



1946

# HISTORY

NORTH ALBANY POST 1610  
AMERICAN LEGION

1991



## PREFACE

This history has been a long time coming and I was more than happy to start writing it when Mr. Ronan Campion asked me to undertake the task in May 1990. Most of the material for this work was obtained over the past year through taped interviews conducted by Mr. Campion. The rest of the information I obtained through personal interviews, newspaper clippings, post photographs, and the various documents pertaining to the post. The finished product is contained in the following booklet.

I would like to thank all of those post members who were kind enough to share their memories of North Albany and the post with me. They made the writing of this history enjoyable, interesting, and a pleasure. In fact I would like to thank the "post" in general for I have rarely met a more congenial group of men.

I hope everyone enjoys reading this work.

John T. Evers

## I. INTRODUCTION

The American Legion system that we have come to know in the United States was founded in 1919 at the end of World War I. Oddly enough the birth place of the American Legion was in Paris, France not the United States. In the years following the "Great War" several posts (meeting places for members of this veterans' organization) sprang up across America. By the end of the Second World War there were several American Legion Posts in the Capital District. BUT, there was no such organization serving the community and veterans of North Albany. In the years immediately following World War II several of the veterans of the "village" decided to change this situation.

## II. HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

From 1945 until about 1947 a group of founding fathers met from time to time in North Albany with the intent of starting a post within their community. These men, who became the original members of the North Albany American Legion Post #1610, met at various locations. The first get togethers took place in the basement of the Sacred Heart Church, which was and still is centrally located in the heart of North Albany. Due to an increase in the number of veterans and the lack of a permanent meeting hall, the group met at several different locations during the mid 1940's. Even while the locations of the meetings fluctuated, a committee to enroll new members was set up as early as January 30, 1946. Meetings were held at the Blue Heaven, Phoenix Club, Public School #20, and O'Keefe's Store as well as at Sacred Heart. The Phoenix Club, which was located on the corner of North First and Broadway, proved to be a very historical meeting place for the future members of the post just as it was for their ancestors. It was in that very house that the agent of the Patroon (the ruling Van Rensselaer family leader) received payments of food, livestock, and other goods from his tenants.

The first community/post function was a dance held at Public School #20 on February 21, 1946. Eventually the members decided that a post of their own was needed that

would serve as a place for the post members to gather and recreate and which could become a pillar of the North Albany community in general. It was universally agreed that a "post" of some sort belonged in North Albany. The problem for the early post members was trying to decide what type of post would best serve them and their community. Some of the members felt that a VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars) would bring prestige to the area due to their contribution to the country in the World Wars. Others felt that an American Legion Post would be more open towards those who served both in combat and in support capacities. A smaller group of members desired an "independent post" that would avoid formal affiliation. Eventually it was agreed that the North Albany community needed an American Legion Post that would encompass most of the veterans of the area and provide a meeting place for them and their families. The "founding fathers" of the post considered naming the post in honor of one of their fallen comrades but they eventually felt that it would be more appropriate if they named it after their beloved community. After all it has been said that 99.9% of those who had entered the post in the early days (as well as those veterans of today) were linked to North Albany by strong family and friendship ties.

It was no easy task to start the North Albany American Legion post. Surely a community of veterans was present in North Albany, yet a post also had to consist of a physical structure which would allow the members and their families to

meet in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. In early 1947 it was clear that a building was needed to complete this scenario. Therefore a group of about four or five post members visited a number of banks in order to borrow the \$10,000 necessary for the building. Unfortunately all of the banks refused to loan them any money. Tired from a depressing day of failures, this small group stopped by Prime's Saloon on Broadway for a bowl of soup. As they talked about their future options and the tough road that they felt was ahead for the post, they were overheard by Bill Selch. Selch, who was originally from New Scotland, worked on a local bus line. He revealed to the group that he had just come into a large sum of money. Upon hearing the group's story about being turned out of all the local banks, Selch decided to help the post by lending them the \$10,000. One of Selch's close friends, Elmer Rando, acted as the agent between the post and Selch. Harry Christenson, one of the post's charter members, was given \$50 for ironing out all of the legal details. The surprisingly good luck that this disparaged group ran into at Prime's Grill allowed them to concentrate on the building of the post free from financial worries.

