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## *Victory Memorial Drive*

by Sarah Johnson

**D**id you know that Hennepin County is home to one of the largest World War I memorials in the country? Bordering the northwest corner of Minneapolis and Robbinsdale, Victory Memorial Drive stretches approximately four miles and contains almost 600 trees and bronze markers honoring Hennepin County soldiers who died in World War I. The City of Minneapolis acquired land for the park through use of the Elwell Act, a Minnesota law passed on July 17, 1910, relating to the acquisition of land for streets, parks, and parkways in cities.

After the United States entered World War I in the spring of 1917, Theodore Wirth (1863–1949), superintendent of the Minneapolis park system and widely recognized as the dean of the park movement in America, introduced a plan to use the land as a memorial for the soldiers of Hennepin County who would perish in the war. The plan called for a two-way roadway and for walk and bridle paths on the east-west section. Wirth was authorized to solicit local buyers for bonds to finance the project. Some of the biggest contributors were the Minneapolis Trust Company, the Minnesota Loan and Trust Company, Midland National Bank, and Lakewood Cemetery Association. Prominent individuals—including Charles M. Loring (1833–1922), regarded as the father of the Minneapolis park system, and Hennepin County Sheriff Earle Brown (1891–1956), progressive farmer, civic leader, and founder of the Minnesota Highway Patrol—also made substantial contributions.

Construction of the parkway, completed in 1921, cost approximately \$385,000. Concerned that seedling trees require eight years to grow to a proper size for planting along the drive, Charles Loring donated Moline elm trees from

nurseries in Illinois and New York for planting along the new parkway.

More than 30,000 people assembled in the northwest corner of Minneapolis on June 11, 1921, for the formal dedication of Victory Memorial Drive with its 568 elm trees planted in memory of the fallen soldiers of Hennepin County. The ceremonies began at noon, upon the ringing of the courthouse bells, with a parade in



*Theodore Wirth*

In formal gardening there is nothing more beautiful than long parallel rows of stately trees. If planted far enough apart to permit each tree to become a fully developed specimen, they will in time become giants of strength and beauty. What better or more noble symbol of strength and character of our victorious soldiers could be chosen to serve as a memorial to the fallen heroes and noble defenders of our liberty?

—Theodore Wirth  
Minneapolis Parks Superintendent

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*Future site of Victory Memorial Drive, looking north from 32nd Avenue (October 1919)*

which thousands marched and every patriotic organization was represented. Representatives of three Allied nations joined the local citizens to dedicate each tree—attended by a former serviceman and four schoolchildren as guns boomed and airplanes flew overhead dropping roses, poppies, and peonies. Gov. J.A.O. Preus of Minnesota, Mayor J. E. Meyers of Min-

neapolis, Capt. Sydney Bailey of the British Navy, representing the British ambassador, and Monsieur DeFontnouvelle, representing the French ambassador, addressed the crowd. Telegrams from President Warren G. Harding, Gen. John J. Pershing, and Major League Baseball commissioner Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis were read.

*Construction of the parkway, completed in 1921, cost approximately \$385,000.*





The establishment of Victory Memorial Drive was a matter of worldwide interest. Marshal Ferdinand Foch, Supreme Commander of the Allied Armies during World War I, and General Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Force, visited it later that year.

“I can conceive of no more fitting monument to the heroic dead of Henne-

pin County than this great Victory Memorial Driveway with its living borders of magnificent trees,” Pershing remarked after viewing the new memorial. “Here, present and future generations may come and witness the tribute of a grateful community to its fallen heroes and meditate on their own duties and obligations as citizens.”



