



EVERY DEPARTMENT HAS A STORY

THE AMERICAN LEGION OF

SOUTH DAKOTA

The veterans who returned to South Dakota after World War I had no intention of putting an end to their lives of service. Forty-eight American Legion posts were established before the first state convention in July 1919. Today, the Department of South Dakota has 240 local posts and about 30,000 members, all of whom served in the U.S. military during a congressionally determined wartime period. Along with the American Legion Auxiliary (female descendants of wartime veterans) and the Sons of The American Legion (male descendants of wartime veterans), the Legion works daily to improve the lives of servicemembers, veterans, families, communities and youth through projects both massive – like when the organization was put in charge of all South Dakota civilian defense during World War II – to the daily activities and services of its local posts.

Legionnaires of S.D.



was placed in the lobby.

Michael J. Fitzmaurice, a 44-year Legionnaire who lives in Hartford, received the Medal of Honor for his actions during the Vietnam War. He went on to serve in both the state Army and Air National Guard. The state veterans home in Hot Springs was renamed for him in 1998; when a new building was opened in 2016, a life-size statue of him

Joe Foss also received the Medal of Honor during his time as a Marine flying ace in World War II. The Sioux Falls-area native has a statue in his honor at Sioux Falls Regional Airport. He served two terms as governor in the 1950s, organized the South Dakota Air National Guard, and led the American Football League and National Rifle Association.

Foss ranked 65th among the nation's most beloved veterans in a 2014 poll by *The American Legion Magazine*. The Joe Foss Institute promotes civics in schools.



Glenn Green served as director of the South Dakota State Veterans Affairs division from 1977 to 1996. The Willow Lake native also headed the South Dakota American Legion as commander, and represented it in the national organization's executive committee for 30 years, mentoring many prominent leaders.

