

American Legion League City Post 554 A Narrative History

The first American Legion in League City was issued a temporary charter on March 20, 1932 under the leadership of Commander Leslie Ryan Scott. A permanent charter was never issued and the group lost their temporary charter in 1940.

In 1947, a group of young men, some of whom were Legionnaires from other states and communities, saw a need to "get involved" and help each other and their community, and the surrounding neighbors. These World War II veterans, some twenty five men, bound together to apply for membership in the American Legion. They met in private homes, city businesses, and civic buildings for nearly a year before applying for a charter on April 7, 1947. League City Post 554 had begun.

Fifteen members signed the charter application, with William B. Haley as the first commander and Anthony Meyer Jr. the first Adjutant. The membership increased to 187. Mr. Lee Roy Bauer sent out penny postcards monthly to inform the members of meetings and to update them on Post news and functions. Dues were \$3.00 per year.

In 1948, League City Post 554 took over the League City Village Fair, a major community event, from the Odd Fellows Lodge. With the help of community businesses and organizations, Chairman Bill Haley and the Legion members enjoyed great success. Eventually, the Fair function was turned over to the Lions Club as it remains today. Also in 1948, under the direction of Committee Chairman H.V. Hood, the school award and medal program was organized, and Post 554 sent the first group of high school juniors to Boys State. The men formed their own Color Guard which marched as a Post Unit in parades and participated in many community functions. The men sponsored a Cub Scout and a Boy Scout Troop with Elmore "Dink" Blanchard as chairman. The men provided transportation to and from scout camp, most of the camp gear that was needed, and many times the men had to go camping with the troop.

Under Commander Percy J. Bergeron, American Legion Junior Baseball was sponsored by Post 554 in June, 1949. The team was coached by Houston Hicks and Dink Blanchard. They had no uniforms and no field of their own on which to play. They practiced at the League City Elementary School.

Mr. Blanchard , who was elected as chairman, worked with Clarence Skalnik, Ullman Kilgore, H.V. Hood, and William Law in erecting a new baseball park on the school property which had been leased for organized civic use. The Legionnaires obtained a bank loan for \$2500.00 for the construction of the baseball park which consisted of the 500 seat stadium, dressing rooms, concessions, and fencing. Most of the construction was done by the men themselves. No lighting was ever installed. This baseball park was named Legion Field

On April 6, 1942, a Constitution and By-laws was adopted by the Department Executive Committee for the organization of the Colored Veterans of the World Wars in Texas. The Post was organized with annual dues set at one dollar per member. In order to organize a colored post sponsored by a local white post, it was necessary to have ten charter members, and to have a member of that post attend meetings. Minutes of the meetings were to be submitted to the sponsoring white post for ratification. Members had their own insignia and uniforms. League City Post 554, under Commander Arthur Parr, sponsored Post 554-A in Dickinson. The Post received a temporary charter on February 2, 1950

On March 1, 1950, one and one quarter acres of land was purchased from Mrs. Johnnie J. Johnson, a widow from Brazoria county, formerly of League City for the sum of \$1000.00. No money ever changed hands. Commander H.V. Hood and Adjutant Ullman Kilgore witnessed the signing of the deed. At one of the meetings, a vote passed that the land would never be sold. This land was located on Hwy 518 across the street from Kilgore Lumber Yard.

In 1952, membership showed a large increase following the Korean War. Talk was high among the men to sell the land and relocate. A vote was taken and passed to sell the land that the Post owned and relocate. Much argument, resentment, and hurt feelings resulted in many of the members walking out never to return. This meeting was held at the Kilgore Lumber Company. Following this disaster, the Post lost their temporary charter due to lack of participation. Some die-hard members continued with the Post youth activities while some members never realized the Post had lost its charter. At this point, there were 79 members with paid dues of \$4.00 per year.

