

South Dakotans and the G.I. Bill of Rights: Dwight Opperman

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Dwight Opperman is a born leader. He was the drum major and student director for the band and choir of Perry High School in Perry, Iowa. He played the alto saxophone in a dance band, worked for J.C. Penney Company and the local theater in Perry, and had his own business. Others delivered the daily paper for him. He collected the money.

Opperman wanted to be a high school music teacher. Like so many at the time, there was no money for a college education to pursue his dream. His mother-in-law made him an offer. She would either purchase him a new tenor saxophone or pay tuition for one year of college. Opperman took the tuition and went to Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. He enjoyed Drake and did well. He heard a rumor that if he enlisted in the Army he might be able to somehow finish college before having to serve in World War II. Like many rumors in military service, it wasn't true and he was called up in 1943 and worked in the medical corps. He was discharged from the Army in 1946, but stayed one additional year as an occupational therapy administrator for Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington, D.C.

Opperman's father worked as a pipe fitter in the shops of the Milwaukee Railroad. While in the service, his father was transferred to the shops in Mitchell. The Oppermans lived at 114 N. Kimball. With his family, Dwight Opperman moved to Mitchell and enrolled at Dakota Wesleyan University for the 1947-48 school year. He later changed career goals and moved back to Des Moines to begin law school at Drake University. He graduated from there with his law degree in 1951. The GI Bill paid for his college work at Wesleyan and law school at Drake.

His first job out of law school was at West Publishing in Saint Paul, Minn. He went from a legal editor to the CEO and chairman of the company. As CEO at West Publishing he was effective and entrepreneurial. He led West into the college textbook market and created WESTLAW, an electronic legal data retrieval system. By the time he sold the company to Thomson Corporation of Toronto in 1996, West was the premier legal electronic retrieval system and law book company in the world.

But what would have happened to Opperman if there had been no GI Bill? He said he would have reconstituted his dance band and played around Iowa and South Dakota for another 10 years. Then, in his own words, "I would have been a bum. As much as I love music, I was not good enough to make a living at it. Without the GI Bill I could not have gone to law school."

It's hard to believe that a man of Opperman's talents would not have found a way to pursue his dream. But, by his own admission, it shows how tough his dreams would have been without the GI Bill.

As Opperman was taking care of wounded vets as part of the Army Medical Corps and later at Walter Reed Army Hospital, the American Legion and other veterans' groups were thinking about vets like him. Over the objections of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who thought the American Legion's version of the GI Bill was too expensive and excessive, and other veterans' groups who argued only wounded veterans had the right to receive benefits from the government purse, Congress unanimously passed the American Legion's version of the GI Bill. It provided a virtually tuition-free college or graduate degree education for all returning veterans.

Many people called the GI Bill "government pork, a boondoggle." Twenty years later, by the time the GI Bill for WWII and Korean War vets came to an end, the U.S. Departments of Labor and Commerce

said the GI Bill cost the public treasury \$19 billion. Yet, these same educated veterans contributed over \$20 billion additional tax dollars to the treasury derived from better paying jobs courtesy of the GI Bill. In essence, the GI Bill was a money maker for the federal government.

It cost the government approximately \$2,000 per year per veteran who went to school on the GI Bill. If Opperman had taken full advantage of the educational benefits of the GI Bill, he would have received approximately \$6,300: \$2,000 for tuition (\$500 per year for four years) plus approximately \$90 per month subsistence pay for four years. How many times over did Dwight Opperman and others like him repay in taxes the benefits they received from the GI Bill?