

Bonus Army

York County Veterans Among 1932 Relief Demonstrators

From all over the United States, the Bonus Expeditionary Army gathered in Washington in June 1932. The men in the BEF were World War I veterans, most of them unemployed. They created a tent city on the Potomac flats and planned a march on the Capitol if their demands were not met.

The veterans of 1918 had received no pension or special benefits at the end of the war. Belatedly, Congress had passed a bill in 1925 to provide an insurance certificate worth \$1,000 that would be payable in 25 years. But in 1932, the soldiers wanted the right to cash in their policies as a "relief" bonus. President Hoover maintained that relief was a local problem.

Among the veterans in Washington were 23 from York County. Guy Able was the leader of the group, and Gary James was the supply officer. Most of the men were recruited at the Union Textile Hall in Rock Hill.

On June 21, Guy Able wrote from "Camp Bartlett" in Washington that they were comfortably quartered with tents and cots and had "eats three times a day."

Able wrote home, "The Rock Hill detachment has the honor of furnishing the camp bugler. The camp was without one until we arrived with "Sally" McClain, of Rock Hill, and he was immediately assigned as bugler, and is very popular with the B.E.F. officials all the way up to the national commander, H.D. Waters."

By mid-July there were 36 York County men at Camp Bartlett, one of some 20 encampments. Local sentiment was very much behind the veterans. Rock Hill and Fort Mill merchants gathered up 1,300 pounds of food and some clothing for Able and his men.

Congressional Democrats had introduced a bill to pay off the insurance policies as a relief "bonus." It was an election year, and the Democrats hoped to win the support of the American Legion.

In late June, the Senate rejected the bill, but appropriated enough money to send the veterans home. In mid-July, discouraged and with Congress in recess, all but about 2,000 men lined up at the Veteran's Administration for their fares.

The veterans who remained in Washington were living in crude shacks adjoining the Treasury Building. The Secretary of the Treasury ordered them to evacuate. On July 23, the men were told they were trespassers and ordered to move.

The Bonus Army dug in its heels and refused to move. On July 28, shooting broke out within two blocks of the Capitol.

The mood turned ugly. Veterans, estimated at 1,000 or more, surrounded the police. The result was one dead, 53 hurt and 100

arrested. President Hoover called for the Army to remove the veterans. Gen. Douglas MacArthur, chief of staff, made a "sweeping movement" using tear gas to force veterans out of an abandoned building.

Fire broke out, destroying most of the Bonus Army's bedding and possessions.

The nation was shocked. The governor of Pennsylvania offered the veterans sanctuary, saying the U.S. government treatment was "brutal, stupid, and altogether unnecessary."

The popular humorist, Will Rogers, said they were the "best behaved body of hungry men who ever assembled anywhere in the world."

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