By November 4, 1953, twenty men had paid dues and elected Chester Davis as Commander. The group applied for and received a permanent charter on February 1, 1954. These men continued the Post activities under the leadership of Commander Richard Landreault. With the new charter in force, new members were recruited. Auxiliary Unit 554 was formed with Mrs. Opal Haley as president. The Post activity schedule kept everyone busy. A Post anniversary dinner was held in April. Many

Legionnaires attended the 9th District Spring and Fall Conventions with members of Post 554 conducting the everlasting ceremony. School award for both white and colored schools were awarded and two boys were sent to Boys State sponsored by the Post. The legionnaires placed wreaths on veterans' graves in conjunction with the auxiliary Memorial Day services. At this time, the annual Christmas party for community children began as well as the making of baskets for the needy. These traditions continue to the present.

On October 18, 1955, the Post sold a 165 foot strip of land to the Texas Highway Department for \$1.00. This land is a part of Hwy 518 today.

During this early period , the Post had very limited funds. It took ten long years to scrape together enough money to consider buying land to build a permanent Post Home. Many fund raising projects were held including Donkey Baseball. Gerald Thompson remembers, "I don't remember how much money we made, but we had a lot of fun and fell off the donkeys. Damn near broke our necks!" Legionnaire John Daro remembers another fund raiser in 1962 which was held at a picnic in Galveston County Park. The Post raffled off a Ford automobile. After the raffle was completed, it was discovered that they didn't sell quite enough tickets, and the winner, Phillip Barbaria, had to finish the loan on the car.

On July 1, 1965, Mr. and Mrs. J.B. Huff bought the land located on Hwy 518 for the sum of \$18,000.00. The deed was turned over to the Huff's by Commander Gail S. Bedow and Adjutant Lawrence R. Pope.

On January 24, 1966, eight lots of land were purchased from B & B Development Co. owned by Johnnie Arolfo, Nick Regena, and Bob Marcha. The real estate agent was Mr. Ed Taylor from LaMarque, Texas . The sum of \$15000.00 was paid for the land as shown on the deed recorded in the Galveston County Court House. These lots were mostly marsh land. Most of the dirt that was required to fill in the area was donated.

The League City Post 554 building, designed by Percy Bergeron and Oscar Barta, was erected by B & B Construction which later become A & A Construction. The building, located at 1650 S. Hwy 3, was dedicated on August 25, 1966. The street adjacent to the building was named Independence St. , The Post home was very small. The kitchen was in the front near the lounge. Every time a barbecue was held or some food was burned, all the doors had to be opened-summer or winter- because there were no windows. At times, the smoke was so bad, guests had to stand outside. Later a new exhaust system was installed which certainly helped the situation except that the system was so loud that members

couldn't hear each other in conversation. The entrance was located on the Independence St. side of the building. There were never enough parking spaces, and the parking lot was full of mud. One legionnaire remembers, "We just pulled each other out and went on our way." The first dollar ever made by the Post in the new Post home was framed and remains displayed in the Post home today. The dollar was taken in by volunteer barman, Al Forsythe on August 25, 1966.

On September 21, 1967, League City mayor, Johnnie Arolfo proclaimed Postal Services Day to pay tribute to Legionnaire Post Master Percy Bergeron. Under the leadership of Commander Wilton "Woody" Hartman, Post 554 sponsored a coffee in the lobby of the Post Office. The occasion was filled with much fanfare as the Auxiliary Unit and Post members turned out in uniform embossed vests and caps.

In 1967, Auxiliary Unit 554, at long last, applied for a permanent charter because the unit had never done so in the past. The new President was Ruth Bedlow who was elected on May 29, 1967.

The year 1969 was a special year for Post 554 in that 1969 marked the first time that League City Post 554 was represented at any American Legion Convention. Woody attended the 9th District Convention hosted by the American Legion George W. Carver Post 835 in Angleton.

In early 1970, Post members planned to extend the Post home building. The present social hall was added and completed by the spring in 1971.

