

**SOUTH PASADENA LOCAL HISTORY  
SOUTH PASADENA PUBLIC LIBRARY MATERIALS  
SUBJECT: WAR MEMORIAL BUILDING**

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## ABOUT THE AMERICAN LEGION

The American Legion was created in Paris, France, in 1919, immediately after World War I, and chartered by the Congress of the United States the following year. Recognizing the many far-reaching post-war problems and needs of the service men and women connected with the Army, Navy, Marines and Air Corps, the Coast Guard, and the Nurses Corps, who sacrificed their lives, were wounded or who suffered long separations and untold hardships while away from their families, while overseas in combat or serving the Armed Forces in many capacities, and to maintain the history and fraternity, and be of present and future service to them and their dependents, and to the communities in which they lived and are living, the Legion was formed.

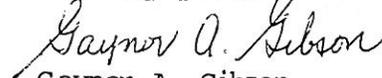
Eligible for membership are those principals of any rank or grade, and their dependents who have, as a matter of record, and honorable discharge, served the United States, domestically or overseas in any of the major conflicts, wars or national emergencies, namely World Wars I and II, Korea, the Falkland Islands, Panama, and now Desert Storm in the Middle East. No distinction is made of positions held, rank or grade attained, color, age, sex or religion, - all are addressed as "comrades" and may hold Post, District, Area and National offices upon nomination and election by their peers. There are now more than 3 million joined, not including the Daughters and Sons of the American Legion, and the Forty & Eight, a very honorable branch of the Legion to which one must be nominated for outstanding service to the organization.

Its aims and goals are to serve the veterans and their many affairs, while at the same time working with the public in community affairs, arousing patriotism and love of country, dealing with youth against drugs and crime, and many Americanism projects, fostering sports and the Senior and Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps (SJROTC & JROTC) at thousands of high schools and colleges/universities all over the U.S. We work with the Boy and Girl Scouts, the churches of all denominations, with other social groups such as the Kiwanis and Kiwannians, the Rotary, the Elks, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Masonic Lodges, and many other charitable organizations around the world, fostering donations, awards for scholastics, Americanism, and even a Girls' and Boys' State, sending the winning contestants to Sacramento and Washington, D.C. for a week's practical experience in running these Government offices.

Our activities are almost too numerous to mention them all. Many of these are dependent upon contributions by organizations such as yours, by businesses and the members themselves. No funds are received from the U.S. or any Government agencies.

We thank you from the bottom of our hearts, and you may be sure the funds will all be put to good use in the manners mentioned above.

Sincerely yours,



Gaynor A. Gibson,

Commander, Post 140, S. Pasadena

## HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN LEGION WAR MEMORIAL BUILDING & TRACT

Compiled from Deeds, Leases, and Historical Records - Sept. 1991

by Gaynor A. Gibson, Commander, American Legion Post 140

The site upon which the American Legion War Memorial Building now sits was originally known in 1908 as Lots 7 and 8 of the Oak Lawn Addition Tract, (later as Oak Lawn Park). Originally privately owned, it was delivered to the City of South Pasadena through the South Pasadena Realty and Improvement Company, Los Angeles, to the City of South Pasadena in a Deed of Bargain and Sale for a consideration of \$10.00 (ten). With it, went the water rights then held by the Marengo Water Company. The deed required that the land be used only for a public park, and that there were to be no buildings or appurtenances on it in perpetuity, unless legally changed.

The lots remained as Oak Lawn Park until 15 February 1921, when the City (S. Pasadena), with a desire by the people voted and approved City Bonds in the amount of \$12,000, and another \$3,000 raised by the American Legion Post 140 to construct a building "to express their public gratitude to those who died and survived World War I" and "provide in such memorial a place wherein the former service men, throughout their lives, might gather to cherish and foster the spirit of patriotism". The park was renamed American Legion Park, and the building the American Legion War Memorial Building. The lease of that date provided also that after 49 years, the Legion, as long as any of its members were alive, and were duly enrolled under the existing organizational by-laws, and qualified thereby, could renew and extend the lease yearly, at a sum of \$1.00 (one dollar) a year. It also provided for the keeping of displays of war material and souvenirs, trophies, historical data, and other Legion property, with the American Legion Post 140 to maintain the building, furnish heat and light, and use it for its determined purposes to support patriotism.

