The race to be No. 1

T he American Legion Department of Iowa began accepting applications for post charters on May 12, 1919. As in many Legion departments, it was determined that the post whose charter was submitted and approved first would become Post 1. Thus was staged the great race between Council Bluffs and Spencer.

At the stroke of midnight on May 12, 15 veterans of each city signed application forms, had them notarized and got them on their way. The Spencer group set out in a Ford, hoping to beat the train to Des Moines from Council Bluffs. The train carried the other application. The Spencer team ran into bad roads, abandoned the car, boarded a train at Carroll, called a taxi at Des Moines and rushed to submit the application just five minutes ahead of the delivery from Council Bluffs. Thus Spencer was Post 1, Council Bluffs Post 2.

Iowa Legionnaires

Hanford MacRide, of Mason City, a combat officer of the American Expeditionary Forces, was fourth national commander of the American Legion and led a U.S. victory tour for France’s Marshal Ferdinand Foch in 1921. He later served as assistant secretary of war and as commanding general in the Pacific during World War II.

Sai Giunta, of Hiawatha, was the fourth member of the U.S. Army to receive the Medal of Honor for actions in Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. A member of American Legion Post 732, Hiawatha, he received the medal after stopping an enemy ambush and killing a high-value Taliban combatant who was trying to drag away one of Giunta’s fellow soldiers. After learning that he would be nominated, Giunta didn’t like being singled out. “If I’m a hero, every man that stands around me, every woman in the military, everyone who goes into the unknown is a hero.” He received the Medal of Honor on Nov. 16, 2010.

U.S. Sen. Joni Ernst, a member of Stanton American Legion Post 407, was the first female veteran to be elected to the U.S. Senate. A former lieutenant colonel in the Iowa Army National Guard, she has been a frequent speaker at the American Legion Auxiliary Iowa Girls State.

Launching the Department

On July 21, Herbert Hoover, the only U.S. president from Iowa, signs the American Legion-Supported executive order consolidating three federal bureaus into one Veterans Administration.

The American Legion of Iowa leads the effort to raise funds to construct what would become the VA medical center in the state, in Des Moines.

Future U.S. President and American Legion member Ronald Reagan, 22, breaks into the broadcasting field by announcing University of Iowa football games for WHO Radio in Davenport and, soon after, WHO Radio in Des Moines.

Ray Murphy, of Leo McNamara Post 61 in Adgie, is elected as the 18th American Legion national commander. World War I veteran Murphy had been a star football and basketball player at the University of Iowa.

The USS Iowa, which became known as “the world’s greatest naval ship” due to her big guns and speed, is first commissioned, beginning more than 50 years of service that includes 14 battle ribbons around the planet. Known as the battleship of presidents, she ferried President Franklin D. Roosevelt to Tehran for a secret meeting in late 1943 with Allied leaders Winston Churchill of Great Britain and Joseph Stalin of the Soviet Union.

Albaugh-McGovern Post 42 in Ankeny is a top national distributor of U.S.-made flags through the Emblem Sales Flag Rewards Program, selling upwards of 400 a year, in return for credits to buy items for the post and community.

Robert Morgan Post 701 in the Meskwaki Nation was formed after 46 tribal members—including eight code talkers—served in World War II.

Dalcher Post 632 was the common bond between two historically rival towns, Dallas and Melcher, which merged into one in 1986.

IOWA BACKROADS: See an online gallery of historic Iowa American Legion posts at www.iowabackroads.com/category/american-legion-posts

1919

1930

1932

1935

1943

Legend

- Legion posts
- Iowa Legion Department Headquarters
- Historic Camp Dodge – home of the Iowa National Guard — is also the location of American Legion Hawkeye Boys State each summer. The Legion-supported Iowa Gold Star Military Museum there offers historical displays, weapons and a research library.

The Sidlow Iowa Championship Rodeo was launched by World War veterans of William Imlay-Jobe-Gibson American Legion Post 128 in 1923 and is now a top local professional event that sees 8,000.

Robert Morgan Post 701 in the Meskwaki Nation was formed after 46 tribal members—including eight code talkers—served in World War II.
Bob Feller proudly displayed in his office a trophy engraved with the following: Presented to Bob Feller The First American Legion Baseball Graduate Enshrined in Baseball’s Hall of Fame Cooperstown, N.Y. July 23, 1962.

With a wiggling fastball of 100 mph or more, Feller was known as the “Heater from Van Meter.” He started playing American Legion Baseball at age 12. Five years later, he made his Major League debut, at 17, for the Cleveland Indians and struck out 15 batters. Two weeks later, he struck out 17. The next season, the teen phenomenon was on the cover of Time magazine.

In 1941, following the attack on Pearl Harbor, Feller enlisted in the U.S. Navy, the first professional sports star to jump into the war. He served on the USS Alabama and finished as a chief petty officer in 1945, with six campaign ribbons and eight battle stars. He was a member of The American Legion and one of the first 29 men promoted to petty officer in 1945, with six campaign ribbons and eight battle stars.

A 12-hour Vet of Valor radiothon on KZIOA in 2016 raised more than $112,000, doubling the previous year’s donations, to help The American Legion of Iowa provide veteran and community services.

The Iowa Idea: Serve in peace as we served in war

Community support is often considered the fifth pillar of The American Legion, and the so-called “Iowa Legion Idea” of the early 1920s planted seeds of local service that spread nationwide and continues today. The idea was simply that Legionnaires can and should volunteer their time, raise funds and substantially support other values-driven civic organizations and efforts in their communities.

Hanford MacNider, who was elected national commander of The American Legion in 1921, was a leading proponent of the original Iowa Legion Idea. “We must continue to serve the country in the same spirit we had in war, and we can do that only if we have every post doing something for its community,” MacNider said in the early years of the Legion, because its members are in nearly all other organizations and in all the churches, and because it represents so many different types of Americans. For war service, comradeship and working for a common cause, can do things no other groups can do.

In 1923, Hanford MacNider was the boss of 383's 5th American Legion National Convention in San Francisco, “for the betterment of schools, recreation, park and playground facilities... Boy Scout work, medical clinics, municipal music concerts, public forums, community buildings, city planning and all forms of better citizenship.”

Inspired by the original Iowa Idea, The American Legion of Iowa Foundation was incorporated on Nov. 29, 1948, reinvigorating the concept by raising funds and disbursing grants to deserving local programs and organizations. Now with more than $2 million in the corpus, and having awarded over $2.5 million over the years – The American Legion of Iowa Foundation supports programs and activities ranging from junior ROTC at high schools to medical equipment for clinics that help the needy to museum exhibits that honor POWs and MIA.

In 2016 alone, over $100,000 in grants were awarded from the Iowa Foundation, including some $30,000 in scholarships. “I'm most proud of the generosity of the members of the Legion Family who have made this possible,” American Legion of Iowa Foundation President David Rebhun says. “We do a lot of good things out there... last things.”

To learn more about The American Legion of Iowa Foundation, call (515) 282-5068 or send a tax-deductible donation to Iowa American Legion Foundation, 720 Lyon Street, Des Moines, IA 50309.