

Monticello Veterans Memorial Completed



Above: The Monticello Veterans Memorial monument.

Left: Harold "Heinie" Babler, a WWII veteran and former POW. Babler has been a driving force in the building of the monument.

Right: Gerhard Pechman works on the Memorial. Pechmann Monuments has built 31 Veterans Monuments through out the Midwest.
Kim Tschudy photos



by Kim Tschudy

Standing at midday looking at the just completed Monticello Area Veterans Memorial, the sun casts a beautiful shadow upon the five Slabs of polished black Indian granite. But the shadows reflected on the monument aren't what you might expect. The shadows are of those veterans whose sacrifices have kept us a free country. The beauty of this monument of black granite is its simplicity.

The monument is laid out with five pieces of granite, the tallest in the center, paying homage to all the veterans from the Monticello area. To the left of this center piece, at the south end, is the WW-1 monument. As you look at this monument you see the faces of Bill Blum, Leon Voegeli, Royal Karlen Sr, R. W. Woelffer and Christ Stauffer. All men who made their mark on Monticello in many various ways. Men who returned and built businesses on Main Street. Their reflections have faded with age as have the memories, but here they are alive. At the bottom of this monument is the quote from Dwight D. Eisenhower, "History does not long entrust the care of freedom to the weak."

Moving closer to the center is the WW-2 monument, where the images begin to get a bit more clear. Here you may see the images of Paul Voegeli, Karl Freitag, Louis Wyss, Harrison Wittenwyler and so many others of their generation who served and upon returning home

married and raised their families in the Monticello area. The light breeze carries upon it the songs of these men's era, Moonlight Serenade, Pennsylvania 6-5000, the music of the big bands of that era, Artie Shaw, Glenn Miller and so many other great musicians. The words of another WW-2 Veteran, John F. Kennedy, remind us, "Mankind must put an end to war, or war will put an end to us."

To the right of the center stone is placed the monument commemorating America's forgotten war and veterans, those who fought in the horrible cold of Korea. In the background you hear the music of Rosemary Clooney, the Mills Brothers, Tony Bennett and Bing Crosby as they entertain the veterans from Monticello who have passed on. If you look closely, you may well see an image of Edward Benkert or Harvey Elmer. These veterans are blessed with the words of Abraham Lincoln, "This nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth." The final stone on the north end is the one that evokes the most sentiment from our baby-boomer generation, the Vietnam War stone. The monument is laid out in a slight V from the center and with the monument placed somewhat lower than the nearby road you immediately get the same feeling as you do when you visit the National Vietnam Veterans Memorial, "The Wall". As you stand here your memory goes back to friends and acquaintances of your youth, a good friend, Leon Gerber, who survived the war but not the peace.

Roger Ritschard and Marvin Pederson, who both died in Vietnam. In the mind's eye you see the Nam vet sitting in his wheelchair at The Wall, head down with his finger on one single name trying to find his own private peace. You think of the Joel Mabus' song, sung with his haunting voice, Touch a Name on the Wall and the words of Thomas Jefferson, "The price of freedom is eternal vigilance."

It was not by accident that this memorial was laid out in this manner. Erich Pechmann, of Pechmann Monuments in Madison, said that their in-house artist, Alex Coyier, had the National Vietnam Veterans monument in mind when he designed the Monticello Memorial. "It signifies the long commitment made by the American people."

This memorial began as an idea seven years ago when Harold "Heinie" Babler felt that Monticello needed a Veterans Memorial, in part because he had seen so many other communities doing similar monuments. Babler, a WW-2 veteran, is a POW who was captured during the Battle of the Bulge in what can only be described as a horribly cold winter with deep snow. Babler, in a recent interview, said that for five days they were kept in a railroad boxcar with no food, water or bathroom. When he was repatriated four months later his weight was down to 80 pounds. Once the POW's were being fed they got only a bowl of soup and piece of bread each day. "I never wanted to be cold or hungry again in my life." Working with Babler is a dedicated group that includes Joe Lehnerr and Thomas Runkle.

Like all good things it takes money to take on a project of this magnitude. It is estimated that when completed the final cost will be between \$60,000-\$70,000. But Babler said that they have gotten a number of large contributions toward the monument with the Monticello Community Club, sponsors of the annual Monticello Homecoming, and Amstutz-Marty American Legion Post each contributed \$15,000 toward the monument. In addition, a number of other area people have contributed and commemorative bricks are still available. The Bank of Monticello has leased the land that Montesian Gardens and the memorial sit on to the Community Club for 20 years.

Perhaps the most interesting contribution has come from Pechmann Monuments. Kurt Pechmann, the founder of Pechmann Monuments, was a German POW in Wisconsin for several years during WW-2. Pechmann was a stone cutter in Germany and while he was in the

POW camps at Hartford and Waunakee, Wisconsin, he, like most of the 650,000 German POW's, were hired out to canning companies and farmers near the POW camps. Kurt's son, Gerhard, said that in six months in the POW camps, "dad gained 60 pounds."

It was the excellent treatment that the German POW's received in Wisconsin that made Kurt want to return to Wisconsin to make his home. It took him several years to do but a farmer he worked for near Lodi sponsored him and Kurt worked for the farmer for six months in order to pay his passage to America. After this time he again took up stone cutting and in 1971 began Pechmann Monuments in Madison.

Over the past 20 years, Pechmann Monuments has done 31 Veterans Monuments throughout the Midwest. In each case Pechmann has donated a substantial part of the cost of the monuments to the veterans groups by charging only what their actual cost of materials and contracted equipment. On most of these projects this amounts to a 30% discount.

"This was my dad's way of paying back the Americans who treated him so well during his three years in Wisconsin POW camps. This monument speaks to the better angels of America."

The official dedication will probably be held on Memorial Day 2013.