

A Capsule History The American Legion

Whatever else war is, and it has been described in every way - from one slightly profane word to countless pages of histories and novels - it is a unique and memory stirring experience for those who were intimately involved as members of the armed forces. From these shared experiences and quickened feelings of kinship, many organizations of veterans have sprung. Officers of the Continental Army formed this nation's first veteran's association - The Society of the Cincinnati. Today there is no accurate record of the total number of veteran's organizations, but among all, none has grown so large or has exercised such wide influence as The American Legion. None is so intimately identified with the word "veteran." Since its origin in 1919, this largest of all veterans organizations has become as integral and accepted a part of the American scene as hot dogs, baseball, and presidential elections.

The idea of The American Legion and a planning caucus (meeting) for such an organization was held in Paris, France. It was the brainchild of Lt Col Theodore Roosevelt Jr., who had been asked by Headquarters of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) In France in World War I to resolve the matter of perceived poor troop morale in the AEF.

In March of 1919 officers and enlisted men came together for the first organizational meeting. The Legion held a second organizing caucus in St Louis, Missouri in May 1919. It completed a Preamble to and finalized the Constitution. It was at the Paris caucus that The American Legion received its name, and Missourian Bennett "Champ" Clark was selected as Chairman.

Even though The American Legion was formed overseas, organizers realized members of the armed services had no choice whether they served in the United States or overseas. Accordingly it was decided that membership in The American Legion should be open to all who served honorably in the armed forces in World War I (Eligibility requirements have since been revised to include all veterans who served honorably in the armed forces of the United States in World War II, Korean War, the Viet Nam War, Lebanon, Grenada, Panama, Persian Gulf War, Iraq and Afghanistan)..

The American Legion was incorporated and chartered by the 66th Congress of the United States; as it states "Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress here assembled; that the following persons, to wit.....and such persons as may be chosen who are members of "The American Legion," an unincorporated patriotic society of the soldiers, sailors and marines of the Great War, 1917-1918, known as the "American Legion," and their successors, are hereby created and declared to be a body corporate. The name of this corporation shall be "The American Legion." The purpose of this corporation shall be: to uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States of America; to promote peace and goodwill among the peoples of the United States and the nations of the earth; to preserve the memories and incidents of the two world wars and the other great hostilities fought to uphold democracy; to cement the ties and comradeship born of service to their country."

The Department of Missouri was chartered in 1919 as the Missouri Branch of The American Legion..Bennett "Champ" Clark was made an Honorary Past National Commander in 1923. Two Missouri Legionnaires have been elected National Commander; Charles L. Bacon, 1961, and Joseph J. Frank, 1996.