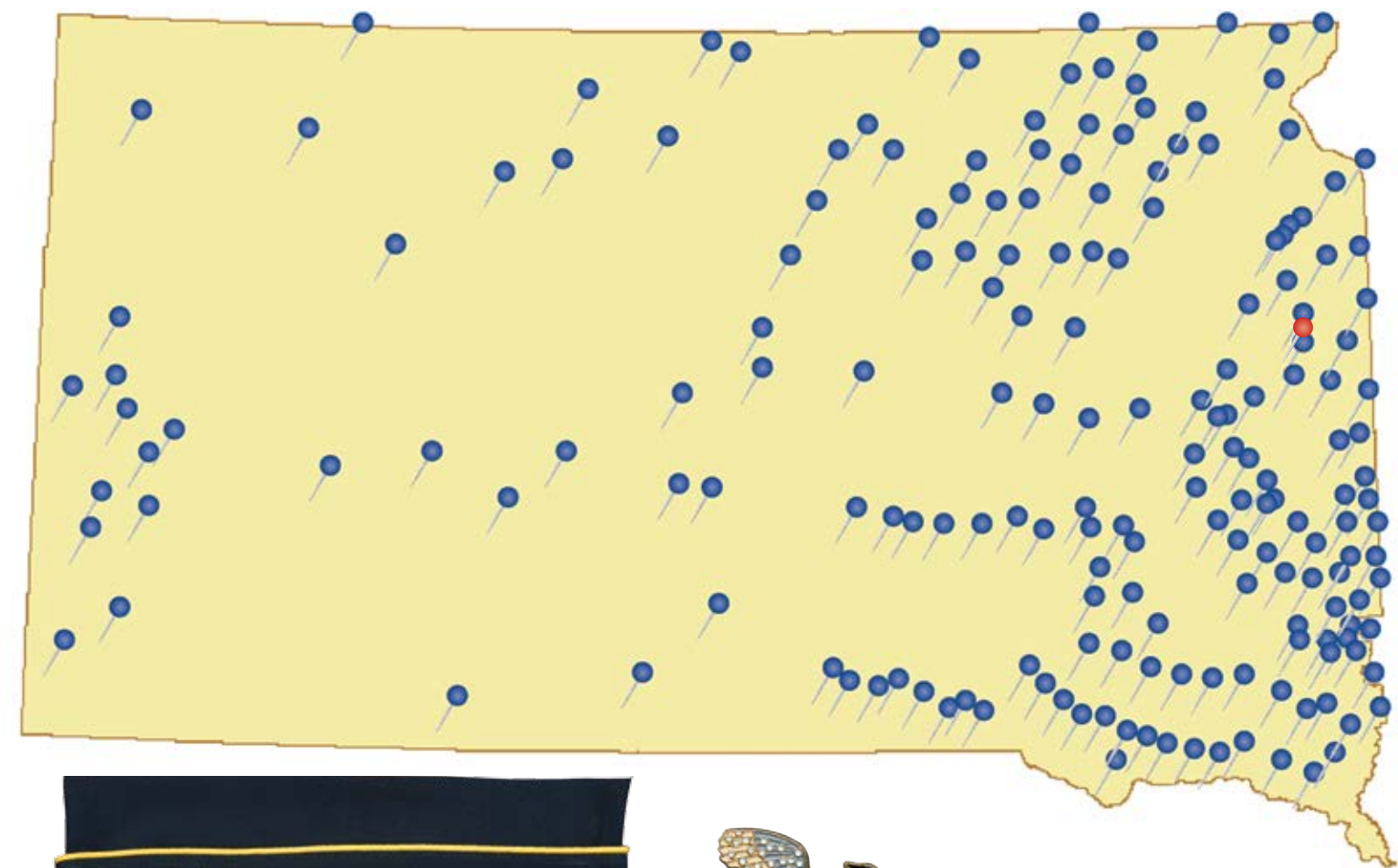


Pheasant sandwiches and more

Hunting season is big in South Dakota, and at least since World War II American Legion posts have been sharing their game. During the war, troops stopping at Aberdeen were provided with pheasant sandwiches, and a tradition soon began to produce special feeds for veterans hospitals. In 1946, 1,600 pounds of dressed pheasants were supplied.

Today, Hartland Post 241 in Erwin is keeping that spirit alive. According to Legion Family member Julie Thonvold, the post and Auxiliary unit have served a turkey dinner on the opening weekend of pheasant season in October for more than 30 years. Upwards of 300 people crowd into Erwin, whose normal population is 43. The menu includes turkey, dressing, mashed potatoes and gravy, glazed carrots, coleslaw, dinner roll, cranberries and pie.

Thonvold says proceeds from the turkey feeds "help to maintain the Legion hall as well as giving donations to Boys and Girls State, VA projects, the food pantry in our county, scholarship funds, recycling for the community, planting flowers in the park and benefits for community members."



Legend

■ Legion posts

● South Dakota Legion Department Headquarters

■ Post 239 in Little Eagle is located on the Standing Rock reservation. Native Americans have the highest per-capita rate of any ethnicity in military service.

■ South Dakota, unlike some Legion state organizations, does not have a distinct embroidered insignia on the caps its members wear. But many attach pins featuring the state bird, the ring-tailed pheasant. In earlier decades, the pins were hand-painted.



Mount Rushmore State Attractions

Capitol Lake, next to the seat of government in Pierre, is the site of memorials honoring those who served in World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War, all watched over by the Flaming Fountain Memorial. The Department of Military and Veterans Affairs is housed in the Soldiers & Sailors World War Memorial, commemorating World War I.



The Minuteman Missile National Historical Site near Badlands National Park is the first such site dedicated to the Cold War. Artifacts, films and interactive displays are available, as well as tours of the silo and launch-control facility.



Mount Rushmore, featuring 60-foot-high granite faces of some of the greatest American presidents, is located in the Black Hills region. State leaders have been known to take the national commander to visit when coming to the department.

1921

The South Dakota American Legion is instrumental in getting the State Bonus Bill passed to assist World War I veterans.

1928

The first department convention of the American Legion Auxiliary is held. Between 1919 and 1921, 86 Auxiliary units are chartered.

