

Legion fights for survival in anniversary year

BY TIM SMITH
STAFF WRITER

With anniversary celebrations just around the corner and a multitude of community service programs in full swing, there should be sunny days for American Legion Groves-Walker Post 346 in Farmington.

After all, the post on April 18 will toast 75 years in Farmington, as well as the 50th anniversary of the current location at 31776 Grand River. But, instead, the sky above the brick building is filled with rain clouds.

■ With casino gambling taking hold in Windsor, and with Detroit to follow, the numbers are dwindling for weekly revenue-generating bingo games. In 1990, about \$28,500 was brought in by the Friday contests, all to help with operating costs; last year, that total was an estimated \$10,000.

■ Young war vets aren't signing up and 14 older ones have died since July. Who knows what that trend will mean to veterans organizations 10 or 20 years in the future?

"I guess that's good in a way, because it means no wars," said Lorraine Christensen, wife of Groves-Walker Home Board President Walter Christensen. "But we need new blood."

■ And residents made enough of a stink about another money maker for the Legion — driver's license testing in the back parking lot — that the Farmington Planning Commission last week denied the post's request for a special exception use permit.

Whatever those setbacks, Walter Christensen and post Cmdr. Paul Olaszewski plan on maintaining all of the positive endeavors that the American Legion prides itself on as well as increasing public awareness and — hopefully — bringing in new members. It wouldn't hurt for the general public to rent the facilities, available for everything from birthday parties to Super Bowl celebrations. The Groves-Walker post relies on such rentals to help keep the building running and Legionnaire programs solvent.

Toot that horn?

"Maybe we don't stand up and toot our horn about what we're doing," said Walter Christensen, a Korean vet and longtime Farmington resident.

Perhaps the 250 members of the post should: They spearhead the annual Memorial Day Parade (May 25) down Grand River to the "Unknown Soldier's Tomb" at Oak Hill Cemetery. They place miniature American flags at the graves of deceased vets. They sponsor youth baseball, as well as troops from the Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts. Legionnaires also visit classrooms for flag etiquette assemblies. They present "Americanism" awards to high school students. They provide scholarships. Earlier this decade, post members Walter Sundquist and Christensen won back-to-back Citizen of the Year Awards from the Farmington-Farmington Hills Chamber of Commerce.

Meanwhile, walls and tables in the basement of the 50-year-old building are filled with memorabilia and photographs, detailing the many accomplishments and saluting those veterans who led the post.

"Look at this," said Christensen, who with Lorraine raised four boys and two girls. He unfolded a blueprint from one of the post's annual Mid-Winter Festivals, mostly held in the 1930s and 1940s to stimulate business and camaraderie in town.

Inside the building, booths were set up by various Farmington businesses, such as the Farmington Dairy, Evans Candy, Mac's 5 & 10 store and Sandra's Sandwich Shop.

"And across the street they had it set up for car sales," said Christensen, glancing down at the yellowed sheet of paper.

April 18 post party: 'Like 50 years ago'

What, where: Dual celebration, 75th Anniversary of American Legion in Farmington; 50th Anniversary of the current location of American Legion Groves-Walker Post 346, at 31776 Grand River, west of Orchard Lake Road.

When: Saturday, April 18, from 11 a.m. to 11 p.m.

Cost: Free, open to general public. (Donations will be accepted.)

Highlights: Oldest tunes, country-and-western music, free food and beverages. "Just like they did 50 years ago," said Legionnaire Walter Christensen. "Hot dogs, beer, popcorn and pop. And at no charge."

lowing sheet of paper.

Community service

The commitment to community service remains strong decades later, even though most of the post's members are now in their 60s, 70s or older. From May 14-16, vets will stand on street corners for the annual Poppy Days sale, to benefit needy veterans and their families.

"I'll be at Farmington and Grand River," Christensen said.

Meanwhile, a "Vegas Night" fund-raiser for the post's baseball program and Farmington High School Baseball Boosters is set for 6 p.m. Saturday, March 28, at the post. Both programs will split proceeds.

"On Memorial Day proper (Saturday, May 30) we also do a special service at North Farmington Cemetery," Christensen continued. "There's a veteran in that cemetery for every war since 1776, from the Revolutionary War through the Persian Gulf uprising in 1991."

"Memorial Day is very special for this country," he said, "and it ought to be for this community, too."

Poppy pride

Also special is the Poppy Days fund-raiser. Christensen removed a fading red paper poppy from the dark blue Legionnaires hat that was resting on the table. The hat is covered with pins and emblems representing some of the landmark achievements he has been part of since 1960.

"That poppy is handmade by a disabled American vet," he said. "He gets a couple pennies for it, maybe. But you can open it up a little bit and blow a little life into it."

Christensen returned the poppy to his hat. "I never wear this hat without it. It's my most cherished part of the hat."

The hat is always a great way for vets to start conversations about the past. But what about the future of the American Legion? Relative post newcomer Olaszewski isn't pessimistic, but he's realistic.

