

Black Hills VFW Posts Support Communities and Offer Tourists Respite

Custer VFW Post 3442 and Rapid City VFW Post 1273 are just two examples of the many South Dakota Posts active in towns and cities across “The Mount Rushmore State”

May 14, 2024

This month, VFW magazine continues its “Destination Post Series.” The series will feature 125 VFW Posts located in sought-after tourist destinations. Featured VFW Posts are those that make a real difference in the communities in which the Posts are located. This month’s article takes VFW magazine readers to South Dakota.

The small town of Custer is nestled in the valley of the Black Hills. Its main street, which is Mount Rushmore Road, looks like something that would appear on a postcard. There is an array of restaurants for nearly every palette, shops for the outdoorsman, bakeries, souvenir shops and a trading post.

In the middle of it all sits VFW Post 3442, which you cannot miss with “Old Glory” painted on the front of the building. No matter what time of day one drives by, it seems the Post is always the place to be in this community of some 1,600 people. Tourists lodging at nearby vintage motels such as the Chalet Motel can be seen walking to the Post in the evenings.

If you travel east out of town, you can drive into Custer State Park. The drive north out of town takes you by the Crazy Horse Memorial and through Hill City and on to Rapid City. You also can travel the scenic Iron Mountain Road, which is bookended by Mount Rushmore and Custer State Park.

Wooden bridges and one-lane tunnels showcase the beauty of Rushmore. Or enjoy the drive to Keystone and on to historic Deadwood, where you will want to stop and check out VFW

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Post 5969 Members of the Custer VFW care for their community in many ways, but especially when it comes to the youth.

According to Post Junior Vice Commander Corey Virtue, Boy Scouts sometimes work dinners at the Post's dining hall in the basement and keep the donations.

"When a group of students were raising funds to head to the nation's capital, the Post gave \$500 to each one to help with the cost of the trip," said Virtue, who served in 2007 and 2013 in Iraq with the 235th Military Police.

Post Commander Rick Hamm added that when high school cheerleaders were traveling to Pearl Harbor for a competition, the Post chipped in to help them.

Virtue, who volunteers at the high school to help students build resumes, said there is a strong bond between the community youth and the Post.

"When students collected items and assembled care packages for troops, we paid the postage to deliver those packages," Virtue said.

Most recently, the Department of South Dakota's Voice of Democracy winner this year was sponsored by Post 3442. Lexi Brandt from Custer High School represented South Dakota in Washington D.C., in March during VFW's annual Parade of Winners.

'WE CAN MOVE MOUNTAINS'

Post Quartermaster D.D. Couch said Post 3442 is nothing but welcoming, which is why veterans and their families choose to be a part of it.

"I have been a member nearly 40 years," said Couch, who also is a past Department of South Dakota commander. "We had 126 members 40 years ago. This year, our membership stands at 441 so far. Post 3442 has been a pillar in Custer for many years. When a member is not in this for him or herself, we can move mountains."

A visit to the Post is a bit like the 1980s sitcom "Cheers," where everybody knows your name. If the regulars do not know your name, Post leaders say they soon will.

Virtue said there have been VFW members from other states passing through town and enjoy Post 3442 so much that they have transferred their VFW memberships to the Custer Post.

"Our Post is nothing more than extended family," Post member Eric Lewis said, adding jokingly, "Maybe a little more like Cousin Eddie [from "National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation"]."

Sheri Deatherage, a physics and science teacher at Custer High School and a Navy veteran, agrees. She is one of the newer members to Post 3442.

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<https://www.facebook.com/p/VFW-Post-2750-100063524951881>

VFW Post 628
1700 W. Russell Street
Sioux Falls, SD 57104
(605) 338-0869
Commander Hosea Bennett
<https://www.facebook.com/Sioux-FallsVFW>

VFW Post 3298
504 S. Wallace St.
Parkston, SD
(605) 630-0771
Commander Charles McKean
<https://www.facebook.com/parkstonvfw>

VFW Post 7319
113 2nd Street SW
Wagner, SD 57380
(605) 481-1338
Commander Carl Roberts
https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100080772789794&locale=ms_MY

VFW Post 4726
321 S. Main
Brandon, SD 57005
(605) 582-3411
Commander Ronald Harris
<https://www.facebook.com/vfw4726>

“I joined because this Post is very, very active in our community, and I love that we are able to be together as different branches of the military and get to interact with each other,” said Deatherage, who earned her VFW eligibility in 1999 in Kosovo. “We are so involved in the community, and it just brings a lot of people together.”

