

VFW Members help preserve Fraternal Veteran History

By Past State Commander Robert J. Welch
VFW National Historian

Many of us belong to organizations other than the VFW. We tend to bring our experiences and passions from the VFW with us to these other organizations and if the organization has a Veteran connection, it just feels right.

My passion happens to be the history of Fraternal Veteran societies in America. Because of this, myself and several other Comrades from the Department of Illinois were able to preserve a piece of Illinois Veteran history, even though we did it under the banner of another organization.

Columbia Post 706, Grand Army of the Republic was chartered in 1890 in Chicago and held their meetings the second and fourth Tuesday of each month at 8 p.m., in Memorial Hall located at the corner of Randolph Street and Michigan Avenue (now known as the Chicago Cultural Center).

Years later, Post 706 relocated to Forest Park and met at American Legion Post 414. It was in conjunction with the WWI Veterans of this American Legion Post that Post 706 would annually hold joint Memorial Day Services at the GAR Post 706 monument in Forest Home Cemetery. The last two surviving members of Post 706 conducted their final Memorial Day service in 1936.

On May 29, almost 88 years to the day from that last Memorial Day Service, I received a text from Lorenzo Fiorentino with a picture of a GAR post charter, post flags and other GAR items that were being stored at an American Legion that was selling their building. In preparation for the sale, the contents of the building were being sold.

Several Comrades were concerned that the American Legion was going to sell the GAR items and that they would be lost or destroyed. After speaking with the American Legion, they understood the significance of the items and had no intent to sell them.

This is where the "other organization" comes into play, I happen to be the Department Commander for the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War. The SUVCW is the legal heir to the Grand Army of the Republic and we have a Deed of Conveyance that gives us legal claim to GAR records, property, etc. Using this deed, and the final wishes of the GAR, we collect these items and make sure they are transferred to a fitting museum to be displayed.

On June 1, then State Commander Brett Nila and I met at the American Legion and as carefully as possible retrieved the GAR property. Most notable of the items retrieved were the Post Charter, Post Flag, an early Illinois State Flag, a 45 Star American Flag, a 48 Star American Flag, Post bible, Post 706 Roster Book, a hand-carved GAR gavel, and miscellaneous records and photographs. The flags are silk and had not been touched in probably 90 years, displayed in a cabinet where sunlight was unfortunately able to reach them, they were not in the best shape. Brett and I did our best to not de-

stroy the flags any more than they already were. It took us several hours, but we were able to pack everything as best we could, and I took possession of the items.

Fast forward to Oct. 5, The Department of Illinois Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War held their 141st midterm Encampment at VFW Post 10302 in Springfield.

At this encampment, the GAR items were on display for the members to see, and the flags were photographed and prepared to be stored in special archival boxes, never to see the light of day again.

I want to thank Past Commander-in-Chief Fritz Mi-

helic for his kind donation of \$250 to go towards the purchase of those boxes as well as the following VFW members (who also happen to be members of the SUVCW) for their help and support with these items and their preservation: Lorenzo Fiorentino, Past State Commander Brett Nila, State Junior Vice Commander Rob Bailey, State Surgeon Ryan Higginbotham, Past State Commander Vince Long and a special thank you to Northenders VFW Post 10302 for the use of their hall. These items will be turned over to the Grand Army of the Republic and Military Museum in Aurora, so they may be properly stored, cared for, and displayed.



Past State Commander and National VFW Historian Bobby Welch and State Surgeon Ryan Higginbotham unroll the GAR Post 706 flag.



The GAR Post 706 flag rolled out.



GAR Post 706's charter.