

Sauk Prairie Veterans Project

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

WENDELIN J. COENEN

Engineer, Army, World War II and Korean War.
Founding member of VFW Post No. 7694.

1996

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Madison, Wisconsin

OH
307

OH
307

Coenen, Wendelin J., (1917-1998). Oral History Interview, 1996.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 14 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 14 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Wendelin J. "Shimmel" Coenen discusses his involvement in the early history of VFW Lachmund-Cramer Post #7694 in Sauk City, Wisconsin. After his World War II service in the Pacific Theater, Coenen recalls discussing the start of a VFW post with Charles Henning at his ice cream shop in Sauk City. He talks about generating interest through an advertisement in the *Sauk City Pioneer Press*, the high level of interest from other returning World War II veterans, and the opposition from the local American Legion. Coenen touches on the first meeting, some of the men who were there, and the election of officers. During years of poor attendance, he explains Charles Henning's efforts to keep the post active and states, "He was a one-man VFW post for a long time." Coenen comments on the post's promotional activities. He touches on his service in the Korean War with Toby Thistle, another VFW member.

Biographical Sketch:

Coenen (1998) was born in Roxbury, Wisconsin, and served in the Army during World War II and the Korean War. He ran an ice cream shop in Sauk City (Wisconsin) with his brother, and Coenen eventually became owner of the Spellman Monument Business in Sauk City. He served as commander of the local VFW and American Legion posts.

Interviewed by Doris Litscher Gasser, 1996

Transcribed by Janet Stewart, 2011

Checked and corrected by Calvin John Pike, 2011

Corrections typed in by WVM staff, 2011

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011

Interview Transcript:

- Doris: This is the fiftieth year of celebration and we're happy to have with us Shimmel Coenen, who is one of the people who was the originator of the organization [VFW Post No. 7969], and he's going to tell us about his beginnings, and maybe a little bit about coming back from your service duty, and a little bit about that, and then on into your communication through your restaurant and the organization. Hello.
- Coenen: Hello, Doris. Yeah, this is Shimmel. The VFW, believe it or not, originated over a soda fountain [laughs] in Sauk City. Ahh, it was an ice cream shop that I had during World War II, which was run by my wife at the time. I was in the service for—I can always tell you that it was three years, four months, and twenty-one days. [laughs] Got out on New Year's Day, January 1, 1946.
- Doris: And you said you were in the Pacific Theater.
- Coenen: Yeah. I was [in] the Pacific Theater. Well, anyway, at the ice cream shop, Charlie Henning, a veteran of the World War II—
- Doris: You want to give a brief account of the story of the ice cream shop before your history? It was a popular place.
- Coenen: Well, yeah, the ice cream shop was definitely a youngster's hangout. The high school students of Prairie Sauk and Sauk City, of course it was not consolidated at the time, would congregate there in the evenings and after athletic events and so forth. And, during the daytime, we had a lot of Coke and coffee drinkers. Charlie Henning was one of the visitors and he always talked about starting a VFW.
- Doris: Now who was Charlie Henning?
- Coenen: Charlie Henning was an electrician. He was a brother of Clarence Henning and George Henning--
- Doris: And is he still around?
- Coenen: Charlie died. I was going out and looking, but I didn't—Charlie must have died about fifteen--twenty years ago; at least twenty years ago, I think. So anyway, Charlie was really the mainstay of the VFW. It was his idea, and, of course, he and I talked about it over the ice cream shop counter. I said, "Well, let's just take a survey of some of the guys as they come in and talk about it." And we did. And it was a good feeling that they were interested in adding a VFW. So I said, "Well Charlie, I'll raise to have the rent to City Hall, and I'll put a notice in the paper that we'll have an

organizational meeting, and see what interest we have.” And we ran this notice in the local Sauk City Pioneer Press, [laughs]--I think it was at the time--and for this meeting, which was held—I think it was in April or May, I forget really. It was shortly after we both got out of the service, and the young men were still coming home. So, anyway, both Charlie and I were really surprised at the turnout we had, the young men from World War II that were interested in starting a VFW. Of course, at the time, we had the World War I members there—American Legion—trying to talk us out of it, because they couldn’t see, you know, dividing the two—having two organizations. And I remember Carl Lehmann was there and, you know, maybe Bill Spellman, and then there was Jim Shiska[?], George Just, I forget who, these were veterans of the World War I, of course, and they were staunch members, and they had a really good organization. They were real active, and they had Memorial Day—very, very good services. So, as I mentioned to you, Doris, I was surprised at the big turnout we had for this first meeting. The meeting was chaired by Charlie Henning, because I insisted he do this, because he was the one that really, really showed the most interest.

Doris: And you were his support man.

Coenen: And I was his support man, yeah. So, anyway, through the meeting, it was decided that we go ahead and set the groundwork to have the VFW post, and we had something like sixteen members who were willing to join.

Doris: Do you want to tell us a little bit about some of these people?

Coenen: Well, those attending the meeting, well, it’s hard to remember exactly what they did. You know, I remember Bisbee—Orrin Bisbee—he had a tavern—his folks had a tavern down where Wally and Fern were, and Herman Bruenig was a truck driver, and, of course, Charlie and myself—Linford LeMoine, schoolteacher, and so forth. It’s hard to remember exactly what every—there was Skinner Hand and Merle Keller. Keller was a truck driver.

Doris: Did any of them tell you their experience that made them want to get together when they came home?