Marshall Foch, Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe for World War I, visited from France with his staff, and personally laid the cornerstone of black granite with time capsule in formal ceremonies on 4 December 1921.

An Indenture and Lease was executed with the American Legion Post 140 on 14 December 1922 employing the wordings above and became the key document whereby the City turned over full control of the building to Post 140.

In August 1923, General John J. "Black Jack" Pershing Commander of all U.S. forces during World War I, planted the now huge redwood tree which stands to the northeast and front of the War Memorial and placed the plate at the entranceway.

The building saw many exciting fund-raising patriotic commemorative events over the succeeding years, until in January 1954, due to the many deaths, illnesses, and incapacity of the veterans, the Post was forced to declare it could no longer afford to maintain the building and pay its bills with its then meager income. In a meeting before the City Council on 22 January 1954, it asked the City Council to take over everything but the Trophy (Club) Room, composing the north end of the building, continue the \$1.00 a year lease, grant it use of the building on certain specific National holidays and ten other nights of the year for special occasions, but to assume all other responsibility for the maintenance and upkeep of the balance of the building, its utilities costs, etc. In turn the Post gave up certain fixtures and property it owned to the City.

Subsequently, and effective April 1, 1954, the City executed a modified lease of the 14 Dec 1922 document with Post 140, agreeing to all these conditions, releasing the Legion from all further financial responsibility with no exceptions, transferring the

In Sept, 1991, the Cultural Heritage Commission (the building is Landmark #2), together with Parks and Recreation, the Mayor, Public Works, the new interim City Manager, the city's appointed Historical Architect, and the Legion Commander, met in mass to discuss the future of the building. It has been declared earthquake-proof and reasonably safe. A comprehensive Plan and detailed discussion over it followed wherein the Architect has agreed to submit a finalized go-ahead Plan for City Council and the Commissions' approval and obtain General Contractor bids for many of the improvements mentioned above, all hopefully to be completed by June 1992. Adequate moneys remain voted in City funds to accomplish many of the goals. First priority was stated to be heating and air-conditioning of the building. Post 140 must take care of its own upkeep and improvements.

# War Memorial Building Brings Back Memories

by David Hamma

"To express their public gratitude to those who died and survived World War I," the people of South Pasadena, on February 15th, 1921, voted and approved the use of \$12,000 in City Bonds plus an additional \$3,000 fronted by the American Legion Post 140 to construct a building and "provide in such memorial a place wherein the former service men, throughout their lives, might gather to cherish and foster the spirit of patriotism."

Later that same year, the Su-

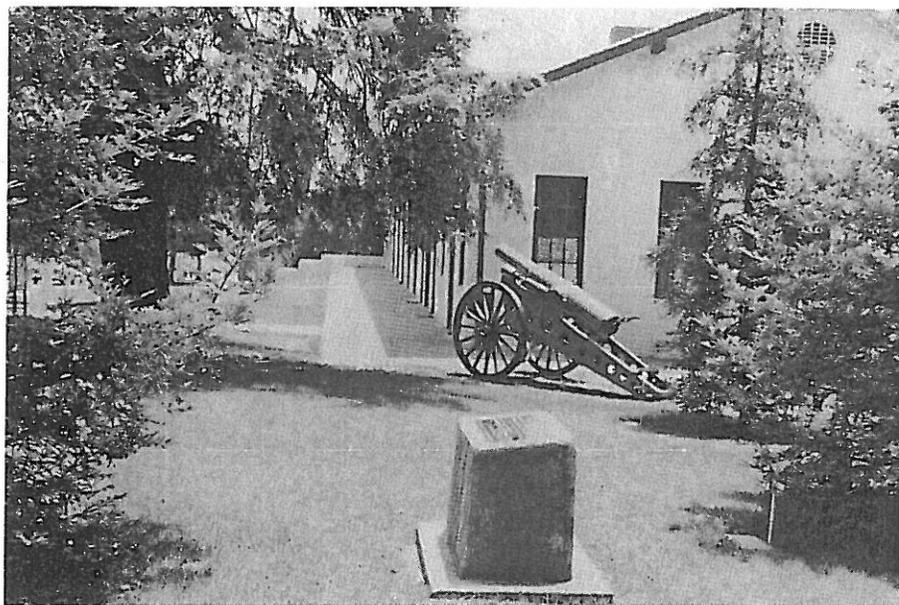
Before my recent visit to the building with Nellie Bowers, past Junior President of the American Legion Auxiliary, my knowledge of this incredible timepiece was limited to a few trivial items, most of which had nothing to do with war or anything else that might have happened before, say, 1988, the year I graduated from South Pasadena High School.