It should be noted that to this day there is a large memorial plaque hanging in thankful honor to Mr. William Selch in the North Albany Post. The plaque is located on the wall adjacent to the game room and stands between the list of the original charter members and the first members of the

ladies auxiliary. It was dedicated in memory of Selch's death and therefore it is inscribed with his date of death; February 26, 1957.

The first plot of land that the post occupied was purchased from the Van Rensselaer Estate, a relic of an ancient semi-feudal estate that once included all of North Albany or for that matter most of Albany and Rensselaer Counties as well. The land was situated on what used to be Mohawk Street, adjacent to Mullon's Park, and was comprised of a small area of North Albany that has since been crossed over by the I-90 overpass. The additional lands surrounding the post were purchased from the City of Albany in the 1950's when the Albany Housing Authority built the Edwin Corning Homes north of North First Street. Along with these lands came a small, white clapboard church on North First Street that had long since gone bankrupt. The total cost for these purchases was \$5,350. The construction company hired for the building of the post was McManus and Longe. [Coincidentally the same firm has recently completed construction on Albany's 18,000 seat civic center; the Knickerbocker Arena.] The actual construction on North Albany Post #1610 started in the summer of 1947 after the post officially received its charter on June 16, 1947 from the County Commander James Drislane and County Adjutant Phillip Murray. It was at this meeting that several of the original post members signed their charter at O'Keefe's Store. The final building plan called for a squat, concrete block edifice with cement floors that would be set

back from North First Street.

The building of the post was a real example of cooperation. All of the interior work, including the ceilings, painting, and plumbing was installed by the post members themselves on a volunteer basis. Several of the members who were skilled in trades, such as Bill Lawlor who was a plumber, lent a hand in equipping the post with the necessities needed to get the building operational. During the construction there was no on-site running water or electricity at the post. Bill Davis, a post member who lived only a block away on Pearl Street, provided all the water and power needed via pipes and wiring from his home.

The first chairs for the post were large iron ones that were purchased from the Watervliet Arsenal at 50 cents each. Soon after the post was opened the members realized that they needed a refrigerator. Luckily one member of the post had a relative who said that he would donate his refrigerator provided the post pay for its removal from his office. The post consented and paid a mere \$13.88 for a green, double door refrigerator with an old fashioned round generator on top.

In no time at all, the post was completely furnished inside and ready to host dances, parties, and bingo games (which helped defray the day-to-day bills). The post began sponsoring such events as The Annual Field Day which provided entertainment featuring greased pole climbing, arts, crafts and game booths. The post also hosted clinics which provided



the youth of the area boxing, dancing, and sporting lessons. In keeping with the times before television, even a movie projector was purchased by the post in order to entertain the community youth. On the whole the functions and tasks performed by the post were innumerable and the community was all the stronger for it. The North Albany Post #1610 provided a strong neighborhood atmosphere that permeated the entire area and brought the people of "Limerick" closer together.

### III. FOOTNOTES IN THE POST'S HISTORY

The first commander of the North Albany Post #1610 was Eddie Carey. During Commander Carey's tenure from 1946-47 the membership grew steadily and the first Legion Cards were issued. On December 19, 1948 the American Legion Auxiliary Unit #1610 came into being under its first President, Betty (Egan) Sheehy. Ever since its inception, the wives and daughters that have made up the ladies auxiliary have been extremely helpful, if not invaluable, to the post.

As the years passed the post grew in membership. It also played a large role in the affairs of its community. By the 1950's the post not only had a sturdy building on Mohawk Street but a considerably large amount of property as well. In fact the post owned two buildings; the post itself and the small white church on North First Street that they bought from the City of Albany. Instead of tearing the church down the post decided to keep it intact. In fact, with the church came what was felt to be a rather valuable lectern that was kept in the cellar before it was eventually given away some time later. The exact whereabouts of the lectern is still a mystery. The church, which had a very plain exterior consisting of whitewashed wood siding and a slate roof, was dwarfed by the belfry that extended two stories into the sky and housed a rather large church bell.

This bell became the spotlight of conversation as well

as the center of attentions in the late 1940's when a Catholic missionary priest from the area started looking for materials for a church to be erected in the Philippines. As the story goes, Father Julian returned from the Philippines to his home in Watervliet after spending some time in Texas near the end of the Second World War. Father Julian had been through quite an ordeal while pursuing his vocation as a missionary priest in the Pacific during the Japanese occupation.

