

## By Suzanne Hill, President American Legion Auxiliary, Unit 218

After World War I, members of the American Expeditionary Force met in March 1919 in Paris to establish a patriotic veterans organization. They next met in St. Louis that May, adopting the name "American Legion."

Washington American Legion Post 218 and American Legion Auxiliary Unit 218 observe their centennials this year, both receiving charters in 1923. The post received its official charter August 18, 1923, and the Auxiliary on May 16, 1923.

Local newspapers invited "ex-servicemen" to a meeting Friday, May 27, 1921. Twenty-two men attended, selecting temporary officers. On June 2, they elected officers and chose the name "Washington Post."

Officers were: A.C. (Arthur) Rumpelt, commander; Walter H. Otto, vice commander; Rudolph V. Willenbrink, adjutant; Edwin H. Thias, finance officer; Gus P. Filla, post surgeon.

In June 1921, Legion members provided military honors for Paul Thater and Edwin Mische's funerals when they were returned to Washington from France.

Post 218's first public event was a carnival and dance at the city park July 13, 1921. It included speakers, drills, music, dancing and a "big auto parade."

Meetings were held in various places: City Hall, Turner Hall and its annex, Sodality Hall at St. Francis Borgia, Brueggenjohann's plumbing shop, the Masonic Lodge and an unknown Main Street location. (According to hearsay, the Legion met at the former Modern Auto location at Main and Jefferson. Perhaps that was the Main Street location listed above.)

The Missouri American Legion's records note the post received a "**temporary charter**" on July 16, 1921. It is not the official charter date.

Post members organized entertainment for publicity and fund-raising, often at the City Park pavilion. Events included dances, concerts, vaudeville shows and speakers. Movies at the Calvin Theatre raised money and included band concerts and other musical acts. Friday night dances raised money to help build the Legion Post Home in the 1930s.

In October 1921, the post sponsored The Rutz-Williams Aeroplane Review, a show and flying circus, at Tiemann field (Lions Lake area) west of Washington for 15 percent of receipts.

A year after the silent movie, "The Covered Wagon," hit the big cities, Post 218 brought it to Washington. For three evenings, September 12, 13 and 14, 1924, it was shown at Turner Hall. Touted as the "greatest picture ever shown" and the "best lesson in Americanism that the screen has produced since the great war," it was based on a novel about the Oregon Trail. Turner Hall was packed for the showings.

A parade was held in Washington with a real covered wagon, along with the Legion Drum and Bugle Corps to promote it. This landmark movie in film history is available on YouTube and is in the public domain.

Post 218 sponsored a barnstorming exhibition on July 31, 1927, on an improvised airstrip on the Fischer farm west of town. Three planes of the Newton Flying Circus were to perform. Stunts included wing walking, loop-the-loops, tail spins and a trapeze performance beneath the plane 2,000 feet aloft. Hundreds of cars packed the pasture parking lot for \$1 per car.

**Post 218 was showing growth by Monday, Oct. 10, 1921. That evening a vote was taken to apply for a permanent charter. Additional officers were elected: Edgar E. Siebel, employment officer; Henry E. Bentinck, chaplain; John Brinkmann, librarian, Henry J. Tibbe, athletic officer; Harry Kampschroeder, sergeant-at-arms.**

Twenty members attended the national convention in Kansas City from Oct. 31-Nov. 2, 1921, using a special 1-cent train fare.

The American Legion Auxiliary Unit 218 organized in October 1922 for close female relatives of veterans.

In that same month, Post 218 organized a drum and bugle corps of five buglers and seven drummers. They performed in events during the upcoming winter months. The March 23, 1923, American Legion Weekly, pictured the Washington corps. A photo outline stated: "The drum corps of Washington (Missouri) Post shows what smaller towns can do."

The Legion rifle squad, Color B and color guards needed new uniforms in May 1927. To raise funds, the post planned a big dance at the City Park. "Since the war, the physique of some of our soldiers has changed considerably and therefore making it impossible for them to get into their uniforms. Come out and help the boys get their new uniforms," the Washington Citizen stated.

Several members represented Post 218 in the Charles Lindbergh parade in St. Louis on June 18, 1927. Alvin Nieburg, R.V. Willenbrink, John Eisele, John Toben, Dr. Dickson and Russell Tibbe carried the Legion colors.

In 1930, 218 organized a drill team along with a drum and bugle corps. About 30 members volunteered to participate. It's unclear if the original drum and bugle corps still existed. They practiced at Turner Hall with Arthur Rumpelt and Fred Mauntel in charge.

### **Memorial Day**

The Grand Army of the Republic originally held Decoration Day (Memorial Day) services in Washington after the Civil War. In 1921, Legion members helped distribute flowers to decorate veterans' graves.

