

Benches added to veteran's memorial at Lake Helen

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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Low numbers dissolve VFW organization.

Old Glory, the Nebraska and a POW/MIA flag flutter in a hot bluster that blows across Lake Helen.

Stone eagles perch atop concrete pillars. At the bottom, the names of soldiers who died in World Wars I and II, the Korean and Vietnam wars are etched in granite.

“In Grateful Remembrance of those who made the supreme sacrifice” are words carved into the slab.

Two stone benches were recently added to the veteran's memorial at Lake Helen.

Veteran's of Foreign Wars Pony Express Post 5132 installed the first bench, along with a tree, with funds from the organization which has since disbanded.

Jack Ostergard, a member of both local chapters of the VFW and American Legion, jokingly said he shamed the Legion into buying a second bench.

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The local VFW organization, made up of members who served in armed conflicts in other countries, dissolved two months ago because of lack of participation.

“And membership,” Ostergard added. “There were only four of us who attended meetings and young guys were not joining.”



Active members included Ostergard, Stan Johnson, George Johnson and Cliff Geiken who have all served as commanders of the organization and who are all in their 80s.

The local chapter still had funds so members decided to buy a stone bench, engraved with the VFW name and symbol, from Blase-Strauser Memorial Chapels & Monuments.

Blase-Strauser sold it to them wholesale and erected it a stone's throw away from the memorial.

Members decided to donate the rest of the money to a Senior Center program that loans medical equipment to the community.

Ostergard said the local VFW once had about 100 members.

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Stan Johnson said the dissolving of the organization was sad “but it’s the way things are going.”

“There is less interest in belonging,” Johnson said.

The former VFW members still belong to the American Legion which is open to any veteran and children of veterans.

They can also join another VFW chapter elsewhere or be an at-large member which is what Johnson chose to do.

Bob Bullock, a past commander of the American Legion, said the Legion and other veteran’s organizations “go to bat for veterans in terms of health care.”

“A lot of times if a guy is going to get health care and belongs to a certain organization, they’ll look at you differently,” Bullock said.

Johnson and Ostergard agreed.

Membership in the local American Legion is 142 with about half the members out of state, Bullock said.

Those numbers helped when Bullock and Ostergard requested donations for the memorial bench at Lake Helen.

Both the American Legion and VFW have helped sponsor the local Veteran’s Day and Memorial Day programs, high school scholarships, fireworks at Lake Helen and decorating veterans’ graves with plaques, flags and crosses to name a few activities.

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The American Legion also sponsors Boys and Girls State, the junior law cadet program and Legion baseball.

Bullock received a state award for his participation in the American Legion in July of 2008.

"We don't do as much as we used to," he said, noting that Legion members also used to give apples to teachers to show their appreciation.

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