When the war ended and he was released, he returned to the United States and spent a year recuperating in a monastery in Texas. After his repose in the monastery Father returned to Watervliet to visit his family and friends. Refreshed and revitalized after seeing his family, the priest eagerly prepared to return to the Philippines in order to set up a mission. It was remarked by one of the priest's friends that it was his sole desire to set up a parish in the Philippines and that "his heart and soul would always be over there."

While in Watervliet he started gathering all the materials that he could get his hands on that would help with the building of a church. This personal crusade led him to one of the barber shops in North Albany. Fortunately for the priest the barber, like barbers everywhere, had a lot of connections. Of course, when Father Julian expressed the hope of finding a church bell the barber's jaw dropped. Where in the world would one find a church bell in North Albany that was not being used? After all church bells are

extremely expensive. BUT, the network of inquiry by those in North Albany quickly revealed the news that the North Albany Post just happened to own a church on North First Street complete with a bell. Neither the bell nor the church were seeing much use and after a little prompting the post decided to give the priest the bell for his mission church.

A small problem arose soon after the post decided to give Father Julian the bell. How do we get it out of the belfry and loaded onto a truck? Once more luck was on Father Julian's side. The Albany Crane Company donated the use of one of its "cherry pickers" and a few of the post members who were iron workers donated some of their time in order to man the crane.

They then proceeded to rip open the belfry, hook up the crane's arm to the bell, and lower the bell down. On paper the operation seemed easy. In reality it took several hours due to some of the worst weather that the post had ever seen in its history. The rain and stormy winds nearly ended the job but, thanks to the perseverance of the members and their desire to help Father Julian with his dream, the job was safely completed despite the uncooperative and violent weather. The bell was then placed on a flatbed truck and eventually it was driven to Boston to an awaiting army transport ship. The ship then sailed (with Father Julian's new bell and other supplies) down the east coast, through the Panama Canal, and across the Pacific to the Philippines to begin a second career calling souls to worship.

The bell, labor, and transportation didn't cost Father Julian one red cent. Thanks to the post, the bell is still believed to be in Father Julian's church (50 miles south of Manila) to this day. Unfortunately Father Julian ran into some trouble with the political authorities in the Philippines after he had been falsely accused of "trespassing" and, despite his being on a first name basis with the Marcos family, he was eventually exiled. Since then he has only been able to return illegally. He has since retired and lives in Texas.

The famous bell was also the source of one of the post's practical jokes. Long before the bell was removed, indeed even before the post was fully operational, a few of the members decided to play a little trick on the community. One day after work a few guys got together and started to ring the bell at the church. They wanted to see if they could stir the interest of the locals and therefore the curiosity of the police. Naturally a few concerned citizens started to wonder why the bell was being rung so late on a weeknight.

Could it be possible that the Pope had died? Was something special going on? The word quickly spread to the local police precinct where one member of the post held a high ranking position. He decided to check it out himself. When he got there, to his exasperations, he found his fellow post members laughing at the questions; "What's going on here? Is there a new Pope?" Eventually the police officer caught on and joined in with the crews' hearty laughter.

#### IV. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE POST

In the 1950's the membership in the post grew rapidly. By this time the post had a permanent home on Mohawk street and was one of the meeting places of the community. The mortgage for the Mohawk Street building was paid off and subsequently burned in an exuberant post celebration on January 26, 1959. Even the press showed up to report on the high spirits and general cheer of the entire North Albany community on that long awaited day. The post, which had grown by leaps and bounds, was well into its third decade of service when the 1960's rolled around. Unfortunately the early 1960's brought hardship and challenge instead of continued prosperity.

In 1961 the post was unexpectedly beset by a fire which totally destroyed the original building on Mohawk Street. Luckily the post had never sold off the small church they owned on North First Street. In order to move the post into the church they had to have one of the post members drive all the way to Syracuse to speak with George Woodcock, the last remaining trustee of the defunct church.

In all actuality the church was owned by the post but the legal title and some necessary paper work had to be taken care of before the post would be able to move into it. Mr. Woodcock decided to sell the legal title to the post for one dollar and therefore help them avoid any high sales tax. The

State of New York decided that the proper selling price was \$50. The post consented, paid the increased price, and proceeded to move into the church.