In 1923 the Legion and Auxiliary planned activities. The day began with grave decorating in the morning. A “monster parade” ran from the Grammar School on Fifth Street to the City Park. Veterans were encouraged to wear uniforms. The American Legion Drum and Bugle Corps marched into the park. The Washington Cornet Band played. A senator and a military chaplain spoke. Auxiliary members offered 1,000 silk poppies for contributions. Similar programs were held in 1924.

In 1925, the Legion dedicated the stone gateway to the City Park with names of those who died in World War I. In 1928, there was no public observance of Memorial Day. Businesses and factories were open, so organizers believed that no one would attend the program. They only planned to place special markers and flowers at graves.

In 1939, observances were part of Washington’s centennial celebration at the City Park and cemeteries. Beginning in 1940, the Legion tossed a wreath from the bridge into the Missouri River in memory of Navy and Marines “who gave their all.” At some point, Legion Posts 218 and 535 and VFW Post 2661 started participating together. Legion members walked from the Post Home to the bridge for several years. The program was held at the Legion.

In 1989, Memorial Day observances moved to the Washington riverfront. Not only did the location change, but the wreath was dropped into the Missouri River from a boat.

### **Independence Day/Legion Picnic**

Post 218 has provided Independence Day festivities since 1925. That year, members held a carnival, fish fry, dance and fireworks to raise funds for the Legion Endowment Fund on July 3.

In 1926, the Legion and area businesses combined to celebrate the nation’s sesquicentennial. The day began at 5 a.m. with a band concert played from building tops. American Legion buglers blew reveille in different parts of the city. Cannon salutes began at 5 a.m. every 30 minutes until 12:30 p.m.

Through the years, the event included carnival games and rides, food, dances, music, “monster” auto parades, a rodeo, baseball games, swimming and entertainment shows. For a few years, festivities lasted three days. In 1951, a Studebaker sedan was raffled at the festivities. It was often called the Legion Picnic.

In June 1934, the Washington Citizen announced one July 4 act, “. . . the outstanding feature of the floor show will be the real honest to goodness Fan Dance presented to Mlle. Lavita.”

At least one man was not a fan of that dance. The post received the following in a letter, “The Legion’s name and standing has been besmirched in Washington by the filth of that act.”

For many years, Legion members presented their own fireworks show. Later, they hired fireworks companies.

In 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Legion canceled the annual display due to concerns about public safety. Fireworks were held throughout World War II, so this was likely the first time the Legion didn't hold the event.

A rebranded "Star Spangled 4<sup>th</sup>" debuted in 2021 with an upgraded fireworks provider. Mark Kimball, a member of the Sons of the American Legion, enlisted the help of that organization. Activities have included a DJ, live music, multiple food stands and a Kids Zone.

Squadron 218 of the Sons of the American Legion was formed July 1, 1935, for sons and grandsons of Legion members. At that time, it was for males age six and up. Today, it's for all ages.

### **Ninth District Conventions**

The Washington Post was host to the Ninth District convention in 1931, 1935, 1938, 1945 and 1948. The Ninth District is composed of Legion Posts and Auxiliary Units in the area. Conventions included guest speakers, large parades of Legionnaires and auxiliary members with bands and floats, drill teams, novelty stunts, as well as baseball games and dances. Convention business was held in various places: City Hall, City Auditorium, Commercial Hotel, Turner Hall and Elks Hall.

In 1931, the convention was said to resemble the state convention in attendance. A movie was made of the 1935 convention and was presented to Post 218 as a convention record. In 1938, Gov. Lloyd Stark and Congressman Clarence Cannon spoke.

The Ninth District of the Missouri American Legion held a 50-year anniversary celebration in 1968 in Washington. It included a parade, music, receptions, guest speakers, a dance, barbecue with music and meetings. To top the two-day event off, participants took a riverboat cruise on the Mississippi Belle on the Missouri River. Many activities were held at the post home.

### **Post 218 Gets a Home**

Beginning Nov. 1, 1934, Post 218 entered into a 99-year lease agreement with the City of Washington for \$1 per year for the former Bassora public square north of Third Street (Second Street in Bassora) between Madison (then Jefferson avenue) and Washington avenues. Member Evert Mauntel designed the building for the site. Ground was broken in May 1937.

A cornerstone laying ceremony was held Flag Day, June 14, 1937. Speakers included Commander Fred Lohan, Mayor Fred J. Ruether and dignitaries from the state Legion and Auxiliary. A time capsule included the American Legion national constitution, post minutes from May 27 and June 2, 1921, charter member names and lists of commanders, adjutants and 1937 members. Members of the Legion and Sons participated.