Charles Lindbergh, just a year removed from his trans-Atlantic flight, presents the Lindbergh Trophy for membership to Charles Curry Post 49 of Clear Lake at the department convention.



1932

During an exceptionally bad winter, Sully Post 79 in Onida distributes to farmers \$20,000 worth of feed, donated by the post, the Red Cross and radio station WNAX.

1933

Amateur boxing tournaments organized by the Legion take place in the state, from local posts to a state finale. Some 1,400 boxers are involved, and half the net proceeds to go the Legion's Child Welfare Fund.



1940

South Dakota's American Legion Boys State – which teaches high-schoolers the system of representative government – has its first session at Northern State University in Aberdeen.

1956

The Legion's Educational Loan Fund is established, which enables recipients to continue their education at South Dakota colleges or technical schools with loans of up to \$1,500 per academic year.

YOUTH

Trooper Academy



The American Legion of South Dakota has been engaged since 2012 in a yearly program that gives high school students the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of law enforcement.

Each summer, up to 24 boys and girls from across the state, who have sent in applications and were interviewed on the district level, gather at the South Dakota Law Enforcement Training Academy in Pierre. The academy is intense, with a paramilitary approach to training. There are daily marches and flag ceremonies. The one-week residential program, with state troopers and other law-enforcement officials in charge, includes classroom and hands-on training on firearms safety, defensive driving, crash investigation, traffic stops, leadership, defensive tactics and criminal law. The recruits also get to see aircraft operations, SWAT and police service dogs at work.

The Youth Trooper Academy is South Dakota's version of similar programs conducted by The American Legion at the state level.

■ **Walter "Speedy" Travis**, a former department adjutant, became so renowned for his lobbying efforts for veterans after World War II that an upholstered chair outside the state House chamber was named for him in 1973.

■ **Battle Mountain Post 71** in Hot Springs was stood up in the summer of 1919 by war-wounded veterans newly transferred to the Battle Mountain Sanitarium. The site has housed sick and injured veterans since after the Civil War. Today it is known as the Hot Springs Campus of the VA Black Hills Health Care System.



For decades, The American Legion Baseball program has been known as the nation's premier opportunity for high schoolers to play during the summer. It was the first program to offer a national baseball tournament for teenagers. At least 70 members of the National Baseball Hall of Fame came through Legion ball, from Yogi Berra to Reggie Jackson. More than half of all current major-leaguers at some point played Legion baseball. Through a relationship with Major League Baseball that started in 1926, the winning team of each year's American Legion World Series has traveled to the MLB's World Series for a game and recognition.

It all started in South Dakota. In 1925, at the state convention in Milbank, Department Commander Frank McCormick introduced his friend Maj. John H. Griffith, the first commissioner of the Big 10 Conference and a former athletic director at Yankton College. Griffith suggested to the attendees that the Legion consider fostering "citizenship training" through the virtues of competitive athletics.

The convention's Americanism Committee put forward the following resolution:

"Whereas, we believe that the development of clean sportsmanship, fair play in business, the development of healthy minds and bodies can best be brought about by education gained through amateur athletics,

"Now, therefore, be it resolved, that the South Dakota Department of The American Legion recommend to the national organization at its annual convention in Omaha that this or similar program be adopted as one of the major activities of the national organization of the American Legion."

Baseball was picked for its "universal appeal to boys." An expanded version of the resolution was taken to Omaha and adopted; posts in 15 states began programs in the summer of 1926, and it spread from there. Today a granite monument in Milbank, erected by Birch-Miller Post 9, proclaims the town as the birthplace of American Legion Baseball. Rapid City played host to the Legion's World Series in 1975, 1986, 1997 and 2005; Aberdeen did the same in 1965. And Rapid City's Post 22 won the tournament in 1993.