The post remained headquartered in the white church on North First Street from 1962 until 1966. The church was remodeled and vast improvements were made in order to get it operational. All of the pews had to be removed and the ceiling had to be replaced for fear that it would cave in. The labor and energy needed to make the church the post's home away from home for the next few years was donated by the members of the post as it was in the late 1940's when the first post was built.

There soon arose a problem over the location of the post and the post's lands. It seems that the State of New York had formulated rather extensive plans for the area of North Albany that encompassed the land on which the North Albany Post stood. The state wanted to buy the lands and the post and tear it down in order to build the I-90 overpass. The members of the post were very reluctant to sell the land especially after they heard the State's first offer of \$25,000. The post turned down the offer and deferred to a legal counselor who estimated the worth of the land at the considerably larger figure of \$38,000. The post then presented this figure to the state who countered the post's offer with a offer of \$38,300 (an increase of \$13,300 over the first offer). Ironically the post received an additional \$300 over their proposed offer. They used half of this small

bonus (\$150) to pay for the services of their highly successful arbitrator.

With the construction of the I-90 overpass the post was forced to build its new building up North First Street Hill. In fact Mohawk Street itself was completely demolished in order to make room for I-90. In 1965 construction on the new post was started. The design for the new post was very different from that of the first post. The new post was much stronger and the frame was built entirely out of steel. The company contracted for the job was Unit Span, but once again most of the labor involved in the building of the post was donated by the members themselves. Once the post was operational much of the interior work, such as the installation of the kitchen, was done by hired hands.

The new post was radically different from the Mohawk Street post. This new building had much more room inside and was fully equipped with a game room, meeting hall, modern kitchen, bar, and storage rooms. The post also spared no cost at decorating the exterior as well as the interior. Therefore a baseball diamond was constructed on the property going up North First Street hill and the white church which had served as a temporary post was demolished. These alterations helped improve the aesthetic beauty of the post as well as provide room for a parking lot on North First Street and a designated area of practice for the post's American Legion baseball team. The first commander of the new post was Al Van Amburgh. Under Commander Van Amburgh the post took out a fifteen year mortgage in order to



defray the cost of the new building and the various additions to the post.

As the years passed the membership leveled off at around 450 to 500 members with the majority being World War II veterans. Since the building of the new post there have been several smaller additions and alterations. In 1971 the post dedicated a monument and a flag pole to the memory of North Albany's fallen comrades. Both the flag pole and the monument marking the dedication are located in front of the post's entrance on North First Street. Another North Albany monument is the Thomas Dongan Memorial. This particular memorial was dedicated in 1983 but the history behind the plaque dates back to the forefathers of the City of Albany. It seems that back in the 1800's many Irishmen from the County Limerick settled in what is now North Albany. In time the nickname "Limerick" was pinned on North Albany and has since remained. The post decided to honor both the Earl of Limerick, Thomas Dongan, and the North Albany area by installing a commemorative plaque during the Albany tricentennial celebrations in 1983. In 1985 a pavilion was built in the back of the post and the surrounding grounds were groomed in order to make it an ideal picnic area and place to hold post functions.

**V. NORTH ALBANY POST'S AMERICAN  
LEGION BASEBALL TEAM**

The American Legion baseball organization is a made up of high school boys between the ages of 16 and 18. Like most American Legion posts the North Albany post has maintained an American Legion baseball team over the years. They represent the post when they take the field and play the representatives from the other legion posts on the local, state, and national level. In the past few decades the North Albany post has fielded several successful teams that have managed to win state championships in 1979, 1981, and 1985. In 1990 they managed to make their way all the way to the state finals before they were beaten.

The North Albany baseball team numbers among their alumni several professional baseball players, including several who are currently active in Major League Baseball today. One highlight of the post's team is its incredible schedule. On the average the team plays between 40 to 60 games a year including games at such ball parks as Heritage Park and Doubleday Field at the National Baseball Hall of Fame.

The post is also privileged to have one of its own, namely Richard "Dick" Conners, as a past Commissioner of New York State American Legion Baseball.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The North Albany American Legion Post #1610 is still located on North First Street hill in the northern end of the City of Albany. To this day the post occupies the same steel framed blue building that was erected in the mid 1960's. The mortgage for that building was paid off and burned in a post ceremony in 1983 (just as the first mortgage was in 1959). A few minor alterations have taken place at the post over the last few years but in general the post has remained the same comfortable community in recent history.