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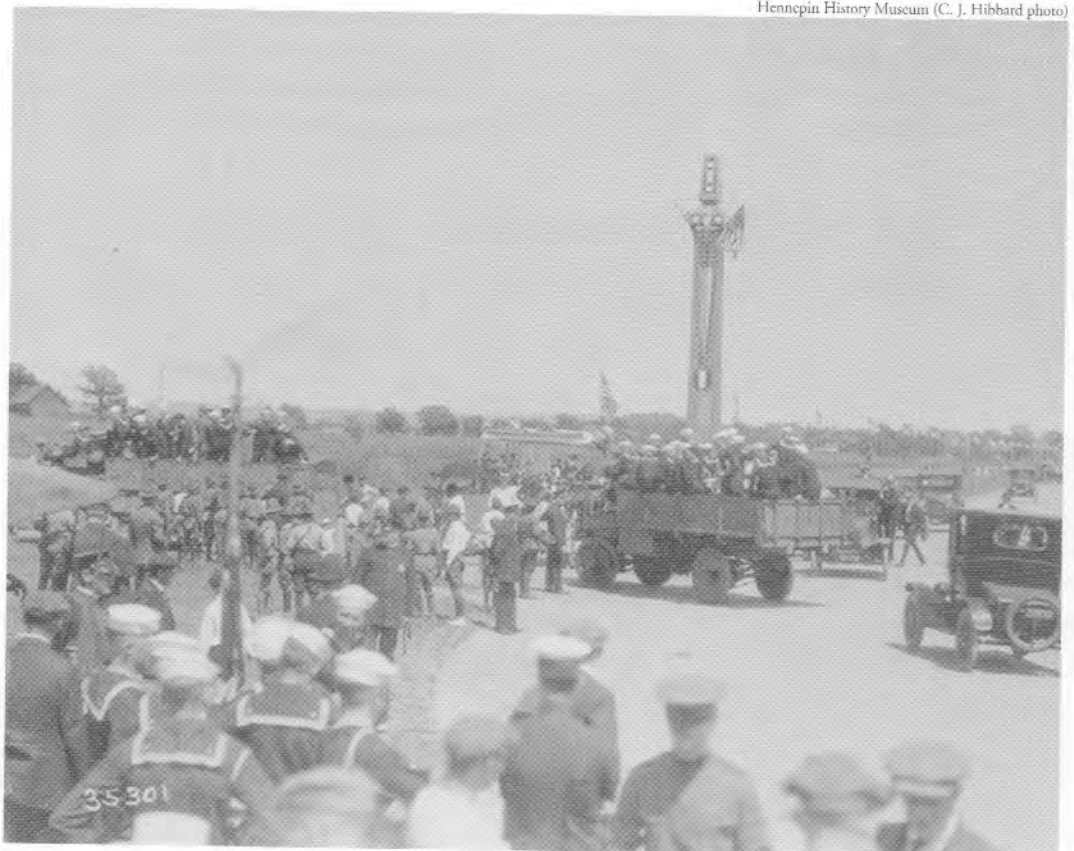


*The ceremonies dedicating Victory Memorial Drive began at noon on June 11, 1921, with the ringing of the courthouse bells.*

Men like Theodore Wirth and Charles Loring devoted professional expertise and personal wealth to make Victory Memorial Drive a tangible, beautiful asset to the

park system and to the citizens of Minneapolis. At the 1921 dedication of the parkway, A. A. McRae, Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board president, said,

*Servicemen representing all the armed forces joined in the dedication of Victory Memorial Drive and its 568 elm trees to memorialize the fallen soldiers of Hennepin County.*



Minneapolis Park Board (C. J. Hibbard photo)



*Thousands marched in a parade along Victory Memorial Drive, with representatives of every patriotic organization and three Allied nations.*

“Mr. Wirth is due unstinted credit for his vision, his ability to plan and his genius in creating . . . and carrying to completion this wonderful scenic drive, which as the

years pass will become more and more appreciated . . . and he will have constructed a lasting memorial to his own industry and artistic skill.”

Hennepin History Museum (C. J. Hibbard photo)



*Among those participating in the dedication ceremonies were soldiers of the 151st Field Artillery, veterans of World War I.*



*Victory Memorial Drive began to realize Theodore Wirth's vision even before its elms grew to maturity (above, soon after dedication; right, 1944).*



In 1921, the *Minneapolis Journal* reported that other large American cities were looking at the park board's achievement. And the *Boston Herald* recommended Victory Memorial Drive as a model for eastern cities: "The completion of Victory Memorial Drive and the dedication of the memorial trees will go down in the history of the city and the Park Board as one of its most important achievements. Its value will increase as the years pass and the trees grow into stately dimensions and majestic beauty."

On Decoration Day (later renamed Memorial Day) in 1923, the American Legion of Hennepin County replaced the wooden flagpole at the right-angle turn of Victory Memorial Drive near 45th and Xerxes Avenue North with a bronze pole set in an ornamental brick base. More than 40,000 children and others raised funds for the flagpole. The base contains



*Gen. John J. Pershing (shown here in 1920) visited Minneapolis to view the newly dedicated Victory Memorial Drive, which he called a "fitting monument to the heroic dead of Hennepin County."*

eight bronze tablets inscribed with messages from General Pershing and Marshal Foch, as well as the preamble to the constitution of the American Legion and the



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*To memorialize their fallen comrades, Hennepin County veterans of the Grand Army of the Republic erected a statue of Abraham Lincoln at 44th and Xerxes in 1929.*



names of the soldiers who were killed in the war.