Legionnaires called on Washington business and professional men in October 1937 for donations to help complete the hall. Henry Tibbe wrote letters on August 31, 1937, to Champ Clark, U.S. Senator, and Clarence Cannon, U.S. Representative, to see if the Public Works Administration would be able to assist

Post 218 with Federal funds. Both replied that the Works Progress Administration (WPA) *might* be able to help. Both letters are in the Post 218 archives.

That November, the city agreed to a request to run water to the lot.

The Jan. 2, 1941, *Missourian* noted that the American Legion made the last payment on the Post Home in 1940.

The American Legion Memorial Home was dedicated May 4, 1941, in memory of World War I servicemen who died in the war. Held in conjunction with a Ninth District meeting, a dedication dance was held the night prior.

“The building was erected with funds secured from the annual picnic on July 4 and public subscriptions. The work started when Fred J. Ruether was mayor. He turned the first shovel of dirt in May 1937. Louis Bleckman, present mayor and a member of the Post, will deliver the address of welcome,” according to the May 1, 1941, *Missourian*.

A souvenir button with a photo of the Post Home was issued for the occasion. An American flag flew for the first time from a new flag pole.

In early 1949, the City of Washington sold the site to the Legion for \$800. It was noted as the “Sale of City Block in Bassora to American Legion Club” in a newspaper. Having been used as a dumping ground, it became an eyesore. The Legion improved the property.

Additions were made to the building in 1948, 1955 and 1988. In 1944, a club was organized, possibly the legal name for a liquor license. In 1948, an addition was built on the north side, including the basement, where a bar room was completed. Sunday, May 25, 1949, the addition was dedicated, preceded by a barbecue and dance on Saturday. A new parking lot and a sidewalk were added.

By 1955, membership had grown to 500+ and the auxiliary 200+. This made a \$30,000 addition necessary. A large addition was built on the east side doubling the sizes of both the hall and basement. The two portions were divided upstairs with a “Modernfold” accordion door. A refreshment room and kitchen were also added to the first floor. New restrooms, a lounge room, recreation room and meeting rooms were constructed in the lower level.

In 1962, the bar was redecorated. In 1968, the kitchen was remodeled. The entire outside of the building was redecorated.

The pavilion and barbecue pit were built in 1981. Restrooms and air conditioning were added in the upstairs hall in 1987. An addition was added to the north of the kitchen in 1988. The bar was renovated in the 1990s. In 2022, new, color-tinted siding was installed on the Post Home and shutters were added. Windows were covered with siding to decrease air leakage.

### **Throughout the Years**

In 1939, Post 218 sponsored a film crew to record activities during Washington's centennial celebration. Cameramen filmed churches and businesses, Post Office personnel, fire and police departments, school children, city council, hospital, Chamber of Commerce, country club and various events. The movie was shown at the Calvin Theatre on June 6, running all afternoon and evening.

For several years, the Legion sponsored "Armistice Anniversary" dances, beginning in 1921 at Turner Hall. Later the auxiliary held Buddy Suppers to treat Legion members, their families and those eligible to join. At other times, it was a formal event with speakers, as it was in 1948 at the Legion with the VFW and DAV participating. The Mortuary Team provided firing salutes at the city park at 11 a.m. in some years. In 1954, November 11 was renamed "Veterans Day." Today, Buddy Suppers are served prior to November meetings. A formal program with speakers and Honor Guard continues at the post home.

An American Legion Junior Baseball League was organized in 1947 in this area. Teams included Sullivan, New Haven, Union and Washington. Today we know it as American Legion Baseball.

For several years, the Washington Police Department sponsored Halloween parties to "keep the children off the streets and out of mischief." Post 218 was one of the participating organizations assisting with games and refreshments. Some parties were held at the Post Home.

### **World War II**

During World War II, Post 218 honored families of those killed in action with Gold Star citations. Post members held memorial services every few months. They attended church memorial services.

In 1943 the post assisted by registering people to do part-time farm work. The Legion cooperated with the United States Employment Service and the Agricultural Extension Service. The hope was those who had day jobs would do farm work after regular work hours for pay. Farm workers were needed because farmers were drafted into the armed services.

The post assisted those serving in the military with obtaining election ballots.

In 1944, the post purchased 300 packs of cigarettes for those serving overseas. Legion dances raised funds to purchase the cigarettes.

Beginning in 1945, the Veterans Administration had an office in Washington. When it gave notice it would close at the end of 1947, Post 218 made a resolution to keep the office open. It served veterans of Franklin, Gasconade, Jefferson, Warren and other counties.

Post and Auxiliary members collected money for the "Gifts for Yanks Who Gave" program in 1948 to provide gifts for military and veterans in hospitals during Christmas.

Post 218 participated in the Franklin County Guard of Honor, organized in 1946 to coordinate area American Legion posts for wake services and military units. In 1947, Mayor Hillermann appointed a committee for war dead being returned to Washington. It consisted of members of the American Legion,

VFW, DAV, Chamber of Commerce, Lions Club, Elks and Knights of Columbus. At another time, the Legion, VFW and the DAV in Washington organized a Veterans Welfare Committee to assist each other when requested to conduct a military funeral.