See, I knew it was the place where the Seniors gathered every year before heading out on the train for Grad Night hijinx, their last dose

of fun before venturing out into the vagueness and fear of post-high school wanderlust.

The strongest impression I had

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ON GUARD--The cannon remains on guard outside while soldiers guard the interior of the War Memorial Building during its current renovation.

preme Commander of World War I Allied Forces, Marshal Ferdinand Foch, laid the black granite cornerstone with time capsule for what would become the American Legion War Memorial Building.

Today the War Memorial is second on the city's already impressive list of historical landmarks. It is also being treated to a comprehensive renovation plan, which has already consisted of such things as earthquake restructuring, a new heating and air conditioning system, and some considerable renovation to the kitchen, including the installation of a new stove and dishwasher and the addition of a service porch in the rear of the building.

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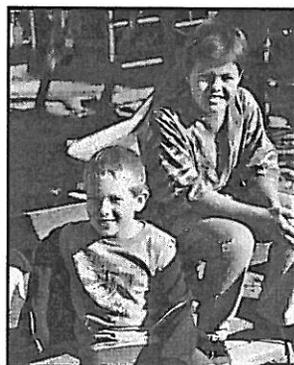
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of the Memorial was the sight of that lovely, grey cannon. Lovely to me because it was at once familiar and ominous as the one icon that enabled me to link the building to its original purpose. However, when I thought of the cannon it was limited to a place in my memory as the main visual preoccupation of my friends and I during our morning Winchell's sessions in the 9th grade, kicking around the Oak Lawn Bridge when Grad Night seemed a million years away.

I had never actually been inside the Memorial and had no knowledge of the incredible authentic WWI posters and I certainly hadn't seen the Trophy Room, with its artifacts

and other historical items, such as the lifesize soldier mannequins. Dressed as they are, in full fatigues, they look as if they are guarding the room from intruders. But after my educational visit with Nellie, I was able to see all these things that make this building the highly regarded landmark that it is.

There is a bookcase in the Trophy Room that Nellie told me was filled with important official documents and information that her husband, Tom Bowers had compiled while head of the Legion. I began to feel like a spy in that old television sitcom, *Hogan's Heroes*. I was filled with warm nostalgia as we moved on to the basement and its many

dusty side rooms.

If you believe as I do, that a building can have a heart, and that furthermore, the hearts of some buildings are bigger than others, then the Memorial is a hearty place indeed. This was my thought as we walked through the cavernous basement rooms and hovels. In fact, the heart I was speaking of may very well lie in the empty main room of the basement. Long since resigned to a mere storage area, it struck me as a space full of possibilities and, as it turns out, there are plans to bring it back to shape as a functional space. I was also shown the large, once luxurious restrooms soon to be restored and made handicap accessible as part of the Phase Four renovation plan.