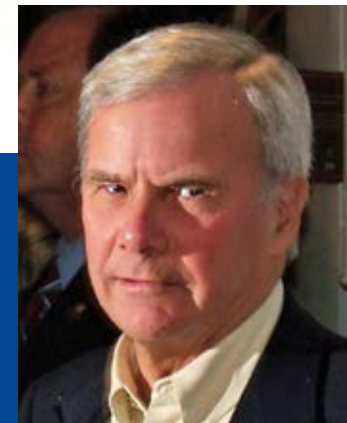
Birthplace of American Legion Baseball



■ In 1989 – during the centennials of both Dakotas – a Legion flotilla took off from Pierre and headed north on the Missouri River. At Mobridge, it met another flotilla coming south from Bismarck, N.D. American Legion National Commander H.F. Gierke, as well as both department commanders, spoke to the large crowd aboard more than 50 boats and afterwards enjoyed a buffalo barbecue.

Did you know?

TV news legend and author Tom Brokaw, a Webster native, was governor of the 1957 American Legion Boys State in South Dakota and participated in Boys Nation, a program that teaches teen boys how U.S. government works. He also played Legion Baseball.



Post-9/11 SD LEGION

"I loved my job, but I loved the people even more. I knew I could count on others to have my back should the need arise. Fast forward to today, and I'm still able to embrace that bond with The American Legion. I love being able to serve my fellow veterans, whether it's helping them find their way through benefits, bringing a meal when they're sick, or simply lending an understanding ear to old war stories. And I love that I have an incredible national network of fellow Legionnaires that would do the same in a heartbeat."

Arthur Peterson Post 136 member Courtney VanZanten, of Colton. VanZanten was a South Dakota State University freshman in ROTC on 9/11; she would ultimately serve with the Air Force in Alaska, Iraq, Honduras and California. VanZanten has become active beyond Post 136, serving as a county commander and district commander, an example of the newest generation of veterans stepping into leadership roles to carry The American Legion in South Dakota into its second century.



■ **Glenn A. Giese Post 323** is housed at Mike Durfee State Prison in Springfield. Chartered in 2015, the post is already active; items created by members have been auctioned off at department conventions, with proceeds going to the South Dakota American Legion Foundation.

■ **The Department of South Dakota** also hosts members from North Dakota and Minnesota who belong to South Dakota posts. In the past, it has hosted members from Nebraska and Montana.

■ South Dakota's state Legion headquarters is located on the top floor of the Codington County Courthouse in Watertown. **Post 17** donated funds to complete construction of the courthouse in the late 1920s, and in return, the top floor was turned over to the post and state headquarters free of charge. Post 17 moved into its own facility in 1944.

Contact The American Legion of South Dakota

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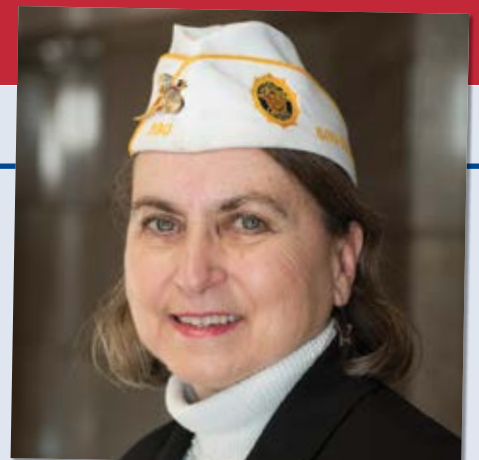
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1958

Julie Sommars wins the South Dakota American Legion Oratorical Contest, the only girl to win that year in the 48 state competitions. She becomes an actress, tying for a Golden Globe in 1969 and later spending five seasons on "Matlock."



1970

The Department of South Dakota wins the first of three consecutive Alvin M. Owsley national trophies for the highest growth in membership from the previous four years' average.



2007

Dempster Christenson, a member of the Humboldt Sharpshooters club, wins the Precision category of the national American Legion 3-Position Junior Air Rifle Championship.

2010

The South Dakota American Legion Foundation is formed to raise and distribute funds for state Legion programs. The foundation is a 501(C)(3) nonprofit.

2011

Legion efforts help restore the state Veterans Affairs department to cabinet status after it was downgraded in 1972.

2016

Charemon Dunham of Iroquois is elected as the first female department commander of South Dakota.