsored by the Post.

The Post has also made an effort to reach out to those veterans of more recent wars like Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq who were not welcomed home with parades and hoopla to help them feel appreciated and valued. In all of its activities, the VFW attempts to live up to its motto: “honor the dead by helping the living.”

