A bittersweet tribute: Park shelter to honor lives of couple’s children, vets

By Kori Knutson / Winona Daily News

It’s a pain no parent should know. Lefty and Marian Lee felt it twice in one day.

The Lees lost 10-year-old Nancy and 8-year-old Marsha after their daughters drowned in Lake Winona on June 8, 1966.

No parent ever gets over the death of a child, but Monday wasn’t for mourning. It was for celebrating the girls’ short lives and for dedicating the Hiawatha Valley Marine Shelter on west Lake Winona to all of Winona’s children and to veterans.

“It’s amazing how many people have remembered,” Marian said.

The Lees’ four surviving children attended with their families. They weren’t sure if there’d be much of a turnout on such a cold Monday morning, but about 100 braved the weather to attend.

The idea for the shelter came about a year ago. The money was raised by members of the Hiawatha Valley Marines, said member John Borman, a Vietnam veteran.

"Lefty and Marian are very dear to us,” Borman said. “This will be a great place for families.”

The shelter sits near the Dacota Street Landing, close to where the girls drowned.

It was dedicated on the 233rd birthday of the U.S. Marine Corps. Lefty served in World War II as a Marine. On July 21, 1944, he received a chest wound on the beaches of Guam. He was patched up and returned to battle. In March 1945, He was knocked unconscious by a blast less than 20 feet away. He can still pick shrapnel from his body.

Lefty was lucky. The blast killed three of his fellow soldiers. He has received two Purple Hearts, nine
ribbons and the Bronze Star for valor in combat.

The war and deaths of his daughters were long ago, but still stay with him.

“There’s sort of mixed feelings,” Lefty said. “You have to carry on.”

Sue Mahlke and Mary Carson are cousins of the girls. Sue and Marsha were the same age. So were Mary and Nancy. Mary was there the day the girls died.

The loss was hard for the young girls to understand. Sue wondered why she couldn’t play with Marsha anymore.

“How do you explain that kind of stuff?” Sue said.

Time has helped, even if it can never completely heal.

“In those days, you didn’t do therapy,” Mary said. “It was probably easier that we were so young.”

Lefty is known for a saying his wife often quotes: “All days are good, but some are better.”

Monday was a very good day for the Lees, even if the celebration was bittersweet. Marian and Lefty have been married for 62 years.

“Some days it’s hard to keep it together,” Marian said. “Time goes on. You have to be a survivor. There’s no getting around it.”

Keri Knutson may be reached at kknutson@winonadailynews.com or (507) 453-3523.