

IOWA HISTORY



Library of Congress Photo
Hanford and Margaret (McAuley) MacNider

“Jack” to All His Boys

Mason City native Hanford MacNider had earned 13 medals, including two Distinguished Service Crosses, two Purple Hearts, and the French Croix de Guerre for his service during World War I. He had reached the rank of lieutenant colonel in the army and been wounded at St. Mihiel during the war. In 1921 this “man of action” as some sources described him was elected national commander of the newly chartered American Legion.

Although MacNider called Mason City his home, at an early age he had left Iowa for Milton Academy in Massachusetts. From there he entered Harvard University graduating in 1911. He returned to Mason City to work in his family’s bank. He joined the National Guard and served with the 2nd Iowa Infantry at the Mexican Border Campaign from 1916-17.

Then World War I broke out and MacNider entered officer training school at Fort Snelling, Minnesota, leaving as a second lieutenant in the army. Although he was assigned to teach at an officer's school behind the front lines, he volunteered to join the boys at the front. It was here he earned his medals and became known as "Jack" to his fellow soldiers.

After the war MacNider returned to Mason City and became a successful businessman. When the American Legion was chartered by Congress in 1919 he eagerly joined the local group in Mason City. And he recruited 1100 other veterans from the area. Just a year later he was elected state commander of the group in Iowa.

In 1921 the American Legion's national convention was held in Kansas City. About 5000 Iowa veterans were in attendance and MacNider was one of them. A news account described MacNider as "the most discussed man at the convention." And when the time came to elect a new commander he was elected because members from the other states "caught the spirit of the Iowa men and just yelled him through his election." He was described as the "epitome of the American soldier." The Iowa veterans sang the state song, "We're from Ioway. We'll have you understand. It's the best state in the land. That's where the tall corn grows."

Spectators at the convention said MacNider looked "more like a president than a soldier." Dressed in his gray business suits, soft collared shirts, and bow ties, MacNider did not campaign for the position. He said, "If the Legion wants me, all right, but let the Legion speak." And the members did—electing him to the top post in the national organization.

When a parade was held at the end of the convention and the veterans passed in review for the newly elected officials of the Legion, MacNider tipped his hat to the Iowa boys. When someone asked him why he had made the gesture he remarked, "They are men who fought with me."

In addition to showing his respect for his fellow soldiers, the war hero also remembered another important person in his life. As soon as he received word that he had been elected to head the national American Legion, MacNider is reported to have "rushed to the nearest long distance telephone" and called his mother back in Mason City to share his good news.

Sources

"Jack" to All His Boys," Brooklyn Daily Eagle, Nov. 13, 1921.

MacNider, Hanford "Jack," Biographical Dictionary of Iowa, U of Iowa.

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