

North Bend/Morse Bluff Veterans Memorial Park

As with all good things, it begins with an idea, a thought, a wish, a dream, and then it is shared with others who also have a vision to pursue it further. And so it began in October of 2002, when Bob Johnson mentioned his idea to Wilber Ott and Doug Wamberg in conversation following an AMVETS meeting in North Bend, Nebraska. Each knew that several Nebraska towns had wanted to express their support of and gratitude to American soldiers who honorably served or were currently serving in the armed forces of America. Would our community embrace the idea as well? Being currently engaged in a war with Iraq, patriotism was fresh in everyone's mind as reports of soldiers' sacrifices and the sacrifices of their families filled the news. The idea was presented to the AMVETS in early 2003, who felt with the help and support of area military organizations in North Bend and Morse Bluff, the park could become a reality. Representatives of the VFW Post #8223, the American Legion Post #340, and the Jeffrey K Mines AMVETS Post #20 came together to form a committee to plan the joint venture. Everyone expected the task to require many voluntary man hours and at a cost they needed to arrive at as the plans unfurled. Wilber Ott accepted the chairmanship and the organizations canvassed the community to encourage support.

The original idea was to utilize a small mini-park situated between two business buildings on the west side of main street 1 ½ blocks north of the intersection of Highway 30 and 79 that was already owned by the AMVETS. However, with the offer of Jim (former graduate of North Bend) and his wife Sandy Kruger of Omaha, a larger more visual spot was chosen a block north of the original plans which encompassed 2.5 lots at the corner of 9th and Main Street along Highway 79. The Krugers had wanted to do something of this nature but had not acted on it and were anxious to become a part of the planning of the park. Their only stipulation was that it honored service men and women and not wars that America had fought. They generously gave the park site to the group and presented a donation of "seed money" of \$25,000, as well to send the idea forward. Service donations were given by Rod Johnson, North Bend attorney and Platte Valley Bank who assisted in achieving grants and funding. Doug and Rene Rasmussen donated their landscaping skills and energy to see that the Park soft-scape was off to a good start. Longevity Lawn Service of Fremont has provided fertilizer and lawn nutrients at no charge. The Rasmussen's now mow and keep plantings trimmed and looking good, as well as take care of snow removal. The KC's Council #3737 have built and donated a brick reference site located in the southwest corner of the Park. There is a very dedicated group that displays the flags on appropriate days and on the days a veteran is laid to rest. Because the Park is quite visible when traveling Hwy 79 to attend University of Nebraska home game days, it was decided to fly the flags at that time to give other Nebraskans the full glory of the Park in full color as well.

During the planning stage, suggestions were received and ultimately Richard Hoppe, noted bronze sculpture artist, particularly of soldiers, was commissioned to help the committee design the park. Mr. Hoppe of Malcolm, Nebraska, near Lincoln, grew up in nearby Schuyler adding yet another connection to the community's efforts. He would sculpture clay images to later be bronzed. The design was to include a member of each branch of the military. The Park was to become a solemn site where people could sit on black granite benches or walk the beautiful surroundings and contemplate; remember loved ones; and recognize priorities, service and sacrifice that are required to maintain a free and democratic society.

The Park cost was estimated at \$260,000, and would be completed as funding became available. Committee members felt the idea that began in 2002 could ultimately take several years to complete, but everyone was willing to devote the time and effort that might take. Funding was to come through the sale of bricks which would become a part of the central statue's base. Dark colored bricks would be reserved for servicemen and women while the lighter bricks denote individual or company contributors, memorial bricks, or bricks of personal significance. Each section of bricks holds 280 bricks, a total of 2400 in all. The bricks cost \$100 and are engraved with the donor's choice subject to limited spaces. Columbus Monument engraves the bricks for a nominal fee as their contribution to the Park. Through grants,

donations, memorial monies, sale of bricks, and fund-raising events, within a year \$140,000 had been raised. Donations of sponsorship of flag poles, benches, statues, and landscaping was also received. Countless volunteer hours by community residents helped clear the donated lots of a basement structure and old trees and shrubs, leveled the ground, set the flag poles, planted new shrubs and trees and plantings, poured foundations for the statues and for sidewalks, laid bricks, and provided electrical and water sources.

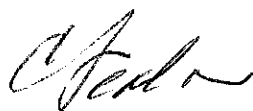
In 2004, the first of the statues, a 4500 pound statue of soldiers in combat, arrived from the Joseph Bronze Casting Company of Joseph, Oregon. It took 3 hours to load the statue and make sure it was secured and a balanced load. Two local veterans traveled the 1471 mile, 82 hour trip to transport the statues traveling back to North Bend at a speed that ranged from 30-58 mph. Their goal was to have the statue home in time for the Old Settlers parade for the community to see. Patriotism was felt during the entire journey. A highway patrolman, who had pulled over a speeding motorist, stopped what he was doing and saluted as the statue passed him on the highway. Truckers honked, bystanders cheered, and lights were left on the statue all night at the motel where the veterans spent a night. These are only a few of many examples. The Navy sailor followed in 2006. The Army female statue was added in 2006 and the Air Force statue in 2007. North Bend resident, Sylvia Slavik, then 99 yrs. old, donated the fallen soldier statue in 2011.

A fundraising challenge that was to have taken 10-15 years was nearly completed in May, 2005 when the Park goal reached 85% or \$220,000. The actual goal was reached in 2006, however it was decided to have a formal dedication on September 18, 2005, when \$223,000 or 90% of goal was reached, just 3 years after the idea was born. Keynote speaker was Governor Dave Heineman and remarks were made from Brig. Gen. Robert B. Bailey, chief of staff, Nebraska Air National Guard. Of the 500 in attendance was the sculptor, Fred Hoppe, surrounding veteran's organizations including several from other towns, local community groups, student organizations, and visitors from many states with connections to the community.

Though the goal has been reached, there are planned maintenance costs so fundraising continues to provide the resources to keep the Park in its present condition for many years to come. Bricks are still available to buy and that will be the primary source of this income, however, the community is aware of the need for funding with a 6 month water bill of between 4-5 hundred dollars and light bill of about \$50 a month, so memorials continue to be sent to the Park Committee and outside donations are still received.

Memorial Day began 1 day after WWI ended at 11 AM on the 11th day of the 11th month in 1918. Since that time many take the time to remember our fallen and to show support to those who honorably served or are currently serving our country. The Veteran's Park is the site of a special ceremony each Memorial Day since it became a reality where generations come together to remember and reflect. "We write no last chapter, we close no books, we put away no final memories, for if honor and patriotism die, who will be inspired to make the necessary sacrifices in the next war?"

Besides Memorial Day services each year, our Park has been the setting for a military wedding, an officer's commissioning, and has detoured a military convoy by two blocks in 2009 when 160 historic military vehicles, bikes, etc. circled the park while following the old Lincoln Highway reliving a 1919 convoy that traveled Highway 30 through North Bend on the trip from Washington, DC to San Francisco. The first convoy was just after WWI when moving from horses to new technology provided a test to various military vehicles. The 3251 miles originally had 81 vehicles and 300 men. Among the first riders was Dwight D. Eisenhower, then a Lt. Col. That trip was made in 62 days and traveled at an average speed of 6 miles an hour and stopped many times to overcome obstacles. Over 33 million people are said to have seen the convoy. To keep with this moment, the 2009 convoy was served 10 cases of Spam from Hormel of Fremont, Nebraska to the travelers. Spam had been a staple of WW1 and is something everyone should experience!



by Cheryl Feala