The members have represented the North Albany Post in admirable fashion over the years and the neighborhood and community involvement cannot be stressed enough. The post can brag of its having the best American Legion Color Guard in the State of New York (as voted on by all of the posts). There have also been two American Legion County Commanders from the North Albany Post namely Ray Steebe, Sr. and William "Tex" Wilson.

In conclusion it may be said that the North Albany American Legion Post #1610 still maintains its strong North Albany tradition. The names and faces have changed little over the years. Indeed most of the names have stayed the same due to the strong family ties that I have mentioned in the introduction. The faces may be a little older but one can still recognize the old die hards and they can still be seen at the post from time to time. Even those that have

moved out of North Albany remain true to their beloved post.

It would be hard to find a more loyal group of men than the members of the North Albany post in today's society and I challenge anybody to find one for I know that they would surely fail.

PAST COMMANDERS

Edward Carey.....	1946-47*
Neil Gray.....	1947-48
Albert Britt.....	1948-49
James Egan.....	1949-50
Ray Ruff.....	1950-51
James Smith.....	1951-52
James Preisser.....	1952-53*
John Cobb.....	1953-54*
Whitney Libbey.....	1954-55
Fred Yanni.....	1955-56*
James Van Amburgh.....	1956-57*
John Barrows.....	1957-58
Ray Steede.....	1958-59
Jack Ruff.....	1959-60
Peter Burns.....	1960-61
Frank Mulligan.....	1961-62
Donald Rainis.....	1962-63
Vincent Egan.....	1963-64
Don Farrell.....	1964-65*
Art Lenihan.....	1965-66
Al Van Amburgh.....	1966-67
Joseph Duclos.....	1967-68
William McDonough.....	1968-69
William Rourke.....	1969-70*
John Mullin.....	1969-70
William Wilson.....	1970-71
Bernie Murphy.....	1971-72
William Gilheany.....	1972-73
DuWayne St. John.....	1973-74
William Carey.....	1974-75
Vince Campbell.....	1975-76
Ralph Deso.....	1976-77
Arthur Dunigan.....	1977-78
Frank Tracy.....	1978-79
Michael Ryan.....	1979-80
Frank Duffy.....	1980-81*
Kevin Ryan.....	1981-82
Ronan Campion.....	1982-83
Raymond Smith.....	1983-84
Nicholas Wendeborn.....	1984-85
Charles Schnurr.....	1985-86
Joseph Betz.....	1986-87
Francis Dolan.....	1987-88
Charles Kelly.....	1988-89
John Jubic.....	1989-90
John Mullen.....	1990-91

\*Deceased

PAST PRESIDENTS

WOMEN'S AUXILIARY

Betty Sheehy.....	1948-49
Sally McDonald.....	1949-50
Betty Smith.....	1950-51
Mae Wylie.....	1951-52
Geneva Prime.....	1952-53
Nat Duclos.....	1953-54
Mary Jean LaVigne.....	1954-55
Mary Stack.....	1955-56
Lil Barrows.....	1956-57
Leona Barrows.....	1957-58*
Ellen Van Amburgh.....	1958-59
Regina Steede.....	1959-60
Loretta Bardelli.....	1960-61
Loretta Bardelli.....	1961-62
Nat Duclos.....	1962-63
Leona Barrows.....	1963-64*
Regina Steede.....	1964-65*
Ann Whipple.....	1965-66
Betty Van Amburgh.....	1966-67
Loretta Bardelli.....	1967-68
Emma Wilson.....	1968-69
Pat Burns.....	1969-70
Pat Burns.....	1970-71
Betty Smith.....	1971-72
Betty Smith.....	1972-73
Betty Beaudoin.....	1973-74
Betty Beaudoin.....	1974-75
Pamela Tracy.....	1975-76
Pamela Tracy.....	1976-77
Emma Wilson.....	1977-78
Emma Wilson.....	1978-79
Margaret Norton.....	1979-80
Nat Cross.....	1980-81
Cecelia Richichi.....	1982-83
Cecelia Richichi.....	1983-84
Sandra McDonald.....	1984-85
Sandra McDonald.....	1985-86
Loretta Bardelli.....	1986-87
Loretta Bardelli.....	1987-88
Margaret Norton.....	1988-89
Margaret Norton.....	1989-90
Margaret Norton.....	1990-91

\*Deceased