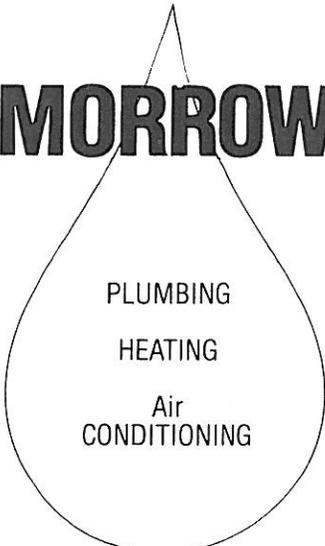
After years of being the main headquarters of American Legion Post 140, the building has certainly seen some wear, and up until now the Memorial has gotten by with the barest of upkeep and improvement. In fact, since 1954 the building has been reporting such problems as basement flooding, roof leaks, various kitchen problems, deteriorating floors, various pests, inadequate toilet facilities and not having handicap accessibility.

So the current plan of renovation is a welcome initiative, and so far things are moving along smoothly for the Legion and Assistant City Manager, Chuck Conn, who helped organize the renovation plan.

The City has, in fact, held sway over the Memorial ever since 1954 when the Legion had to turn the building over in an effort to save costs "due to the many deaths, illnesses, and incapacity of the veterans." This alliance hasn't always been an easy one. As part of the turnover the Legion had to give up all but the Trophy Room and settle for only occasional use of the facility including certain National holidays and ten other nights of the year for special occasions.

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## War Memorial

From page 48

However, these days the two entities seem united in the common endeavour to improve conditions both inside and outside the War Memorial.

Before the Legion's recent breakthroughs, they faced multiple problems in getting the necessary repairs and renovation off the ground. The City had been hampered primarily by a lack of funds, as well as an ever-changing group of officials and commission heads.

The Legion has persisted though, and now their hard work is paying off. Mr. Conn is excited about the work being done on the building and looks forward to making the Memorial the premiere city center for meetings and other community activities. This includes the possibility of wedding receptions.

Last year, after acquiring the necessary funds, which alone took nearly three years, the earthquake restructuring and subsequent renovations began. Recently that work was completed. Now Phase 2, the main goal of which is to make all restrooms handicap accessible, has begun.

Next on the list of renovations and actually being done in conjunction with Phase 2 is a series of landscaping measures being spearheaded by Irving Rector and South Pasadena Beautiful, who have matched a \$4,000 State grant. Mr. Rector is as enthusiastic as Chuck Conn about the current changes at the War Memorial. As part of the landscaping planned for the building, South Pasadena Beautiful has already been responsible for the clearing away of the ivy which had grown so wildly over the Oak Lawn Bridge.

Come to think of it, I can't remember ever seeing what the bridge actually looked like under all that foliage. Growing up as we did, on all the standard issue medieval folklore and TV sense of adventure, the ivy lended the bridge a Hobbitesque coziness to feed our sugar-glazed,

cream-filled imaginations. After all these years, seeing the bridge stripped to its bare structure has a cleansing effect, like seeing a closet in an old house cleared of its cobwebs and dust and made ready for a new owner.

Other changes on the agenda include the rerouting of the sprinkler system, as well as a new bunch of plantings to complement the building's already beautiful surroundings.

Most notable of these already in place is the enormous redwood tree planted in August 1923 by General John J. "Black Jack" Pershing, Commander of all U.S. forces during World War I. As I stood in front of it I couldn't believe it had taken me this long to stop and notice it. After all, I think it's the only tree of its kind for a radius of several miles. After minutes of feeling the usual dwarfdom induced by giants such as this, I snapped out of my trance and resumed my walk with Nellie who then showed me the more recently planted series of small trees in memory of six former South Pasadena residents who had died in Vietnam. Those veterans are: Terry Brooks Dyer, Charles Bruce Hunt, Robert Dean Campbell, Ralph Nelson Duemling, and Peter Lorenz Wood. James Kelly Patterson also had a tree planted for him; however, recently there has been new evidence to suggest that he is actually a Prisoner of War.

If all goes well, this Summer will find Phase 4 of the renovation in full swing, which involves actual restructuring to the bridge. This is provided the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transit Authority comes through with its proposed grant of \$500,000. If they do, this will complete the City's well-outlined plan to give the War Memorial a new lease on life as it forges on after more than half a century as community center and hub of American Legion activity in South Pasadena.