On May 7- 8, 1970, the Village Fair opened with a parade led by Post 554 and Unit 554, Jr. girls and SALS. The Post entered a float titled, "The Constitution of the United States and Betsy Ross". The Jr. girls marched as pilgrims followed by Post members who dressed as confederates carrying antique guns. SALS members, John Taylor, Chuck Hartman, and Buddy Whatley, played and carried drums. The Post parade entry won first place.

In July of 1970, members of Post 554 with Post 490 chartered a Greyhound bus and traveled to Department Convention in Fort Worth. During the long bus ride, the idea of a Bi-district Coalition 4th of July Picnic was born. District 9 and District 22 participated. The Coalition Picnic featured rides for the children, American Legion booths, food, and beer. This annual project continued for the next twelve years.

The 1970 Fall Convention was held on September 12-13 in Needville, Texas. League City Post 554 was well represented with Auxiliary Unit 554 member Marilyn L. Hartman serving as 9th District parliamentarian. At the Fall Convention, League City Post 554 was selected to host the 1971 Spring Convention. At this Spring 1971 District Convention, Post 554 was one of three Posts in the country to

receive a citation for outstanding membership achievement. J.D. Whatley served as Commander and Carolyn Hartman served as Auxiliary President. A tour of Johnson Space Center was arranged for the conventioners on Saturday afternoon with a dance at 9:00 pm with music by "Robert Smith and the Rustlers".

On July 28, 1971, revisions were made on the Post Constitution and Bylaws . The Post meeting times were changed from 8 o'clock in the evening on the second and fourth Monday to the second and fourth Thursday of the month . These changes were made under the direction of Commander J.D. Whatley , Jack Phillips, Adjutant, and Department Commander Waggoner Carr.

In 1973, a partition was added in the social hall forming what is now known as the "Back Bar". These changes were made under the leadership of Commander Jack Ivey with Adjutant Charles T. Woodley. National dues increased in 1973 thus making Post dues increase to \$10.00 per year. Additionally , the first Department Junior Girls Forum was authorized by the Department President. League City Junior Girls Unit 554 was organized immediately. All girls under the age of eighteen years old were invited to join. Commander Dick Roberts with Chairman Buddy Witte, formed the Sons of the American Legion Squadron 554 which received its charter on October 14, 1975. Legion baseball continued to thrive at the League City Post 554 with E.E. Cob Koehler as the manager from 1975 through the 1980 seasons.

In 1976, Commander Jack Phillips with the help of Elijah Squire did their very best to construct the present kitchen. It became a large project then they could handle. The executive board granted permission for a contractor to complete the project. Very few changes have been made since. Many donations have been made to the kitchen which is dedicated to Al "Unk" Forsyth and Alice "Granny" Brooks. By this time, membership had grown to 273 members with dues paid.

In 1977, Commander Jack Phillips along with Auxiliary Unit President Helen Fowler, welcomed the 9th District Spring Convention to League City on April 23-24. The Legionnaires and the SALS held their meetings at the Nassau Bay Motor Hotel and the Auxiliary and the Jr. Girls met at the Post home.

In September of 1978, the first *The Partner-Ship* newsletter of Post 554 rolled off the presses. The editor was William Hutchison with co-chairman Diana Roberts and Ed Snellbaker. To help defray the cost of printing, ads were sold to area businesses. Unfortunately, the newsletter was only published for seventeen months due to a lack of participation. There was a circulation of 1000 copies. In October 1978, the Post 554 Legionnaires, Unit 554 Auxiliary, Jr. Girls, and SALS Squadron 554, joined

forces led by Chairman Ed Snellbaker, and Co-Chairman Alvin Poche, raised \$1300,00 which was donated to the Galveston County Muscular Dystrophy Association.

On March 5, 1979, the Annual Leadership College was held in Austin attended by Post 554 legionnaires, Ed Snellbaker, William Hutchison, and Carlos Sustaita. There was no area of American Legion operation that was not covered. The post members who attended were so proud of their scores in the high eightieth percentile.

