

Camp Merritt World War I event marks 100 years since 'war to end all wars'

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(Photo: Steve Janoski/NorthJersey.com)

For many of the 400 people who attended the Camp Merritt World War I Centennial celebration on Sunday, it was a chance to pay solemn respects to the more than a million American doughboys who passed through the camp on their way to fight in the great butchering known as the “war to end all wars.”

But for Jean Walsh and her twin sister, Sheila Frary Smith, both Dumont natives, it was more personal: Their father, Lt. Charles Frary, ran Camp Merritt’s stockade a century ago, they said. The sisters said they don’t know much about their father’s time at Merritt, aside from how he once took the famed Irish-American gangster Jack “Legs” Diamond to a New York City prison after Diamond deserted.

“That’s the only thing I can remember my father telling us,” Smith said. “You know, these things you wish you had asked your parents ...”

The Frary sisters, along with hundreds of others, gathered on Sunday to honor all those who worked, trained or passed through Camp Merritt, the sprawling 770-acre tract on the border of Cresskill and Dumont that for three years served as an embarkation point for American soldiers heading to France.

The ceremony, held at the Camp Merritt Memorial Monument at the intersection of Madison Avenue and Knickerbocker Road, drew a slew of public officials, including Rep. Bill Pascrell Jr., state Senate Majority

Leader Loretta Weinberg, state Sen. Gerald Cardinale, Assemblywoman Holly Schepisi, Assemblyman Robert Auth and Bergen County Executive James Tedesco III.

Scores of garrison-cap-wearing veterans turned out, red poppies pinned to their lapels. Many were members of American Legion Camp Merritt Post 21, the Cresskill group that organized the event with the Bergen County Division of Cultural and Historic Affairs.

Camp Merritt, named for Civil War Gen. Wesley Merritt, was active only from August 1917 to June 30, 1920. Built in the bucolic Garden State fields of the early 20th century, the area is now crammed with the blend of homes and businesses found in any North Jersey suburb.

Cynthia Forster, director of the historic affairs division, said that even though Camp Merritt is now one of history's ghosts, resurrecting its memory is important.

"It has already been said that if we forget our history, we tend to repeat it," she said. "People need to realize how many people were killed in what was supposed to be the last great war."

Joe Cutolo, the post's eight-year commander, added that the public can't forget those who sacrificed for them.

"The reason why any soldier ever went is so that the next generation wouldn't have to go," Cutolo said. "You need to understand what happened. This is a monumental thing."

Bergen County sheriff's officers blocked traffic around the monument, which is a 65-foot stone obelisk surrounded by a small grass field and an immensely busy traffic circle. Dedicated by Gen. John J. Pershing in May 1924, the monument is inscribed with the names of the 578 people who died at Merritt, mostly during the 1918 influenza epidemic.

Weinberg said she had driven by the monument countless times without thinking about why it was built. That will change now, she said.

"Hopefully we will bring these stories back to our children and our grandchildren of the importance of this monument," Weinberg said.

Pascrell said more than 140,000 New Jerseyans fought in World War I, and that the organization and planning at Camp Merritt helped the American Army quickly expand as our entrance to the war loomed.

"I think General Pershing and those who consecrated this ground in 1924 would be pleased we are not forgetting the over 2 million Americans who put their lives on the line to protect freedom and democracy," Pascrell said.

Tedesco called Sunday a "special day for all of us here in Bergen County."

Maria Santiago, a Dumont resident, saw signs for the event posted around the town and attended because she's from a family of veterans.

"Anything that has to do with our country makes us feel proud," she said.

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