

TELEGRAPH

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From World War I to today, Dixon arch hovers over homecomings

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DIXON — Once again the Dixon Memorial Arch has played a role in welcoming home soldiers returning from battle far away.

This time the 33 members of Fox Battery/202 Air Defense Artillery Unit of the Dixon National Guard Armory passed beneath the arch, on South Galena Avenue between Second and Third streets, Saturday during a welcome home parade after a year's deployment in Iraq.

World War I

Dixon's arch tradition dates back to World War I, which ended Nov. 11, 1918.

The 1919 Dixon Triumphal Arch was the focal point of a city-wide celebration on June 12, 1919, according to a program prepared for the dedication of the latest Dixon Arch in 1985. The first arch honored the homecoming of Company C, 123 Field Artillery of the 33rd (Prairie) Division as well as other World War I veterans.

The arch was erected on the west side of the (old) Lee County Court House near the Nachusa Tavern. It was to be covered with beaverboard and to span Galena Avenue.



Company C, originally Company G, Sixth Regiment of Illinois National Guard, left Dixon in the spring of 1917 after the United States declared war on Germany. It consisted of 68 enlisted men and three officers. They were among the first 100,000 Yanks to go overseas.

During its time in Europe, the only death was Private Horrace Ortt who was killed by a high explosive shell while volunteering to take a message to company headquarters on Oct. 4, 1918.

The Dixon Veterans of Foreign Wars Post is named for Ortt.

The troops departed Brest, France May 16, 1919 and arrived in Hoboken, N.J. on May 24. On June 5, local officials went to Chicago to greet the troops in Grant Park and as part of the Chicago celebration the 33rd marched down Michigan Avenue.

Company C then went to Camp Grant in Rockford where the discharge process took place at the rate of 5,000 troops per day. The Dixon unit was mustered out on June 8.

A caravan of automobiles drove to Rockford to bring the veterans home. Final release was at 10 a.m. and the arrival in Dixon was between 1 and 3 p.m.

As the caravan passed through Oregon, a telephone call was made to Dixon and the Dixon Waterworks whistle blew for five minutes to signal the entourage would arrive at the courthouse square in about an hour.

There was a good crowd at the courthouse that Sunday, but no formal program and the veterans soon dispersed. Formal welcoming home ceremonies were set for June 12.

The Dixon Arch had letters proclaiming "Dixon welcomes her returning heroes" on one side and "We pause a moment to honor our dead" on the other. It was wired with red, white and blue lights and four search lights illuminated a large flag flying from atop the arch. Total cost for the temporary arch was \$465.

At 2:40 p.m. on June 12, Col. Henry Reilley, commander of the 149th Division, gave the address of the day on the topic of preparedness.

There was a banquet for 275 soldiers and 25 sailors at the Elks Lodge and at 7 p.m. a community sing on the courthouse lawn.

The climax was a parade viewed by an estimated 20,000 to 25,000 people.

Included in the parade were 14 Civil War veterans carrying weapons from their era. According to the dedication program, every so often, they stopped and fired volleys from their weapons.

The climax came when Company C passed under the arch. Thousands of flowers were thrown by Dixon ladies and streamers were thrown from the balconies of the Nachusa Tavern.

The temporary arch was reinforced in 1920 and became a permanent fixture.

Several years later the inscription was changed to read "Dixon honors and welcomes all who have served" on one side and "A grateful people pause in their welcome to the victorious living to pay silent tribute to the illustrious dead" on the other.

Operation Desert Storm

Veterans of the 146-member Rock Falls-based 1644th Transportation Company drove underneath the Dixon Arch when it returned from the first Gulf War on May 24, 1991.

As the unit headed north on state Route 26, a Dixon Police escort stopped at the arch and Daniel Ruckman, a Dixon member of the 1644th, cut a yellow ribbon stretched across the four lanes of Galena Avenue. The soldiers waved American flags from the buses transporting them home. People lined the streets waving flags and signs such as:

n "Welcome back to the heartland of America."

n "We are free as a bird because of troops like you."

n "Welcome back from Iraq, we supported you as you supported us."

The group then went on to a large welcome home parade which began in Dixon, along state Route 2 to Sterling, through Sterling and Rock Falls to the Rock Falls Armory.

Two large yellow ribbons outside the Rock Falls Armory welcomed the troops home.

Inside, a large crowd of parents and family members heard from a variety of officials including Maj. Gen. Harold Holesinger, adjutant general of the Illinois National Guard, who read a letter from then-Gov. Jim Edgar.

"You deserve special recognition for your participation in this national crisis," Edgar wrote.

Holesinger was a native of Morrison.

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