

Veterans No longer a legion of followers

American Legion posts try to retain a tradition

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WATSONVILLE — Even in the dimly lit hall of American Legion Post No. 121, the portraits, proclamations and photos illuminate the past of the organization that for 75 years has carried the flag for America and those who went to war for it.

Now, the American Legion's struggle isn't against those who would defile America or its flag. Here, at least, it's against ennui and attrition.

In some places, like Post No. 121 in Watsonville, the Legion retains its viability. Post

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No. 121 was one of six Legion posts in the county in the 1960s. Now there are two — and Post No. 64 of Santa Cruz, which like Post No. 121 will celebrate its 75th birthday this year, has only about 180 members. That's down from almost 1,500 immediately after World War II.

Post No. 64's most recent meeting did not attract enough members to constitute a quorum.

On the national level, the Legion, with 3 million members, has a substantial voice. The Legion has a powerful congressional lobby that focuses primarily on veteran-related issues such as the closure of Veterans Administration hospitals and maintaining and improving benefits and pensions.

In California, it has 615 posts and about 150,000 members, according to a spokesperson for the state headquarters in San Francisco. The spokesperson said the membership is the second-highest in the state organization's history.

But its presence on the post level, both in Santa Cruz County and elsewhere, began to diminish in the late 1960s and early 1970s when the military became anathema to many as the result of the Vietnam War. Despite efforts to attract Vietnam-era veterans, comparatively few have joined — and as members who were veterans of previous wars died or lost interest, Legion posts have been hard-pressed to replace them.

"Most veterans organizations are put together with World War II veterans," said Mike Cooper, county veterans service officer. "Nationally they're still prominent, but that (declining membership and interest) has been the general case."

Watsonville's Post No. 121, to a degree, is an exception. Its membership is slightly younger than the norm. The post commander, Robert Foxworthy, served with the Marine Corps in Vietnam. Unlike most Legionnaires, who count their membership in decades, Foxworthy has been involved for eight years.

"I guess it was curiosity more than anything

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American Legion

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else," Foxworthy said of his joining Post No. 121. "I'd been out of the service for about 20 years. I just walked into a meeting one night and decided to join. I enjoy the idea of being able to help people and help sustain the programs that the Legion has."

○ About 20 of Post No. 121's members are Vietnam-era veterans, Foxworthy said. Most of the rest were in the military during the Korean War, with a smattering of World War II veterans. One man, L.L. Mossberger, has been a member for 67 years.

Even though he is a newcomer, Foxworthy is well-versed in both the past and the present of the post and the Legion.

The post is involved in a number of activities in the community, most of them benefitting Pajaro Valley youth. Together with its women's auxiliary, it sends a local boy and girl to Boys State and Girls State, where students from around California gather for a week and learn how government works.

Post 121 also sponsors youth baseball and softball teams and Boy Scout troops, helps raise funds for college scholarships, and assists local veterans who need shelter, transportation or advice on their benefits.

The post also votes on veteran-related issues and sends its recommendation to the district (Santa Cruz, San Benito and Monterey counties) and state levels.

'Every time a serviceman would be shipped out, they'd have a dinner or a breakfast for him.'

*— Joe Datko,
post adjutant*

Foxworthy has sought new members through a national computer network that helps locate veterans, and he has sought to give the post a voice in Legion affairs on the state level.

While Foxworthy focuses on the present in his capacity as post commander, he can be like a museum guide as he shows visitors around the post hall. Various awards and commendations adorn the walls, along with photos of past members, including mayors, state senators and judges. Most of the prominent families of Watsonville's history can be found somewhere on the walls.

The post's roots go back more than a century. It was an outgrowth of the Pajaro Valley chapter of the Grand Army of the Republic, a Civil War veterans group that stayed active nationally until the 1930s.

Post No. 121 was chartered on Nov. 20, 1919, one year after the national organization was formed in France in the aftermath of World War I. The Watsonville post was named for Edward Lorenson, whose portrait dominates one end of the hall. Lorenson, who was killed in action in France in 1918, was the first of 18 residents of the Pajaro Valley to die in World War I.



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Joseph Datko, left, and Robert Foxworthy at American Legion Post No. 121 in Watsonville.

"His descendents used to come in once in a while when we'd have breakfasts here," Foxworthy said.

Joe Datko, post adjutant and a 45-year member, said membership in Post No. 121 reached more than 1,000 in 1946 in the aftermath of World War II.

"During the war," he said, "this was the center of activity. Every time a serviceman would be shipped out, they'd have a dinner or a breakfast for him. At that time, everybody in Watsonville knew everybody else, and after the war the thing to do here was to join the American Legion."

The post, which has a pool table and a bar in addition to the main hall, became a social center for the community. Now bingo games are held there, along with barbecues, fund-raisers and other events.

"Our numbers have held pretty steady," Foxworthy said. "We're still hanging in there."

Santa Cruz Post No. 64, on the other hand, is dangling precariously.

It sponsors the Boys State program in the Santa Cruz-San Lorenzo Valley area, and it makes an annual contribution to Juvenile

Hall, according to post member Bob Lemmon.

"But we scarcely get enough people at each meeting to conduct business," he said. "At our last meeting we didn't even have a quorum."

Post No. 64, which doesn't have its own headquarters, once met in the main auditorium of the Veterans Memorial Building downtown. It now meets in a small room — "the bunker," as Lemmon puts it — in the same building.

Lemmon, a World War II veteran, said to his knowledge, the post has no members who served in Vietnam. Most members are World War II veterans in their late 60s or older.

"Nine of our members passed away last year," he said. "Our numbers are going down. We have to do a survey and find a meeting day where we can get people to come. Otherwise they'll work a few of us to death. We've been losing a lot of our old standbys."

Yet despite the fact Legionnaires are aging, Post No. 121's Foxworthy says the Legion will not die.

"There will (always) be an American Legion," he said.