



Historical White Lake

Montague Memorial Athletic Field



By Barbara Bedau Brow

White Lake Area Historical Society

The Montague Memorial Athletic Field exists today because of the efforts of the citizens of the Montague community and their desire to establish a "living memorial" in honor of the men and women from the area who served in the armed forces during World War II.

The memorial was created during a time when rationing of items was still going on and some things were pretty hard to come by. But in true pioneer spirit, the project moved forward and became a reality.

In April 1944, the Chamber of Commerce voted unanimously to sponsor a war memorial. A committee consisting of Adolph Anderson, chairman, Taft Nesbit, George Mason, W. L. Lipka, Don R. Aitken and E. G. Townsend was appointed.

The Montague Post of the VFW backed the proposal and appointed Otto Ochs, Robert Kinney and Marcus Dahl as a committee to work with the Chamber of Commerce. The VFW Auxiliary also appointed a committee consisting of Mrs. Alvin Anderson, Mrs. William Wentworth and Mrs. Harry Block.

Additional members to the committee included: Earl Friday, Edmund Schiller, Dr. C. A. Wilke, Harry Butzer, Rev. H. C. Ringenoldus, and Wm. C. Schultz.

Rev. Ringenolds was named chairman of a subcommittee to consider a proper site. Members of his committee included George Mason, Paul Medbery, August Lehman, and Otto Ochs.

Marcus Dahl was named chairman of the sub-committee to consider the type of plaque of honor roll to erect. Other members of this committee included: Dr. C. A. Wilke, Mrs. Wm. Wentworth, Taft Nesbit, Don Aitken and E. G. Townsend.

In early September 1944, a temporary Honor Roll Plaque was constructed. Wm. C. Schultz constructed the 10 foot x 8 foot wooden plaque made of weatherproof plywood. The painting and lettering were done by Howard Johnson. It contained the names of 200 citizens from Montague, White River and Montague Township and surrounding areas.

A metal eagle was gifted by T. M. Pletcher of the Whitehall Metal Studios and mounted on the plaque.

On September 30th, the Honor Roll Plaque was installed on the side of Taft Nesbit's store located at the corner of Dowling and Ferry where it was highly visible by all. Clayton Kline, local electrician, gave the material and labor for the lights to illuminate the roll. The power for the lights was donated by the Michigan Public Service Commission. Flags were gifted by the VFW.

With the temporary plaque in place, work continued to raise funds for a more permanent lasting memorial.

The City of Montague and the Board of Education both made generous contributions. The fundraising campaign continued. Proceeds from dances, raffles, and donation jars in local stores helped to raise the necessary funds. An early goal of \$1,200 was reached.

In December 1944, lights were purchased at a greatly reduced cost and brought down from Ludington for later installation at the field. Other items planned for the field included a fence and bleachers.

By March 1945, contributions had reached \$4,000 – just \$1,000 short of the proposed goal.

Land was purchased south of the Oehrli Elementary School in March 1945, from Mrs. C. A. Merica. The plan was for part of the land to be used for a children's playground and the other part for a football field.

In June 1945, work began to clear the land and remove the stumps. Dobb Trucking and Crane Service of Muskegon was hired to excavate and level the field. Tons of earth were moved from the high side of the property to the lower side in order to create a level playing field.

Many hardworking volunteers came with trucks and tractors and pitched and hauled manure and spread it over the field and worked it into the soil. Those who worked the soil were: R. R. Oehrli, E. G. Townsend, Jack Townsend, Henry Hunt, Walter Hunt, Arthur Nichols, Rufus Hunt, Harry Wissman, Roger Schultz, Wendell Lipka, and "Bill" Gillan. Farms from which the natural fertilizer came included: Warren Howell, Ray Schultz, Ed Rogers, Otto Ochs, Joe Zaremba and "Bill" Thieman.

In August 1945, the field was rolled and seeded, with the hope that it would be ready to use by the next year.

On September 21, 1945, the first football game was played on the new field under the lights. It was estimated that there were 1,200 in attendance at the game, which saw Montague win over Whitehall 13-0.

By November 1945, the contributions to the Memorial Field Fund totaled \$7,238.51.

The Memorial base was constructed on the south end of the field and two plaques containing a total of 244 names were installed. In addition, a plaque containing the names of eleven servicemen who died while serving during the war was also added. They were: Robert Andrews, Kenneth Carmody, Menno Earl Gingrich, Otto R. Grunewald, Robert La Founce, Edward Lindsey, Robert Meinert, John Radics, Thomas Reavy, Raymond Runzel, and Harold Strandberg, Jr.

On September 19, 1947, the Montague Memorial Athletic Field was officially dedicated. It was estimated that there were 2,000 in attendance. The actual dedication was staged by the Veterans themselves assisted by other speakers, the high school band, and also solo and group singing. In addition, the Montague and Whitehall high school football team played 60 minutes of rugged football. The Wildcats smothered the Vikings 26-0.

From that time on, the field has continued to be used for football games and site of many high school graduations until around 2004-05, when the new stadium was built. The area is currently being used as a soccer field.

It is also the site of the Memorial Day services that are held each year before the start of the parade.