

Memorial tablet honors ‘Great War’ dead

One hundred years ago today, November 11, 1918, the guns in Europe fell silent after more than four years of unrelenting carnage. World War I claimed the lives of some 9 to 11 million soldiers and 8 million civilians. The armistice between Germany and the British, French and American Allies famously took effect on the “eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month” (though the Treaty of Versailles marking the war’s formal end wasn’t signed until 1919).

In the aftermath of the “Great War’s” end, anguished communities across the United States counted up their dead and began making plans to memorialize those who made the ultimate sacrifice.

McLean County was no exception. Locally, veterans, public officials and community leaders worked together to erect an 87 by 65 inch memorial tablet. The 1,000-pound, oversized bronze plaque features the names of 173 fathers and sons who lost their lives in a conflict cruelly known as the “War to End All Wars.”

The tablet, titled “In Memory of the Soldiers and Sailors of McLean County Who Died in the World War,” also includes five bas-relief vignettes. One scene above the memorial’s three columns of names features an Allied convoy crossing the Atlantic Ocean, while the other depicts an aerial dogfight, with one biplane aflame and plunging to a fiery end. The three scenes at the bottom include one depicting naval deck guns engaging the enemy fleet, and two frontal assaults across the Western Front’s hellish landscape of trenches, palisades, wrecked equipment and exploding artillery shells.

In the fall of 1920, the McLean County Board of Supervisors passed a resolution supporting the erection of a “splendid bronze tablet, a fitting memorial to the dead heroes from this county who sacrificed their lives in the late war.” The American Legion Louis E. Davis Post 56 of Bloomington and other organizations and individuals helped the county clerk compile a list of war dead.

While that effort was underway, the Board of Supervisors brought in Bloomington architect Arthur F. Moratz to design the memorial. Born in Bloomington to German parents, Moratz studied architecture at the University of Illinois. Some of his better known buildings include Bloomington’s Holy Trinity Catholic Church (1932) and the Normal Theater (1937).

In late 1920, the county, using Moratz’s drawings and specifications, solicited bids for the casting and fabrication of the tablet. In February 1921, the county rejected the only two bids it received (one from New York and the other New Jersey) as too pricey, so they started over. This

delay proved fortuitous, because in the second round of bidding they happened upon the talented sculptor George H. Honig of Evansville, Ind. In April 1921, the county's public buildings committee accepted Honig's bid of \$1,700 (or the equivalent of \$23,500 in today's dollars).

A Rockport, Ind., native, Honig was an artist and sculptor who worked in a wide range of mediums, including oil, charcoal, watercolors, plaster, stone and metal. Some of Honig's more notable works include two bronze groups at the entrance of Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Coliseum in Evansville, and six commemorative bas-relief tablets at the Henderson, Ky. courthouse depicting the state's pioneer history.

There are several dozen memorial tablets in Honig's name, most found in southern Indiana, especially Evansville, as well as Henderson, Ky., situated across the Ohio River from Evansville. He's also credited with several works in Illinois, including a memorial in Paris, Ill., listing veterans of the American Revolution buried in Edgar County.

The McLean County World War I tablet arrived in Bloomington in early October 1921, with a visiting Honig superintending its installation in the county courthouse. Yet plans to build a veteran's memorial building complicated matters, as some community leaders believed the new building would be a better fit for the Moratz-Honig artwork.

And indeed, the bronze tablet was relocated to the three-story, Neoclassical-style McBarnes Memorial Building about the time it opened in the spring of 1923. Located on the 200 block of East Grove Street and designed by Arthur Moratz (yes, him again), the building originally housed the Illinois department of the American Legion offices, as well as club rooms and meeting space for local veteran organizations and posts.

The tablet honors McLean County's fallen—whether they lost their lives in training exercises, through camp-borne sickness, or on the battlefields of Europe. There's a poignant story behind each of the tablet's 173 names. Lee J. Roebuck, for instance, was the very first McLean County resident to die in the war, though he served under the Canadian flag. He first attempted to join U.S. Army as an aviator, but was rejected due to a heart defect. On Oct. 20, 1917, Roebuck's Canadian-made trainer fell apart in midair during a training flight in Ontario.

Dewey Burger, who grew up on a farm outside the Village of McLean, enlisted on the same day with three of his brothers. He was killed in action at Soissons, France, on Jul. 19, 1918, though the details of his death are few. Wounded on Sept. 30, 1918, by shrapnel or machine gun fire (accounts differ), Pvt. John M. Redd remained in a French hospital when his regiment, the famed "Black Devils," returned stateside. Redd never recovered and died in France.

The tablet, of course, offers an additional 170 similarly tragic stories.

After the county sold the McBarnes Memorial Building in 2004, local officials decided it best to return the tablet to the old courthouse, which is now home to the not-for-profit McLean County Museum of History. Today, the memorial can be seen in the north corridor of the museum's first floor, next to the "Farming in the Great Corn Belt" exhibit (ironically, this was about where it was originally located 83 years earlier). A rededication ceremony for the reinstalled tablet was held May 29, 2004.

At one point during its many years in the McBarnes Building lobby, the tablet was painted gold, though the reason why such a garish finish was deemed necessary in the first place is unknown to this author. Happily, the county hired Randy Reid, a local sculptor and Illinois State University professor of art, to remove the gold paint and restore the tablet to its original bronze patina.

The annual Veterans Day ceremony is scheduled today from 10 a.m. to noon on the east steps of the McLean County Museum of History. The centennial of the armistice is a most fitting and proper time to honor those who gave their lives in service to this nation.

In October 1921, soon after the tablet was first installed in the courthouse, The Pantagraph paid its respects to those memorialized on its bronze: "Silence has fallen upon their lips, and stillness on their forms, but their names alone breathe eloquence born of the long struggle of the World War, the burden of which fell upon their shoulders, that will forever inspire the tears of grateful memory as generations come and go."

--30--

fini