

# Starr King Post #52, GAR

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## Starr King Post #52, Grand Army of the Republic



G.A.R. Starr King Post #52 Members - 1922

Santa Barbara, California

The Grand Army of the Republic was founded on April 6, 1866 in Decatur, Illinois. Its membership was comprised of veterans of the Union Forces who banded together as brothers seeking to keep alive the fires of patriotism, seeking to provide a relief association which would aid by the highest type of charity, a deserving brother, their widows and orphans and to perpetuate the brotherly feeling engendered by the common hardships and perils they shouldered together during the recent War of the Rebellion and to perpetuate the memory and history of the dead. Membership was restricted to soldiers, sailors and marine s who served between April 12th, 1861 and April 9th, 1865 who had received an honorable discharge. No person was eligible who had taken up arms against the United States which disqualified all Confederate veterans.



The Grand Army was organized nationally by Departments, each Department representing one or more States. Thus the Dept. of California and Nevada came into being with the authorization and organization of the first Post, Lincoln Post #1 in San Francisco on April 22, 1867. The larger population centers were able to organize GAR Posts more quickly due to the larger veteran population with the more rural areas of the State to follow. In early 1883 interest was developing among some of the leading veteran citizens in the City of Santa Barbara and on May 17th, 1883 the first of several organizing meetings were held at City Hall with about twenty ex-Union Soldiers attending. The Editor of the Santa Barbara Daily Press reported that "it was generally felt that the Grand Army of the Republic, as now organized, was a social, benevolent and mutually beneficial institution - a union of the old Army banded together for mutual support and the perpetuation of old time memories." This was not completely the case as in addition the GAR had become one of the most powerful political organizations in the country, eventually electing five of their members to the office of President of the United States and affecting National and State legislation to benefit of Union veterans.

Politics aside, a name was chosen for the first Grand Army Post in Santa Barbara County. It was chosen by the veteran soldiers to be named the "Starr King" Post #52 (the 52nd Post in the Dept. of California and Nevada) after Thomas Starr King, patriot and preacher of Civil war fame. He was the Minister elect of the Unitarian Society in San Francisco who had come to California in 1860 and became an eloquent lecturer more scholarly than most rivals, was a fund raiser for the Union and lectured over the State speaking to American Patriotism. This during a time when 40% of the States population supported the Southern cause. The names selected by most GAR Posts were of distinguished fighting soldiers, Santa Barbara had decided to honor a fighting preacher who had died at the age of forty in March of 1866. There remains today, a large marble and bronze Monument to Dr. Thomas Starr King in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco.

On June 25th, 1883, at City hall, a third attempt was made to organize the new GAR Post. There had been some apprehension on the part of a number of candidates as to the political connection of the GAR but the local newspaper editor assured all that "there are no politics" in the Post of the Grand Army. Republicans and Democrats meet as they met around the old time camp fires and neither side ask nor care about what a comrade s politics may be." That being said, elections were held, the Post was mustered in and the first twenty one members answered the call, all of them leading citizens in the community. The newly elected Post Commander was Peter L. Moore, late 1st Lieutenant in the 27th NY Light Artillery and now a local manufacturer & dealer in Cigars with a store located on State Street.

Post meetings were now scheduled to meet every alternate Monday commencing with the second Monday in July in the upper hall of the Odd Fellows building. The early efforts were to recruit new members among the many Civil War veterans living throughout the county and to organize participation in Patriotic events taking place in Santa Barbara. Eventually the membership of the Starr King Post were to come from as far as Lompoc, Santa Ynez, Goleta and Carpinteria. Old prejudices died hard and the first attempt to march as a "Blue and Gray" unit in the 1883 Fort of July day parade failed as two ex-Union soldiers refused to march with ex-members of the Confederate Army and the feature was canceled.

