Veterans' Groups [1]

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by Alan K. Lamm, 2006

See also: American Legion [2]; Society of the Cincinnati [3]; Sons of Confederate Veterans [4].

The first national organization established for the purpose of bringing veterans together in the new American republic was the Society of the Cincinnati [5], established at the end of the Revolutionary War [6] in 1783. The society was organized by Maj. Gen. Henry Knox, made up of former officers of the Continental Army, and led by George Washington [7]. In addition to more serious pursuits, the group served as a social club established so that veterans could visit and reminisce. Membership rights were passed on to the eldest son, and chapters were established in every state, including North

(Click to see larger) A reunion of Confederate veterans near Brevard, 1911. North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina.Carolina at Chapel Hill Library.   [8]

After the end of the American Civil War [9] in 1865, war veterans from both the Union and Confederacy [10] formed veterans' societies. Those who fought for the Union formed the Grand Army of the Republic [11] (GAR), started in Illinois in 1866 by Richard J. Oglesby, John Logan, and Benjamin F. Stephenson. The GAR included elaborate anti-Confederate rites and rituals and promoted fraternal relations among Union veterans, aid for disabled and needy veterans, support for the widows and orphans of veterans, and allegiance to the United States. The GAR grew rapidly and by 1867 virtually every northern state as well as several former Confederate states, including North Carolina, had chapters. Many of North Carolina's Union veterans, as well as northerners who had moved to the state after the war, joined the GAR. In all, North Carolina had 13 GAR chapters, including those located in Wilmington [12], Elizabeth City, New Bern, Raleigh [13], Charlotte [14], Asheville [15], Edenton [16], and Bryson City.

Confederate veterans organized a host of local soldiers' reunion groups, which finally came together in 1889 in New Orleans to form the United Confederate Veterans [17] (UCV). John B. Gordon [18] was chosen the first commander of the organization. Like its counterpart the GAR, the UCV included elaborate rituals and a military-style organizational chart that extended up from local units or "camps" all the way to the national level, called the "general headquarters." At the height of its popularity, the UCV had 1,855 camps with 160,000 members, with all but six camps located in former Confederate states. The UCV focused on issues such as petitioning state governments for veterans' pensions, establishing veterans' homes, raising money for Confederate monuments, and education.

The UCV held its first reunion in 1890 in Chattanooga. The 1890s also saw the soldiers' reunion movement aided by a new force, the "Lost Cause [19]" cult, which romanticized the Old South at a time when the pain and misery of the war years had slowly faded from memory and when many Confederate veterans were dying at a growing rate. Ironically, the Lost Cause even became popular in the North in the 1890s, with northern theaters regularly featuring romantic plays about the antebellum South.

In 1895 the United Daughters of the Confederacy [20] (UDC) was established in the capital of the "New South," Atlanta. This organization was largely responsible for creating the hundreds of Confederate monuments and statues that still stand in courthouse squares and other prominent places across the South. The Sons of Confederate Veterans [4] was formed in 1896 to honor and remember those who fought for the Confederacy. Both groups were inspired by the 1896 gathering in Richmond, Va., of 10,000 old Confederate soldiers, many of them poor, who marched in a parade, honored the widow of Jefferson Davis [21], and reminisced about the war.

The UCV and GAR, after clashing during the early years of their existences, began a period of reconciliation in 1898, brought on by the national patriotism inspired during the Spanish-American [22] War. By the early twentieth century, as time mellowed many bitter feelings, the two groups even began holding joint soldiers' reunions. The last UCV meeting took place in 1951 and was attended by its three surviving members. Like the GAR, however, the UCV lives on through its auxiliary units, which continue to actively promote Civil War [9] history and heritage.

The United States fought other wars that eventually led to the formation of additional veterans' groups in North Carolina

and the rest of the country. Beginning in 1899, veterans from the Spanish-American War (1898) and Philippine Insurrection (1899-1901) [22] founded local organizations in order to push for veterans' benefits. These groups included the American Veterans of Foreign Service [23], which was established in Columbus, Ohio, and the Colorado Society, Army of the Philippines, organized in Denver. In Pennsylvania, the Philippine War Veterans and the American Veterans of the Philippine and China Wars were established, and in 1905 merged to form the American Veterans of Foreign Service [24]. Finally in 1913, the Colorado and Pennsylvania groups joined to form the Army of the Philippines-Cuba and Puerto Rico, later changing the name to the Veterans of Foreign Wars [24] (VFW). The modern VFW, headquartered in Kansas City, Mo., has 1.8 million members in 9,000 local posts worldwide, including several as part of the VFW Department of North Carolina [25]. Membership is open to all veterans who are U.S. citizens and have earned an overseas campaign ribbon.

After World War I [26], veterans of that conflict formed the American Legion [2], which was chartered by Congress in 1919. Like other soldier groups, the American Legion sought to gain benefits for veterans. In 1921 the organization was largely responsible for lobbying Congress to create the U.S. Veterans Bureau, known today as the Veterans Administration [27]. By 1931 membership in the American Legion had reached 1 million. With the outbreak of World War II [28], the American Legion amended its charter to allow veterans of that conflict to join. The American Legion also played a large role in convincing President Franklin D. Roosevelt [29] to issue the GI Bill of Rights [30] in 1944, which has since helped millions of veterans attend college and purchase homes.

The American Legion subsequently opened membership to veterans of or those serving during the wars in Korea [31] and Vietnam [32], the invasions of Grenada and Panama, and the Persian Gulf War [33]. It continues to promote veterans' issues as well as many other social concerns. In 2006 the North Carolina American Legion [34] had approximately 40,000 members in more than 200 posts throughout the state.

References:

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James West Davidson and others, *Nation of Nations: A Narrative History of the American Republic* (3rd ed., 1998).

C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (1974).

Additional Resources:

Veterans of Foreign Wars Homepage: http://www.vfw.org/ [24]

VFW North Carolina: http://vfwnc.org/ [25]

Subjects:
21st Century (2001-present) [35]
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