

The Legion Brings Santa to Ames

The events of October 1929 were felt in Ames as they were across the United States. By the following fall, it was obvious that for many children of this country, Christmas would be a much smaller celebration. At the Dec. 12, 1930, Ames American Legion Post 37 meeting, member Carl Powers described a program that the Marshalltown post was operating to help the children of that community have a good Christmas. He suggested that the Ames post begin such a program in 1931.

Legionnaire Powers' suggestion was well received. The following October, a team of Legionnaires led by M.B. Griffith made plans to open The American Legion toy shop. The program was announced in the Oct. 27, 1931, issue of the Ames Daily Tribune-Times. The toy shop would focus on donations of gently used and repairable toys rather than new toys, due to the declining economic conditions in the country.

Community groups and businesses quickly joined the effort. Collection points for donated toys were set up at the downtown fire station in city hall, Wilson and Lindquist Dry Cleaning on Hayward, Edwards Coal Company on Lincolnway and Peyton Grocery on West Street. Boy Scouts and Camp Fire Girls volunteered to help repair toys.

The Boy Scouts conducted a house-to-house visitation on Nov. 21 to collect donated toys. The Camp Fire Girls undertook the repair and dressing of dolls to be given to Ames children. It was reported that the firemen had been busy for two weeks repairing and painting wagons, tricycles and go-carts in their spare time at the station. More dolls were being requested to meet the need in that area. A team busily gathered names of children to receive the gifts.

While the toy shop work was progressing, the American Legion Auxiliary was busy gathering clothing and food to also be distributed to families in need and had taken over the task of compiling names of families and children to be visited. Many Ames merchants donated paint and other materials, as well as cash, to be used in repairing the toys as well as cleaning and pressing of the donated clothing. Many public school classes made donations to the project.

Distribution of the toys and clothing was accomplished on Christmas. Approximately 500 children were visited by Legionnaire Santas to distribute approximately 3,000 toys from the project. That effort was supplemented by cash donations from the city, post office and highway commission employees, the women's clubs and fraternal orders and the Social Service League.



The photograph was published in the December 30, 1931 Daily Tribune-Times. Those in the picture from L to R are

M. B. Griffith, Toy Shop Committee Chair, American Legion Post #37
George Horsley, Ames Fire Department
Mrs. L. H. Wilson, Executive, Camp Fire Girls
Eula May Hiland, member, Camp Fire Girls
F. H. Schleiter, Mayor City of Ames
Mrs. C. L. Dixon, President, American Legion Auxiliary Unit #37

M. G. Davis, Superintendent, Ames School System
E. A. Thomas, Commander, American Legion Post #37

The article states that the picture was taken in the American Legion hall and shows a small corner of the toy shop with boxes ready for delivery. The article credits the toy shop with the gathering, repair as necessary and distribution of more than 3,000 toys.

With the success of the toy shop in 1931, the program was again initiated in November 1932 with the first donated toys being received mid-month. For the second year, the Ames firemen, Boy Scouts, Camp Fire Girls and merchants pledged their support. No count was recorded of the number of children whose Christmas Eve was made brighter when the toys were delivered but it was reported that 165 families received gifts. An open house at the post on the Wednesday prior to Christmas was held for the community to see the results of their donations and work.

Beginning with an announcement by the city manager on Dec. 23, 1932, the American Legion Auxiliary began management and operation of a clothing depot to accept used, serviceable clothing for redistribution to those in need in Ames. The depot focused on winter clothing, shoes and overshoes.

The toy shop continued throughout the remainder of the 1930s. The December issues of the Ames Daily Tribune-Times reported that more than 600 children received Christmas presents in 1933. In 1934, it was reported that 136 families with 425 children were given Christmas presents. For 1935, those numbers grew to 152 families and 456 children with 1937 seeing 429 children in 239 families helped.

Minutes of the American Legion meetings In January each year give reports that toy shops continued until at least 1942. No further mention of the toy shop is made after 1942. World War II was well under way. Focus shifted to bond drives and other efforts to support those fighting the war.

Work continues to this day to help veteran families with children in financial difficulties. The leadership provided by the Ames Legion Family after Legionnaire Powers' recommendation for a toy shop in bringing the community together to ensure a bright Christmas for every child in the community during the Great Depression says much about the World War I

veterans, their families and their continuing service through The American Legion.

Next month we will begin to examine the changes in The American Legion following World War II and some new activities undertaken by the members.