

## The American Legion, the 40&8 and the Carville Community

Almost 100 years ago on September 16, 1919, the United States Congress chartered the American Legion as “a patriotic veteran’s organization.... [f]ocusing on service to veterans, service members and communities”. That simple statement from the Legion’s website only begins to illuminate the work of the organization in the past century, but it does presage an important event for the Carville, Louisiana, hospital community for much of the last hundred years.

On a Sunday in June 1931, twelve years after its formation, the Legion came to Carville. Stanley Stein in his memoir *Alone No Longer* recalls the occasion when, “the barbed wire which cut us off from the world began to sag.” (p. 117) A patients’ group of 20+ veterans of the Spanish American War and the Great War met with Sam Jones, Louisiana State Commander of the American Legion, and other Louisiana Legionnaires to express their needs and air their grievances as veterans and forgotten human beings. It was perhaps the first time that a group of Carville residents, including my grandfather Edmond Landry (a WWI veteran, aka Gabe Michael), had bonded as a force to advocate on behalf of themselves and their fellow patients. On that day the residents found a new friend and ally in the American Legion and a new lease on life.

Sam Jones invited the group to form their own Legion post and promised to connect Carville with the outside world. Within weeks the Legion had invited baseball teams from Baton Rouge and environs to play on the Carville diamond and had sponsored bands to perform for hospital dances. The Legion took action on larger projects as well, working with the federal government to ensure the creation of a new infirmary and a recreation hall to replace those worn

and outdated structures. Over the years the Legion continued to help the residents financially and politically. As Sam Jones had foreseen, the patient body achieved power from its alliance with the national organization.

The hospital in Carville, Louisiana, is closed to patients now; isolation and incarceration are recognized as unnecessary and deleterious to HD patients. Those with Hansen's disease seek outpatient treatment in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, or in satellite clinics across the country. But Carville's bond with the American Legion, and particularly the 40&8, continues as it has since 1931. While the American Legion is no longer involved with Carville projects, the 40&8, the younger of the two organizations continues to fulfill its mission of service. The Carville Historic district, the Carville museum, the cemetery, and *The Star* are still beneficiaries of their generosity which began in the 1940s.

The 40&8 began as an invitation only honor society of veteran members of the American Legion. It took its name from the French box cars used in World War I to transport American soldiers to the frontlines in France. The cars could hold forty men and eight mules, hence the name La Sociétié des Quarante Hommes et Huit Chevaux or the 40&8. The name is apt, for the members of the 40&8 continue to work with persistence and vigor on behalf of both Carville and their other national causes including efforts for the welfare of children.

The 40&8's support of Carville began in 1943 when members purchased a printing press for the magazine and became a primary funding source for the hospital's international publication, *The Star*, which has as its mission "Radiating the light of truth on Hansen's disease." The paper's mission continues as does advocacy on behalf of those who have been affected by HD. The 40&8 contributes to that mission through financial support and the printing and

distribution of the 78 year old magazine, now newspaper. A bond formed so many years ago continues to this day.