On November 11, 1928, the tenth anniversary of the signing of the armistice that ended World War I, a bronze marker was placed in front of each tree along Victory Memorial Drive bearing the name, rank, and company of a fallen soldier, along with a cross, a Star of David, or a crescent, depending on the faith of the soldier. A flag was placed on each of the markers on Decoration Day. The markers, however, presented challenges. For example, the roots of the growing elms caused the monument bases to heave upward, while other markers became targets of vandals. In addition, the markers also hampered maintenance of the grassy areas on the drive. Because of all these factors, the city park board replaced the markers in 1953 with plaques embedded in the ground. While the change solved the

problems, the memorials, now at ground level, are more difficult to observe.

The Abraham Lincoln statue at 44th and Xerxes is also a part of Victory Memorial Drive. In 1929, 125 remaining members of the Hennepin County units of the Grand Army of the Republic erected the statue in the center of ten trees they planted to memorialize fallen Civil War comrades.

Victory Memorial Drive is also part of the Grand Rounds Scenic Byway, the longest continuous system of public urban parkways in the country and the pre-eminent urban parkway system for more than a century. In addition to Victory Memorial Drive, Grand Rounds includes the Chain of Lakes, Minnehaha Falls, and the Eloise Butler Flower Garden.

Parks, parkways, and green areas have always been a huge part of life in Minneapolis. They play an important role in the

social and economic environment of the city by instilling community pride in the beautiful areas in which people of the city can recreate. Citizens from across the metro area enjoy the shade of elms surviving more than 75 years as they pass through the area in cars, on bikes, on roller blades, or on their feet. The parkway provides a wonderful landscape offering an uninterrupted straight-line view of the elms, with monuments, tablets, and statues complementing but not interfering with its arboreal beauty.

The Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board currently maintains Victory Memorial Drive. Recently, concern has risen about the markers and replanting of trees. Because of Dutch elm disease, some trees have had to be cut down and others planted in their place. Upon the 75th anniversary of the dedication of the parkway in 1996, a unique "Adopt a Marker"

program was initiated, through which interested citizens maintain the area surrounding a designated marker. It has come to the attention of city officials that some markers have been accidentally covered by new sod. In addition, new lighting is needed on the parkway and adjacent bike paths.

State lawmakers passed a bill during the 2003 session of the Minnesota Legislature to designate Victory Memorial Drive as a state historic district. Sen. Linda Higgins and Rep. Joe Mullery sponsored the bill, which the City of Minneapolis added to its legislative initiatives, at the request of Fourth Ward council member Barb Johnson. The bill faced no opposition as it made its way through the state lawmaking process. In fact, several legislators asked to co-author the bill. During the hearings, Folwell resident Patricia Schon, past national president of the Vet-

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### *In Flanders Fields*

In Flanders fields the poppies blow  
Between the crosses, row on row,  
That mark our place; and in the sky  
The larks, still bravely singing, fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago  
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,  
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie  
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:  
To you from failing hands we throw  
The torch; be yours to hold it high.  
If ye break faith with us who die  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
In Flanders fields.

—John McCrae, 1915

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*The  
Minnesota  
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has designated  
Victory  
Memorial Drive  
as a state  
historic district.*

*A bronze marker was placed in front of each tree along Victory Memorial Drive in 1928 to honor the World War I dead of Hennepin County. Plaques embedded in the ground replaced the markers in 1953.*



erans of World War I Auxiliary, spoke in support of the enabling legislation and recited John McCrae's 1915 poem, "In Flanders Fields." She was joined by representatives of the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars as well as Milt Schoen, veterans' service officer for Hennepin County. Gov. Tim Pawlenty

signed the act creating the historic district. The designation will help ensure that, as A.A. McRae said at the dedication of Victory Memorial Parkway in 1921, "these beautiful trees remain a living emblem to the hallowed memory of those of our loved ones who made the supreme sacrifice for liberty, justice, and humanity."

***Sarah Johnson***

*is a student in the Graduate School of Business at the University of St. Thomas and has lived on Victory Memorial Drive for the past 12 years.*