Every Wednesday, lunch was served from 11:00 am to 1 pm. Great people like Francis Wood, Peggy Hite, Tilli Berry to name a few, made great lunches. Not to be forgotten were Cobbs Koehler and his wife, Rouline, made the finest batch of chili in the west.

With Commander Leonard "Buddy" Witte at the helm, Post 554 hosted the 9th District Oratorical contest. Gene Seamend, 3rd Division Oratorical Contest chairman, witnessed Pat Schuff from Dickinson garner first runner-up honors. The 1979 Turkey Shoot, which originated in 1967, was a great success under the direction of Bud Olsen. The "shoot" was held in the vacant lot in back of the Post home. The post membership at this time was at 257 members.

The 9th District Spring Convention was held in Rosenberg on April 28-29. The Post Everlasting ceremonies were lead by 9th District Historian Mike Lacy with special guest - American Legion Chorus. The Sons of the Legion were called to order by 9th District President Robert Olsen of Squadron 554 and the Pledge of Allegiance was led by 9th District Vice Commander Jimmie Poche of Squadron 554.

The 9th District Fall Convention was hosted by Sealy Post 442 on October 20-21, 1979. Mike Lacy, 9th District Historian, again conducted the Post Everlasting ceremonies. The 9th District Convention was attended by Sons of the Legion Squadron 554 members Vice Commander Robert Olsen and Sgt-at-Arms Gary Harrington.

The 1980's found for school awards presented in both Clear Creek and Dickinson schools. In 1981, Ed Snellbaker was elected commander and Ruth Collins was elected adjutant. Under the guidance of Commander Snellbaker, three area high schools participated in the first Jr. R.O.T.C. drill team competition. Winners at the first event were Madison High School "Marlon Rifles" of Houston. The "Silver Falcons" from Dickinson High School won trophies in the unarmed and armed competition. Inspection phase trophies were won by the "Little Devils" of Lamar Consolidated High School in Rosenberg. Commander Snellbaker also led the League City Post to participate in a nation-wide program to seek out Vietnam War veterans in the Galveston Bay area who were exposed to agent

orange.

Commander Jack Phillips led the League City Post in 1982 with a very active schedule. In June, the Post membership sponsored a fishing trip for the disabled. The Post provided the 115 sack lunches for the participants. Major Steve Brooks was the guest speaker at Memorial Day services in 1982. The League City Post 554 joined forces with the Lions Club of League City to bring food to needy families in the area. Brenda Witte, president of League City Unit 554 Jr. Girls, traveled to Dallas and represented the League City Post in the Miss Teenage Texas competition sponsored by the American Legion. In August of 1982, during the Department of Texas Convention held in San Antonio, Brenda Witte, Unit 554 President, was elected Department Jr. Girls President. During the annual District Officers Coffee Tour, League City Post 554 was honored by the attendance of 9th District Commander Kenneth Jan, 3rd Division Commander Gene Valigura and 3rd division Auxiliary President Patsy Palmquist. On October 15-17, 1982, 9th District Fall Convention was held in Victoria with the Unit 554 Color Guard opening the festivities. The Post was well represented at this convention with the SALS and Legionnaires. The first Annual Family Picnic was held at the Galveston County Park in 1982. This popular Post event continues today.

In 1983, Dick Roberts was elected Commander of League City Post 554 which was well represented at the Department of Texas Convention held in McAllen in July of that year. Brenda Witte, as Department Jr. President, opened the 10th Annual Department Jr. Forum at the Granada Inn on July 21st.

Jack Ivie was installed as commander in 1984. Special guest, Department of Texas Commander John D. Morris, served as installing officer. Eight young men, sponsored by Post 554, attended Boys State that year. Post 554 was honored to participate in the the dedication of flags by the city of League City in preparation of the celebration of the the Texas Sesquicentennial.

The 1985 Baseball season was a banner year for League City Post 554 baseball. The team under manager Wilton "Woody" Hartman won the Department of Texas championship. The League City team was eliminated by Tennessee and Mississippi in the regional tournament.