Younger men and women who want to war or spent time in the service often are too busy going to college or getting their personal lives going to worry about signing up for the Legion — something that requires \$35 annual dues and a time commitment that can be as little as one two-hour meeting per month.

"The problem is," said Olaszewski, a Marine vet who joined the post in 1995, "you get out of the military and too many veterans aren't involved with the (veterans') organizations because they're trying to get their lives together."

Perhaps, he added, next month's open house anniversary will spark some interest in younger vets to join what Lorraine Christensen said is like a devoted family.

"We've been here for so long and a lot of people have worked many, many years," she said. "And they are still working to keep it going."



STAFF PHOTO BY SHARON LEONARD



Vintage shots: Paul Olaszewski and Wally Christensen, both American Legion vets, pose with a photo of the first Memorial Day Parade after the construction of the building. The cannon is an original Civil War weapon. At left, the Legion building on Grand River is shown during its original construction 50 years ago.

timely finds

right style

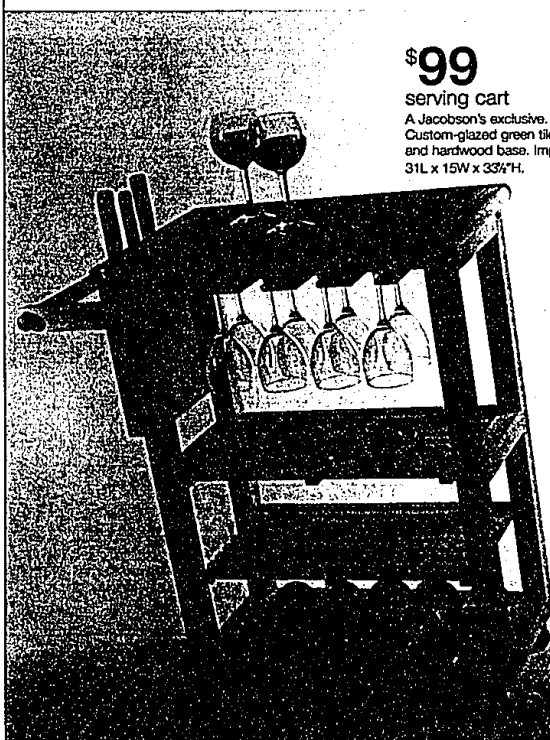
right price

right now

\$99

serving cart

A Jacobson's exclusive. Custom-glazed green tile top and hardwood base. Imported. 31L x 15W x 33 1/2 H.



Jacobson's

Birmingham • (205) 844-6900 Livonia • (734) 591-7606 Rochester • (248) 851-6000

SHOPPING HOURS • MON-SAT 10-9 • OPEN SUN AT NOON

Did you know that:

■ The first location for Farmington's American Legion Groves-Walker Post 346 was in a log cabin behind where the Masonic Temple is today?

■ The second site was in the basement of what is today known as the Village Mall?

■ Its third home was on Grand River at Maple, about a half-mile west of the current location?

■ Florence Lee was the first post president in 1926 and that Zella Neufman was the first president at the current building?

■ There probably are 1 million eligible war veterans — in Michigan alone — who are not members of veterans organizations such as the American Legion and VFW?

3 Clarenceville seats open after incumbent withdraws

BY MARIE CHESTNEY
STAFF WRITER

Linda Brandemihl, who's served 12 years on the Clarenceville Board of Education, has stepped out of this year's school board race.

That means three seats are up for grabs in the June 8 school election in the small school district which serves portions of Livonia, Redford Township and Farmington Hills.

The other two open seats belong to Gary Garrison and Marita Neal. The trustees appointed Neal to her interim seat Thursday after accepting the resignation of trustee Gary Gasser.

Brandemihl said she knew going into last Thursday's board meeting that she would not be filing petitions for re-election.

During the meeting, Garrison

announced he will seek another four-year term. Brandemihl said she refrained from saying what she intended to do because she did not want residents to think there is a link between the two departures, hers and Gasser's.

"I've enjoyed it, loved it, but it's time," Brandemihl said Monday.

"There's no other reason. Being on the board leaves you with little time to do anything else, and there are other areas I want to explore, such as hospice work, or working one-on-one with kids as a tutor."

Instead of waiting until the April 6 filing deadline, Brandemihl said she announced her decision ahead of time so residents know there is one less incumbent in this year's school board race.

"Historically, we've had trou-

ble attracting candidates and there have been uncontested races," said Brandemihl, an office administrator for Michigan Surgical Associates in West Bloomfield.

"The most important thing is that a candidate take the commitment seriously and do the homework. Being a trustee is a bigger responsibility than showing up for two meetings a month."

Brandemihl's seat is also a four-year term.

Gasser was two years shy of serving his four-year term. The successful candidate for Gasser's seat will serve out the last two years of his term.

Residents in both the Clarenceville and Livonia school districts have until 4 p.m. April 6 to file petitions for a seat on their respective boards.