Virtue, whose great-uncle was a charter member of the Post, and whose father was a life

member before dying from an Agent Orange-related illness, said the town of Custer may be small, but the Post keeps growing.

“The success of this Post is because of the community involvement we see,” Virtue said. “But the camaraderie we experience here is what I most love.”

On March 29, VFW Post 3442 celebrated 79 years in Custer.

‘WE OFFER FRIENDSHIP AND CAMARADERIE’

Located in downtown Rapid City, VFW Post 1273 is a hub of activity.

Following the Indigenous People’s Day Parade in October, the sidewalk was lined with visitors trying to get into the Post. According to Post Commander Ralph Treece, this is common.

“We are like the house where you want to hang out,” Treece joked. “We want people to come in and see what the VFW is all about.”

Treece attributes this to the good the Post members do in the community and surrounding areas.

The Post’s Boots on the Ground is one example of service. On Oct. 29, Post members, along with other organizations, worked at the VFW Post to feed, clothe and counsel, when needed, 125 individuals.

Of those served, 50 were veterans. Veterans were admitted from 11 a.m.–2 p.m., and the public was admitted for the last hour. Donations of clothing, boots and hygiene products were collected during “fill-the-truck” events at the Post leading up to the Boots on the Ground event. Sleeping bags and blankets also were distributed.

Items not handed out during the event were donated to other Rapid City veterans’ organizations for distribution.

The Post members also work closely with Cornerstone Rescue Mission just a few blocks away. Area Boy Scouts can often be found volunteering at the Post as well.

“Any event we have with extra food, all goes down to the homeless shelter,” Treece said. “Always something going on for us giving back in the community that these guys here have done forever, and we have just kept that going.”

At about 20 members strong, the Post’s Honor Guard stays busy. A VFW member since 1973, Marv Czerwonka heads up the guard, which averages 15 funerals a month and travels within a 60-mile radius.

The Post offers plenty of fun for its members and those passing by on Main Street. Monthly pancake breakfasts, Friday night fish fries, weekly bingo and cookouts are just some of the ways members enjoy themselves at the Post.

Aside from the fun times, Post members strive to inform as well. Displays showcasing military memorabilia aim to do just that. Gas masks, helmets, telegrams and even a bugle are encased.

“This is not so much a museum,” Treece said, “but we want people who come through the doors to understand what the VFW is about and where we came from.”

For Post Junior Vice Commander Chuck Lanning, the Post’s rich history is a draw.

“I came to this Post because I was involved with the VFW as a child with pancake breakfasts and such,” said Lanning, who served in the Army twice in Iraq and once in Afghanistan. “I think that is one of the best things we do here on the first Sunday of the month is the pancake breakfasts. But I like the history here, as it goes back to the 1930s.”

Original prints and artwork hang on the walls throughout the Post. In one area, barstools have areas of service and military branches printed on the back.

“People come in and maybe want to sit in a chair that represents where their dad served or the branch of military their grandfather was in,” Treece said.

While veterans end up at VFW Post 1273 for different reasons, a common theme keeps them there – camaraderie.

“The reason this VFW Post in particular means something to me is that it is people getting together and just enjoying the camaraderie,” member Ken East said. “And it is also about veterans taking care of veterans.”

Czerwonka agreed, adding: “VFW Post 1273 is about veterans helping veterans to keep things going. We make sure their needs are met, and we offer friendship and camaraderie.”

This "Destination Post Series" article is featured in the 2024 May issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Janie Dyhouse](#), senior editor of VFW magazine.