The 30th day of May, 1868 had been designated by the National Commander in Chief of the Grand Army of the Republic for the purpose of decorating the graves of those who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion. His famous General order No. 11 authorized and encouraged all GAR Posts to inaugurate this service and it be kept alive from year to year as long as a survivor remains to honor the memory of his departed comrades. Memorial Day, May 30, 1884 the Starr King Post conducted the first organized observance ever held in Santa Barbara. Members of the Starr King Post met in front of IOOF Hall where they conducted the ceremonies of presentation of the flag. From there they were escorted by the Santa Barbara Guards down State Street to the beach, moving along the beach to the Cemetery grounds where memorial exercises were observed. Prayers by the Chaplain, singing by the Choir, addresses by the Post Commander Peter L. Moore, reading of Poems and other patriotic addresses were the program for the day. Finally at the close of the exercises a detail of Comrades decorated the veterans graves and at a signal from the Drum Corps, the "old soldiers" assembled at the entrance gate for the return march to their headquarters.

The Memorial day observance had become so popular and raised the spirit of patriotism to such a level that the local population turned out in great numbers and the banks and public offices closed for the 1885 event. Even though the march to and from the cemetery was a long and fatiguing one the "old soldiers" proudly marched the entire distance. Citizens followed in carriages and dozens of carriages and busses were already on the ground when the procession arrived and the tradition was firmly established in Santa Barbara for honoring the veteran soldier dead from all wars and included the "men in gray", decorating their graves with a profusion of flowers. In the years to follow it became a part of the local tradition and each year there were more graves to decorate. By 1894 the "old soldiers" were unable to march the entire distance and transportation was provided for anyone not having their own, the Southern Pacific's outgoing morning train would stop at the cemetery and the incoming noon train would stop to return passengers from the cemetery to town. All businesses closed from 10am to 12pm, school children participated and the town flew all the flags at half mast. All ex-Confederate soldiers were invited to participate and the old animosities had been pretty well forgotten.

By 1886 membership in the Starr King Post had increased to 57 and the membership stabilized at about that number for several years. By 1915, due to old age, membership began a sharp decline as the death rate among the "old soldiers" was rapidly increasing. Due to the restriction of eligibility of having to have served in the Union forces between 1861 and 1865 there was a preordained end of the Grand Army of the Republic and the Starr King Post #52. That would occur with the death of the last active member.

The Post was active in the community, actively sponsoring the Memorial Day Observances, turning out in GAR uniform at all their members funeral services and saw to it that every Civil War veteran, whether a GAR member or not was given a decent burial. They never knowingly allowed a veteran to be buried in a paupers grave. The Starr King Post established a speakers bureau and members spoke to as many school children in their classrooms about the flag ritual and patriotism in general as would have them. The Post saw to it that every School had an American flag and encouraged schools to use the Pledge of Allegiance and the singing of the Star Spangled Banner as

patriotic exercises in the classroom. During the years 1907, 1920 and 1936 the Starr King Post sponsored a Department Encampment, welcoming members of the GAR from every Post in California and Nevada to Santa Barbara. There were 46 members attending in 1907 of the 259 veterans in attendance, the numbers dropping considerably in 1920 until in 1936 there were only 66 veterans attending from all over California including three members from the Starr King Post. The last three Starr King Post members still living in Santa Barbara on May 14, 1936 were Leander Rickett, Charles Albert Storke and Abraham C. Hess and this writer assumes that they were the last three surviving members referred to in the report of the 1936 GAR Encampment.

Abraham C. Hess was the last surviving member of the Starr King Post #52 and died at the age of 97 years on March 5th, 1938 in Santa Barbara. He is buried in the GAR Plot at the Santa Barbara Cemetery.

There has been reported as many as 318 members of the Starr King Post from its organization in 1884 until 1936. The Grand Army of the Republic only represented about 60% of the Civil war veterans in the county as not all veterans applied for or were accepted as members.

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Order of Minor Historians

San Luis Obispo, Calif.

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