Coenen: There was a [laughs] lot of stories, of course. I always remember—well anyway, we won’t go into that now, but let’s talk about the organization of the VFW; that’s primarily what we’re here for. When we had our first organization meeting in order to elect the officers, it was decided among us that we would promote Orlo Koenig as commander, because Orlo was a veteran of the World War II. He was in Europe, and, more importantly, he was a prisoner of war for I don’t know how long—a year and a half, eighteen months, I think. And so he, of course, is deceased now, but he

was elected as commander, and I myself was the Senior Vice Commander, and Linford LeMoine was the Junior Vice Commander, and Charlie Henning was the Judge Advocate. At the organization meeting, we were issued VFW cards, you know, that you belong to the organization, and my card number is two, number two, and it's still number two, so I'm a proud member of card number two. Linford LeMoine, who is still living, is card number four and Orrin Bisbee is card number five. The card number one and three are deceased. Now, I think, what's most important—we met and we had good meetings. We had good turnouts, but then it started going downhill; interest was lost, I don't know for what reason. The American Legion tried to get stronger. Roman Reuter was real active in the American Legion, and they bought the old Burke House, and they put that into a Legion House. I don't know if you remember that, Doris, or not. That's on Jackson Street, the corner of Jackson and John Q. Adams, I think. So the VFW went downhill, but low and behold, Charlie Henning hung in there. I often remember that, through the years, nobody would show up for the meetings; maybe one or two, or often, sometimes he'd have them in his car [laughs]. He'd fill out all the quarterly reports, as the quartermaster, and then he'd bring them over to me to sign them. When I was at the Spellman Monument Company, Charlie lived across the street and, I think, this went on for a long, long time—years. And old Charlie, every quarter, he would be the quartermaster, he would say—and he'd call his meetings, nobody would come, maybe just Charlie and some other guy. [laughs] So it was quite interesting. And then, I always remember, I had all the records—Charlie Henning gave me all the records, Charlie died, passed away, and I had the people who knew that I was active in the VFW gave me the records. So I have all the records from VFW. One day, John Hyatt came to me and said, “Do you have the records of the VFW?” and I said, “John, I do, and if you want them, thank God, take them, because, you know, they're valuable, they're the history of the organization and I certainly don't want to be responsible for them.” Because I was responsible for quite a few things for the veterans, as I said, I was active in the Legion, I was commander there and I was commander—I was past commander of the VFW a couple times, so that's pretty well the old background of how it started, how it came through, and Charlie Henning should get all the credit for keeping it together in those years of, uh, between when it was—

Doris: Active.

Coenen: Active, yeah, to keep it active, yeah. He was great, Charlie was— incidentally, he would [laughs] sidelight, he was really, you know, he had VFW on his car, he attended all the state conventions, all the regional, he was representative in the regional conventions, he would go around to different VFW posts, and he was a one-man VFW post for a long time. Charlie Henning should get all the credit. He really had his mind out to it,

and he took care of it. And I guess, if you look at the records, you fellows that have the records, you'll see what Charlie Henning did. So, Doris, I don't know what else to say—

Doris: Well, what did you really do at your meetings? Like, say when you had your initial meetings and there was so much enthusiasm until—

Coenen: Well, it was an organization meeting, you know, and of course the first meetings, you know, and you order caps and you'll get your Legion VFW cap, and I don't know—

Doris: What activities, you must have engaged in some activities at first, even though—outside of Henning's car through the years. Did you do any marches or did you promote anything, or did you just get together for fellowship and support?

Coenen: We promoted activities, you know, I forget. I remember one time we had a circus come to town for money, and of course we had things to do. Doris, I can't remember because you see, it was in—we're talking about 1946. I stayed in the Reserves and I was called back to active duty in '50. And of course then I went to Korea, I was in Korea for a year, and the present commander of the VFW, Toby Thistle, and I were in the same organization in Korea together.

Doris: Ah, how interesting.

Coenen: Yeah, very interesting. There's a story behind that—

Doris: Do you want to tell about the Korean War?

Coenen: --About Toby. I don't think Toby [laughs] would appreciate me telling the story, but I'll tell it to you after a while. But, I was battalion sergeant major in just south of Seoul, Korea. We were the engineers, and Toby joined us when we were up there in Seoul. I had requested him when I saw the manifest. The ships coming over with replacements on it were available to me as battalion sergeant major and I saw Toby's [name]. I don't want you to print that because he'll be embarrassed.

Doris: No, I don't think so.

Coenen: Toby's a soldier, he's all soldier. He's Commander now.

Doris: So then, they had these activities, and you really weren't around then to keep it going, but during the time when American Legion became stronger, I think Roman Reuter had very strong political aspirations and he sort of used the American Legion to promote McCarthyism, don't you--?

Coenen: Well, yeah, really, he had good ideas, but some things fell by the wayside. I think Romie tried to do too much without any help. And you can do just so much.

Doris: And in the last years they became just sort of an organization to—

Coenen: Yeah, it's quite active now; the American Legion is quite active. Dr. Westrius [has] taken over. Don Wittig was a good man, he and, of course, his wife Grace were quite active in the Legion. But there's a lot of history—

Doris: So you don't want to tell anymore about your war experiences?

Coenen: Well, no, I think that is irrelevant to the VFW.

Doris: Mmm, well we are also including those, but anyway you feel as though you've told all you wish to tell?

Coenen: I can't think of anything else.

Doris: Alright then we'll say thank you very much for coming, and then I'll get together and thank you for today.

Coenen: Sure.

[End of Interview]