The flame that never was

By Steve Langley, The Gazette

Even as the millions-dollar Veterans Memorial Building was rising from the municipal landfill in the middle of the Cedar River, its appearance was still not finalized. Several ideas for the huge building's tower were under discussion and it wasn't until Jan. 25, 1917, that the Veterans Memorial Commission, established by the Iowa Legislature to oversee construction of the building, accepted the last plan for constructing architect Frank Gordon's massive sculptural expression of the Monitor of Pittsburgh.

Revered choice to design the top of the tower as a cenotaph, an empty shelter to honor the city's war dead. He modeled it after the famous monument that stands in Whitehall, London, England.

The tower rose 18 feet higher than those in previous plans. The top of the tower is 50 feet above the ground and those who have ascended the circular stairway on the top say the view is spectacular.

Local legend has it that in 1911, a gas line was extended up through an elevator to the cenotaph, and a live flame burned there for several years.

That turns out not to be quite right. The gas line wasn't a gas line — it was steam.

In 1915, Cedar Rapids Jaycee Young Men's Bureau began to work on a plan to have a "perpetual flame" appear from the top of the cenotaph. John Logg and Bill De Vaul came up with an unusual idea for the "perpetual flame." The Flame was approved by the Memorial Commission. A pipe carrying steam was run up through the inside of the cenotaph from the seventh floor. The pipe discharged steam under pressure through a series of small holes at the bottom of a three-foot-diameter urn in the place of a bunch of red roses.

By day, a cloud of steam was visible for several miles; by night, the plume would glow red. The cost of installing the apparatus was about $200.

Many of downtown Cedar Rapids' buildings were heated by steam generated by Iowa Electric Light & Power Co.'s 50th Street generating plant, including the Municipal Building. The Flame's operation was governed by a valve, estimating that nearly 6,000 cubic feet of steam would be used in a year via the urn's outlet.

"Lighting" the Flame was scheduled for July 1, 1915, and was the highlight of the "Freedom Flame Week" proclaimed by Iowa Gov. William Branch Phelps for July 1 through July 7. McKinley High student George Zimmer, governor of the 1913 Hawkeye Boys State, and Cedar Rapids Chamber Young Men's Bureau President Neil Runion jointly hoisted the "lighting" of the Flame ceremony.

The Flame was used to light a National Freedom Flame in Independence Square in Philadelphia. Kapp and De Vaul, representing the Cedar Rapids YMB, carried a symbolic torch out of the cenotaph during commencement of the day's ceremonies. It could be seen for miles as they started a trip to Philadelphia.

The Flame in Philadelphia was temporary, however, since the square recently had been restored to Colonial days and the Freedom Flame was seen as too modern.

The Freedom Flame and accompanying ceremony occurred every year on July 19 until 1919.

The steam pipe up a shaft in February 1914 and was repaired in time for the ceremony, but in 1916, the steam in the pipe caused the "Flame" to go out. It was repaired, but by March, the Memorial Commission had asked the Junior Chamber to remove the equipment because it was no longer being used. In December, Commission Chairman Abel Pihler formally requested that the Junior Chamber remove the lights and steam apparatus from the cenotaph. "This project has died because of technical troubles and a lack of interest," Pihler said. The removal restored the cenotaph to its original appearance.

The cenotaph was lighted again by electricity when Cedar Rapids joined 300 other cities and towns for National Devotion Week in October 1931. The Memorial Coliseum and the courthouse were lit with colored lights arranged on the island's plaza and on the cenotaph.

The only flame on the Veterans Memorial Building occurred in 1916 when some enterprising volunteers, thinking that the original flame had been the product of a natural gas line and also was a true flame, tried to find a way to enlighten the arrival of the Olympic Torch in Cedar Rapids. With a short window of time to prepare, they settled on a propylene torch. Ralph Welch of Welch Fuel Company in Waterloo was asked to supply his expertise and he came up with a flame that projected nearly 5 feet tall and about 3 feet wide. It was lit in front of the pillars that surround the cenotaph, rather than at the top.

It burned for a few hours May 26. Efforts to make the actual flame permanent were unsuccessful, but the idea of Flame returning to the cenotaph was in 1997. The Veterans Memorial Commission member's unveiled plans for a gold-plated, standing flame identical to the original, signed by Larry Garman of Hoover Sign and Graphic. On July 19, 2002, the 2,200-pound gold flame was placed on the top of the cenotaph. Crafted by metal artist Larry Loretz, it measures 8 feet high and 9 feet in diameter, and it is lighted from the base. The $30,000 cost of the piece was covered by private donations.

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