

MINNESOTA (PINE COUNTY) HISTORY

Minnesota Naval Militia

A unit of the United States Navy located in Pine City, Minnesota, very unlikely most people would think. The Third Division of the Minnesota Naval Militia was not quite the United States Navy, but it could be called into service by the Navy in time of war. The Division and an armory to house it was located in Pine City.

On the evening of January 21, 1913, seventy young men from the Pine City area were mustered into the Naval Militia by Captain Guy Eaton from Duluth. The officers elected for the new division were Commanding Officer Lieutenant Robert Wilcox, Lieutenant (JG) Dr. K.W. Kapp and Ensign Fred Jepson. Uniforms were issued on April 18th and plans for an armory were in progress.

The Pine City Militia trained for two weeks of each of the summers of 1913-14-15 and 16. They cruised the Great Lakes in the USS Gopher. Several months before the United States declared war in WW I, the unit was ordered to be on alert. The several months of preparation and suspense was broken at 10:30 AM on April 6, 1917, when the order to "Mobilize the Naval Militia" was given. Pine City's Militia of 38 men were ordered to board the train that day and proceed to Duluth, and then on to Philadelphia Naval Yard. They were to serve on the USS Massachusetts.

A monument is located on the lawn of the City Hall in Pine City with the names of the Officers and men of the Third Division who served in WW I. The marker notes that this Militia unit was the first to be called into active service in WW I.

A shooting accident happened the very first day of the mobilization. During the time of alert and preparation, an armed guard was kept to guard the Armory. While the men were checking their new rifles, one of the rifles fired, the bullet passed through Dewey Wilcox' right ankle and then through the ball of his left foot and into the floor. Apparently the man on guard duty forgot to unload his rifle and the rifle discharged when he worked the action. The bullet hole can still be seen in the Armory floor. After some weeks of recuperating Dewey rejoined his unit in Philadelphia. Dewey jokingly claimed to be the first casualty of WW I.

The Third Division was not kept together as a unit. The men were assigned to other duties with the Navy. After the war the Division was dissolved and never reactivated. Naval Militia units were only reorganized in Duluth, St. Paul and Minneapolis.

The act to establish Naval Militia units was authorized by the Congress in 1899. Naval Militia units were military organizations equivalent to the National Guards. A Naval Division had about the same number of men as a company of land forces. Minnesota's first Naval Militia was organized in 1903 at Duluth. This unit trained on the Great Lakes in the USS Gopher.

How did Pine City, a small town thousands of miles from the seas and a hundred miles from the Great Lakes, qualify for a Naval Division? In 1913, the Minnesota Legislature authorized cities in Minnesota to share with the state in building armories in their cities. Congressman J. Adam Bede, of Pine City and Judge Robert Wilcox, a former Naval Officer, worked hard to get an armory and a Naval Unit located here. A check for \$1,000.00 from voluntary subscriptions and a deed for three lots donated by Mr. and Mrs. Fred Hodge was enough to assure an armory to be built at Pine City. The building was built in the fall of 1913 at a cost of \$15,000.00.

The armories served the communities as a place for the Militia to train, but also a community center. Many dances, meetings, funerals and other gatherings were held at the Armory. Pine City High School played its basketball games in the building until the High School Auditorium was built in 1937.

In 1924, Battery E 125th Field Artillery of the Minnesota National Guards was activated and took over the Armory as it's training facility. They trained at the Armory until February, 1941, when they were called into active service in WW II.

The Minnesota State Guards were organized to replace the activated National Guard and trained in the Armory until 1947, when the present National Guard was organized.

After the new Armory was built on old Highway 61 south of Pine City, and the local school took over the old armory and used it for school purposes for several years. The building is now under control of the City. The Minnesota Naval Militia Armory is now a historical point of interest, and thus closes another interesting story of military history of Pine City.

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