

BACK IN TIME

Battling over a proper memorial

A building or a park? In the end we know what won out

By **DICK SHEARER**

Not all wars are fought on a battlefield, which was precisely the case in early 1920 in Lansdale.

World War I, supposedly the war to end all wars, had mercifully concluded a little over a year earlier and townspeople sought a way to honor those who served the nation so bravely in Europe.

But as is often the case, no good idea goes unpunished. A number of community leaders and the fledgling American Legion post discussed the possibility of erecting a war memorial building in the downtown district.

The public found out about this on Jan. 15, 1920, when a story appeared on the front page of the *Republican and Review* newspaper that disclosed the exploratory talks that had been going on behind the scenes.

An ad hoc committee, including William Heebner of the agricultural works family, and Dr. H.O. Williams, a prominent physician, put the plan on track by raising the funds to purchase land on West Main Street across from the present PEAK Center.

The news story was accompanied by a drawing of the proposed building which was designed by local architect Milton B. Bean. Plans called for it to house the Legion headquarters and several other organizations and it would include a gymnasium in the basement.

There was scant news coverage over the next two months, leaving the impression the project was moving ahead full steam. Not so.

Had it been merely a matter of raising more money, no doubt the war memorial building would have become a reality. But from the start the principal players began bickering.

The borough supported the idea but wanted to retain control over the building. It expected the Legionnaires to pay a share of the maintenance. The Legion, on the other hand, wanted to run the place and felt the borough should be responsible for its upkeep.

A big concern was that the post-war euphoria would eventually fade and there would be no support for the building when the veterans died off. The borough feared it might wind up with a white elephant on its hands.

Townspeople took sides and before long this good-intentioned undertaking became the source of discord, leading to arguments among long-time friends. It quickly became evident that the project was doomed to fail.

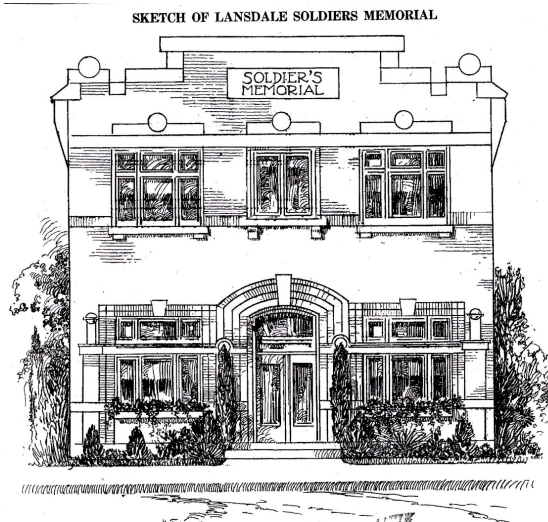
As this was going on, Lansdallians were mired in a cold, snowy winter so thoughts turned to the upcoming baseball season. A new team was being formed and it needed an improved playing field. A number

of sites were suggested but the most appealing was a plot of land off Line Street that was owned by Heebner.

Sometime between January and mid-March thoughts turned to making the new baseball field and its surrounding tract into a war memorial park. Just like that, the building plan was scrapped and the land sold back to its previous owner.

Heebner offered to sell his tract at a reasonable price with the option for a newly-formed parks committee to buy more acreage if the need arose in the future.

The new plan was ambitious. It included more than benches and a ballfield. There was talk of a



(Continued on page 2)

In the end, the choice was Memorial Park

(Continued from page 1)

gymnasium, locker rooms, a community center and a public swimming pool. Of course, most of that never materialized.

But the basics became reality. The parks committee – a private group – raised enough money for the field and grandstand to be built and it assumed responsibility for maintaining the property.

Still, the fears expressed when the memorial building was under consideration turned out to be warranted. By the early 1930s, financial support for the park declined as the war years faded in history. The committee was so low on funds that members had to reach into their own pockets to buy gas for the lawn mower.

The crisis was brought to light by Walter Sanborn, publisher of *The Reporter*, who wrote a series of front page stories detailing the park's history and the community spirit that led to its creation. He implored the borough to step in, take control of the property and maintain it.

That is precisely what happened. A public parks commission was created and on May 30, 1935 a greatly improved Memorial Park – complete with new walkways and hundreds of donated shrubs - became Lansdale's tribute to those who served the nation in wartime.



WORLD WAR I MARKER CIRCA 1930s.