At one time, the Post 218 group was known as the Mortuary Team. Today it's known as the Honor Guard. It participates in the Missouri Military Funerals Honors program, working with the National Guard and active components of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines and Coast Guard to provide military honors in Franklin and surrounding counties. In addition to providing funeral duties, the Honor Guard participates in Memorial Day, Independence Day, POW/MIA Day and Veterans Day observances.

On May 23 1987, the Post Home's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration was held. The event included a flag-raising ceremony, barbecue and a beer garden. A dinner and dance were held in the evening. Secretary of State Roy Blunt spoke.

In 1990, the post constructed a five-flagpole monument at the corner of Third and Washington on the Legion grounds. The center flagpole flies the American flag with the POW-MIA under it. On either side are the Missouri and the American Legion flags. The American Legion Auxiliary and the Sons of the American Legion flags fly on the outside poles. It was dedicated Sunday, Sept. 9. State Rep. Wes Miller and State Treasurer Wendell Bailey spoke.

On Saturday, Dec. 7, 1991, the post held a 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary memorial service of the Pearl Harbor attacks. Members of Post 218, its Auxiliary, Sons of the American Legion, VFW, U.S. Army Reserve and the Washington Volunteer Fire Company participated on the Post 218 grounds.

The City of Washington installed a veterans memorial in Krog Park Sept. 11, 1988. Post 218, along with VFW Post 2661, dedicated the memorial at the corner of Fifth Street and Highway 47. It was rededicated in 1999 in conjunction with the VFW.

A chapter of the American Legion Riders was formed in 2006 by Sons member Dewayne Scego after a Legion member suggested it.

Ground Hog celebrations started in 1959. These once-popular events included a plate lunch supper of pork sausage ("ground hog"), sauerkraut, bread, applesauce and potatoes. A live music dance followed until "the ground hog goes into his hole." It included much merriment, including costumes.

One year, festivities included a "Hillbilly Wedding." The mock wedding party consisted of men, including the bride, flower girl and vocalist, dressed as women. Another time Miss Krakow, Miss Pottery Road and Miss Goose Town competed in the Miss Ground Hog Queen Contest. Attendance prizes were given.

At another time, the Legion held "Tacky Dances." Dance-goers wore "tacky" clothing for Halloween.

Over the years, the Legion, the Mortuary Team or the Sons of the American Legion have held shooting matches to raise funds. Shooters aim at targets for meat prizes. At one time, these were very popular and included free beer. Additional prizes could be won by purchasing tickets for “spin the wheel.”

Bingo was a popular fund-raising event at Post 218 beginning in the 1970s for many years. Saturday evenings, the hall was packed with bingo players. Crowds swelled when husbands were away for deer hunting.

Beginning in 2017, the American Legion Family (Legion, Auxiliary and Sons) has held third Saturday barbecues to raise money.

It's unclear when Post 218 obtained a “cannon,” a 4.7-inch M1906 field gun. It was built in 1918 by the Northwestern Ordnance Co. The carriage is a No. 696 Armory Carriage, Model of 1906, built by the Studebaker Corp., in 1918. It is doubtful this gun saw action in World War I. Many were used for stateside training. It has been restored several times, most recently in 2020 using barbecue proceeds. It is displayed in front of the flag memorial.

In addition to programs mentioned elsewhere, Post 218 has supported Boys State, American Legion Legacy Scholarships, flag education, American Legion Oratorical Contest, Poppy Day, clay bird trapshooting sports program, emergency aid to veterans, flag education, POW/MIA programs, food pantries, Special Olympics, Franklin County Honor Flight, American Legion Baseball, Scouting, Child Welfare and JROTC medals.

### **Expanding Eligibility**

According to the national American Legion, the organization “was designed to die when the World War I generation did.”

Throughout the years, eligibility changed with the times. When President Roosevelt signed Public Law 767 in 1942 to amend the 1919 American Legion charter, World War II veterans with honorable discharges became eligible. Both the Legion and Auxiliary amended bylaws to reflect this change.

As our country became involved in other conflicts, more periods of eligibility were added, including Korea, Vietnam, Lebanon/Grenada, Panama and the Gulf War/War on Terrorism. If National Guards/Reservists served in active duty during those times, they were also eligible. However, the hodge-podge of eligibility dates left some veterans ineligible for membership.

Congress' Legion Act of 2019 changed the American Legion's eligibility periods from seven war eras to two: April 6, 1917, to Nov. 11, 1918, and Dec. 7, 1941, to a time later determined by the federal government. No other restrictions to American Legion membership were changed.

End