

Honoring Fort Mill's Heroes

On April 10, 1919, Fort Mill had a lot to celebrate. The small town, hardly more than a village, was celebrating the return of its World War I veterans.

The servicemen gathered around the old armory and marched to a position in front of the bandstand in Confederate Park. The park was decorated and "illuminated brightly."

All of the town officials were there to greet the veterans. Lucy Fish was at the piano and a choir under the direction of Mrs. Edward Ardrey was ready to sing.

The small town had furnished 124 men to the U.S. armed forces during the war. And Fort Mill, for a town its size, had more commissioned officers than any other town in the United States. There were a lieutenant colonel, three majors, six captains and five lieutenants.

Out of 96 in the nation, two local soldiers, Lt. James Dozier and Sgt. Thomas Lee Hall, had been awarded the Medal of Honor.

Fort Mill also claimed three winners of the Distinguished Service Cross, the next highest honor that the United States awards. The winners were: William Nims, Callie Smith and Capt. Elliott White Springs (Springs really was a native of Lancaster, but his parents were from Fort Mill and he returned from the war with the intention of living in Fort Mill).

After town officials welcomed the troops, there was a response by Lt. Col. Thomas Spratt, who in civilian life had been the cashier of the First National Bank of Fort Mill. Spratt joined the Fort Mill National Guard as a lieutenant in 1910. He was promoted to lieutenant colonel when the 30th Division was sent overseas.

Capt. Sam Parks and Lt. L.B. Dozier made speeches. Then Lt. Frederick Nims, Joseph Belk, Cpl. John Bayne and Dewitt Burrage presented and read the citations to heroes.

Nine memorial wreaths were laid. Seven were for men killed in action and two for men who died of disease. The wreaths were placed for Sgt. Thomas Lee Hall, Sgt. James E. Bailes, Cpl. Cary L. Faris, Cpl. Harvey L. McManus, Clyde Stevens, Walter O. Leazer, David Lee, Grover Patterson and Eugene Osborne.

When the ceremony was over, cake and ice cream were served and there was a dance in the armory.

The bulk of Fort Mill veterans were members of the 118th regiment, 30th Division, popularly known as the Old Hickory Division. Thomas Spratt's National Guard unit became part of this regiment at Camp Sevier in Greenville during October 1917. The regiment landed at Calais, France on May 24, 1918.

The first combat action of the 30th Division was when the soldiers faced the German Hindenburg Line on Aug. 31, 1918. For a month they traded shots with the Germans and then on Sept. 29, the Division "plowed its way with shot and shell through that series of German forts, hitherto considered impregnable."

In the next three weeks, Sept. 29-Oct. 20, the 30th Division captured 98 German officers and 3,750 enlisted men while three officers and 24 men of the division were taken prisoner. But the Americans had 44 officers and 1,011 men killed and 113 officers and 4,823 men wounded.

The worst day of the war for the Fort Mill men was Oct. 8, 1918, at Montbrehain, France. Company G. started the day with 185 men and at the end there were only 37 who

were not wounded. Hall, Stevens and Leazer were killed that day. McManus was badly wounded and died later.

Sgt. Thomas Lee Hall, son of Fort Mill's mayor, discovered a German machine gun nest. He was not willing to order his men to their deaths but went alone and killed the five Germans in the gun nest with his bayonet. Later in the day while leading a charge, Hall was mortally wounded.

First Sgt. Willie Nims was wounded in the leg by shell fire. He used a stick as a crutch and led his men with a "remarkable dash and intrepidity through heavy machine gun fire."

In a burst of enthusiasm for the exploits of the Fort Mill boys, postcards were printed to proclaim Fort Mill's contribution to the war. The cards carried the message: "We claim the prize for patriotism. Can you beat it?"

Louise Pettus is a local historian. This monthly article about the history of Fort Mill is presented by the Fort Mill Downtown Association. For more information, check out www.fortmilledowntown.com.