



HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON

World War I veterans known as the Bonus Army march for early benefit pay on Pennsylvania Avenue in July 1932.

## HISTORICAL SOCIETY EXHIBITION

# After World War I, a Fight for Pay

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John Gill was 10 when his father, Theodore, took him to visit the destitute veterans on the muddy Anacostia River flats.

The former World War I soldiers pitched tents and built makeshift shacks. It was 1932, and they had come by the thousands to collect war bonuses the government had promised.

Payouts were scheduled to begin in 1945. But as hard times swept the country during the Great Depression, the veterans demanded their money early. While they waited, sympathizers such as the Gills visited and gave away cigarettes.

"Things were really bad," said John Gill, now 84. "On Constitution Avenue, you'd see soup kitchens and people standing in line, and veterans would be standing in line."

Yesterday, the Historical Society of Washington commemorated the 75th anniversary of the Bonus Army's march with the opening of an exhibition, "Wages of War: Bonus Army to Baghdad." It includes firsthand accounts of what happened, police nightsticks used to drive the veterans away, buttons and photographs.

It is an effort, organizers said, to reclaim a piece of the past.

"It's been bleached out of the his-

tory books for too many years," said Paul Dickson, co-author of "The Bonus Army: An American Epic."

The government had promised veterans \$1 for each day of service at home and \$1.25 for each day served overseas. But 1945 seemed too far off for people who were starving. As the Depression deepened, veterans and their families converged on Washington to lobby for a bill that would allow advance distribution of the bonuses.

They called themselves the Bonus Expeditionary Force but were commonly referred to as the Bonus Army. It is estimated that as many as 65,000 veterans and their families came to Washington, spreading out in Anacostia and across the city, Dickson said.

The bill died in the Senate. But many of the veterans remained.

On July 28, 1932, District police tried to remove some of the protesters. Two veterans were shot and killed by police officers. Then the U.S. Army, on President Herbert Hoover's orders and under the command of Gen. Douglas MacArthur, continued the removal. Troops used 3,500 tear gas canisters and bayonets to drive out the protesters.

"What was compelling to me about this story is that veterans could go through the experience that they went through in World War I and then be completely mistreated

when they came home," said Robert Uth, who directed the PBS documentary "The March of the Bonus Army."

Still, the impact of the protest has been lasting.

In 1936, Congress overrode a veto from President Franklin D. Roosevelt to grant the World War I veterans their bonuses. Uth said the distribution of the bonus was a half-step toward the passing of the GI Bill in 1944, which gave veterans a college tuition benefit and home loan guarantees.

"It had such a positive effect on the people of the country, and it motivated a young generation to be patriotic and to believe that veterans were treated fairly just before that generation was called upon for World War II," he said. "The Bonus Army was a test that let the government see that positive social change came from treating veterans fairly."

Austin Kiplinger, chairman of the Kiplinger Washington Editors, was 13 when the Bonus Army came to town. His father, an editor and journalist, took Kiplinger to Anacostia.

Kiplinger, 88, remembers the sweltering heat in the camp that he called a "great bowl of gruel" because of the mud and sewage.

"It was a pretty messy and pretty desperate-looking sight," he said.

The exhibition runs through Veterans Day.