

# The Grand Army of the Republic *by David Klinepeter*

The Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) was founded on April 6, 1866, in Decatur, Illinois, by Major Benjamin F. Stephenson, a Surgeon who served in the 14th Illinois Infantry. The society was composed of men who had fought for the Union during the Civil War and had been honorably discharged. Its purposes were to honor those who had died in the war, to provide for the widows and orphaned children, to promote comradeship among all veterans, and to uphold the Constitution and protect the Flag at all cost. Its watchwords were Fraternity, Charity and Loyalty.

An organizational meeting was held on July 12, 1866, in Springfield, Illinois, and was attended by delegates from ten states and one district. This meeting set the ground work for the GAR. The first official encampment (national convention) was held at Indianapolis, Indiana on November 20, 1866, and General Stephen A. Hurlbut was elected the first Commander-in-Chief by the 288 delegates who attended the encampment.

In 1868, the second Commander-in-Chief, General John A. Logan, issued his famous General Order No. 11 establishing May 30th as Decoration Day. From then on, May 30th was to be a very special day for those who had worn the Blue, and had fought and died in defense of national unity. Later, it would be renamed Memorial Day to honor the dead of all wars and more recently it would be moved to the last Monday in May.

The Grand Army floundered in its maiden years under the weight of politics. It contained members of both political parties and they clashed within the ranks at every meeting or veteran's gathering. Its membership kept declining until a resolution at the National Encampment in 1869 called for the elimination of any political debate at any National, State, or Post function. The resolution was approved but it took almost ten years before politics was silenced. After that the organization began to grow.

The GAR was organized on a three tier system. At the local level was the Post, which usually met weekly. In the middle was the State or District (several states or territories grouped together) Department level, with an annual convention. At the top was the annual National Encampment. The

Department and National meetings attracted not only the official voting delegates but also ordinary members and their families. In addition to business meetings, there were also massive parades, banquets, memorial services, and social activities.

The GAR adopted its familiar membership badge in 1869, replacing two previous designs. The badge was similar in shape to the Medal of Honor, with its eagle, star, and flag ribbon. In 1880, the design of the eagle was changed slightly to avoid confusion with the military medal. With later minor variations, this form (above) became the most common Civil War veteran insignia.



By 1887 the GAR reported a membership of 321,000 men, and a moment of irony occurred when the Grand Army sent a liberal subscription of money to the city of Charleston, South Carolina, the city that had fired the opening guns of the Civil War. They sent the gift in the name of Charity and Generosity from their former enemies.

The Grand Army wielded an influence far beyond its true power. It was credited with swaying the balance of national power for over 50 years. Up to 1901, with the death of President McKinley, six out of seven U.S. presidents had been Union veterans of the Civil War. As powerful as it was to become it would never count more than thirty two per cent of the Union veterans in its membership.

In 1888 the GAR recognized the Order of Sons of Veterans (now called the Sons of Union Veterans) as an auxiliary for male descendants. The reports of 1889 gave a membership of 410,000 with 6,711 Posts in 42 Departments. When the 24th Encampment was held on August 13, 1890, over 40,000 appeared to parade through the streets of Boston, Mass. The presence of Gen. William T. Sherman, the last living army commander, highlighted this encampment.

By June 1892, the membership peaked at 445,368 veterans, however, many Civil War veterans never did join the GAR. In 1892 the Silver Anniversary of the GAR Encampment was held in Washington, D.C., and over 350,000 people entered the city to see the veterans. On September 20, over 80,000 veterans marched in the Grand Parade, over the same route as the Grand Review in 1865.

This period of time was undoubtedly the high water mark of the Grand Army, with 7,568 Posts in existence, but deaths were out-numbering gains in membership. For a quarter of a century they had given relief to their members, their widows and orphans, even to former enemies, established soldier's homes, and erected monuments to regiments and heroes. They had fought long and hard for pension rights for all veterans of the war. Patriotism was most important and the flag flew prouder because of them. From then on, as each encampment came and went, the report of the membership grew smaller.



Current officers of the GAR wore badges with a rank strap at the top and the flag ribbon edged with a color that denoted the level - light blue for post officers, red for department officers, and buff (yellow) for national officers. It should be noted that the insignia on the strap was the wearer's position in the GAR not his rank in the military. A badge with the "Colonel's eagle" (left) would indicate a Post Commander if the edge of the ribbon were light blue, a Staff Officer

for a Department Commander if red, and an Aide de Camp to the National Commander if buff.

After completing their term, past officers would wear the rank strap on the ribbon and return the eagle to the top of the badge. Again, the combination of the edge color of the ribbon would indicate the level and the insignia on the rank strap would indicate the position. In the case of the example at the upper right, a light blue edging would be a Past Post Commander, red would be a Past Staff Officer for a Department Commander, and buff would be a Past National Aide de Camp. GAR members wore only one badge, indicating their highest current or past position in the organization. The rank straps varied from four stars

for the National Commander down to sergeant stripes for lower positions in the local posts.

The 49th GAR Encampment took place in September 1915 in Washington, D.C. and once again the Grand Parade was held but only 20,000 veterans were able to march. Time had diminished their ranks, and a few still wore the tattered uniform of a half century before.



As the 1920's began, post after post began to fade as its members answered the final roll call. By then, the average age of the veteran was in the eighty's. Many posts simply ceased to exist and those that were about to cease operations were asked to send their material to the respective department headquarters.

The GAR continued to hold National Encampments each year at different cities, but by 1948 only 52 Union veterans were living. At the 82nd Encampment at Grand Rapids, Michigan it was decided, because of the advanced ages of the veterans, that the Final Encampment would be held in Indianapolis, Indiana in 1949, the city of the first National Encampment in 1866. By that time there were only 16 members.

The GAR never opened its ranks to veterans of other wars and thus it became a "last-man" club. The last member of the GAR was Albert Woolson of Duluth, Minnesota. He was also the last Union Veteran. Woolson was 109 years old and died on August 2, 1956. He had been a drummer boy in Co. C of the 1st Minnesota Heavy Artillery. Woolson was honored with a statue at Gettysburg.

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*David Klinepeter is a charter member of the Camp Curtin Historical Society and often portrays Gov. Andrew Curtin. In 1949, he attended the Last National Encampment of the GAR in Indianapolis as a member of the Sons of Union Veterans. He currently serves as Historian and Patriotic Instructor for Camp 15 of the SUV and is an avid collector of GAR memorabilia.*

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