The League City Post 554 under Commander Mike Lacy and chairman Jerry Dorman, hosted its first annual Bar-B-Que cook-off in the spring of 1986 with eleven teams entering the event. This popular event continues today.

In 1986, a special 4th of July parade was held in Dickinson with children dressed in patriotic attire to celebrate the Texas Sesquicentennial. Post 554 provided miniature American flags for the

event for over 100 children who walked and rode their festively decorated bicycles and tricycles.

The 1986 9th District Fall Convention was held in Angleton on October 30-November 1. Squadron 554 member Emery Boettcher held the officer of 9th District Finance officer.

In 1989, Joe Noe was elected commander of Post 554. Commander Noe resigned due to conflict and Commander Jack Ivie finished his term. Post 554 presented a check for \$2,500.00 for the League City Lions Club from the proceeds of the League City Post's Village Fair booth. Legionnaire Woody Hartman represented the post in this endeavor.

The 9th District Spring Convention was hosted by El Campo Post 251 on April 22-23. League City legionnaire Woody Hartman was elected 9th District 1st Vice Commander. He conducted his duties as 1st Vice Commander at the 9th District Fall Convention hosted by Galveston Post 20 on October 20-21, 1989. SAL Squadron 554's Emery Boettcher served as Sons of the Legion 9th District Commander.

In August of 1989, the League City Post 554 baseball team under manager Woody Hartman won the Department of Texas championship in Corpus Christi.

The 1990's started another decade of greats for the League City Post 554. The first Annual Golf Tournament was started in 1991 by legionnaire Bob Mitchell with eighteen teams in the first event. On January 7, 1991, League City Post 554 reached a great milestone. A loan from League City Bank, originally dated September 6, 1966 in the amount of \$15,000.00 for the purchase of eight blocks of land, was paid in full. The original loan was for the purchase of eight blocks of land. The paid note was signed by Commander J.D. Whatley and 1st Vice Commander Jack Ivie. A celebration was held to burn the promissory note.

In 1991, revisions were made in the Post Constitution and By-laws which permitted dues to be raised to \$18.00 per year. There were 350 members at this time. Communication of current and upcoming events were covered by legionnaire Don Wolf who wrote and edited a newsletter which he typed at home. The Auxiliary took over the publication of the newsletter and named it *The Patriot*. The Unit 554 Auxiliary continues to publish *The Patriot* today. From 1981 to 1991, there was no newsletter published by Post 554.

The League City Post 554 baseball team had another banner year in 1996 by winning the Department of Texas championship once again. The team was eliminated by Oklahoma at the Division tournament. The team was under manager and SAL member, David LeDoux.

The school awards program hit an all-time high with thirty-one schools participating in the American Legion program. A total of ten boys were sent to Boys State that year also marking an all-time high. One of the League City Post sponsored boys was selected as the alternate to attend Boys State in Washington D.C.

The 1996 year marked an increase in dues to \$20.00 per year with a post membership at 384 members. Two popular American Legion events sponsored by Post 554, the Annual Golf Tournament and the Annual Bar-B-Que Cook-off, had the highest number of entries in the history of the events. Under the leadership of Commander Don Chambers, plans were made to build a baseball field behind the League City Post home. One hundred yards of dirt and sand were hauled in to level the four back lots on Independence Street and Hwy 3. All was ready to proceed with the project, when the contractor in charge of the project died before the final phase was completed.

Now, in 1998, fifty years have passed and many of our "Good Buddies" have been called to enter the ranks of our Supreme Commander, never to be forgotten. Today many of the first members of Post 554 continue on and many have been added, but whatever the event or situation so many have worked diligently to make the League City Post 554 what it is today.

If worthy persons or projects have been overlooked, the omission is certainly unintentional. To all those friends and acquaintances, who gave so generously of their time and talent to help relive the history of our Post, I thank you.

For God and Country

Mary Santarelli

Post 554 Historian