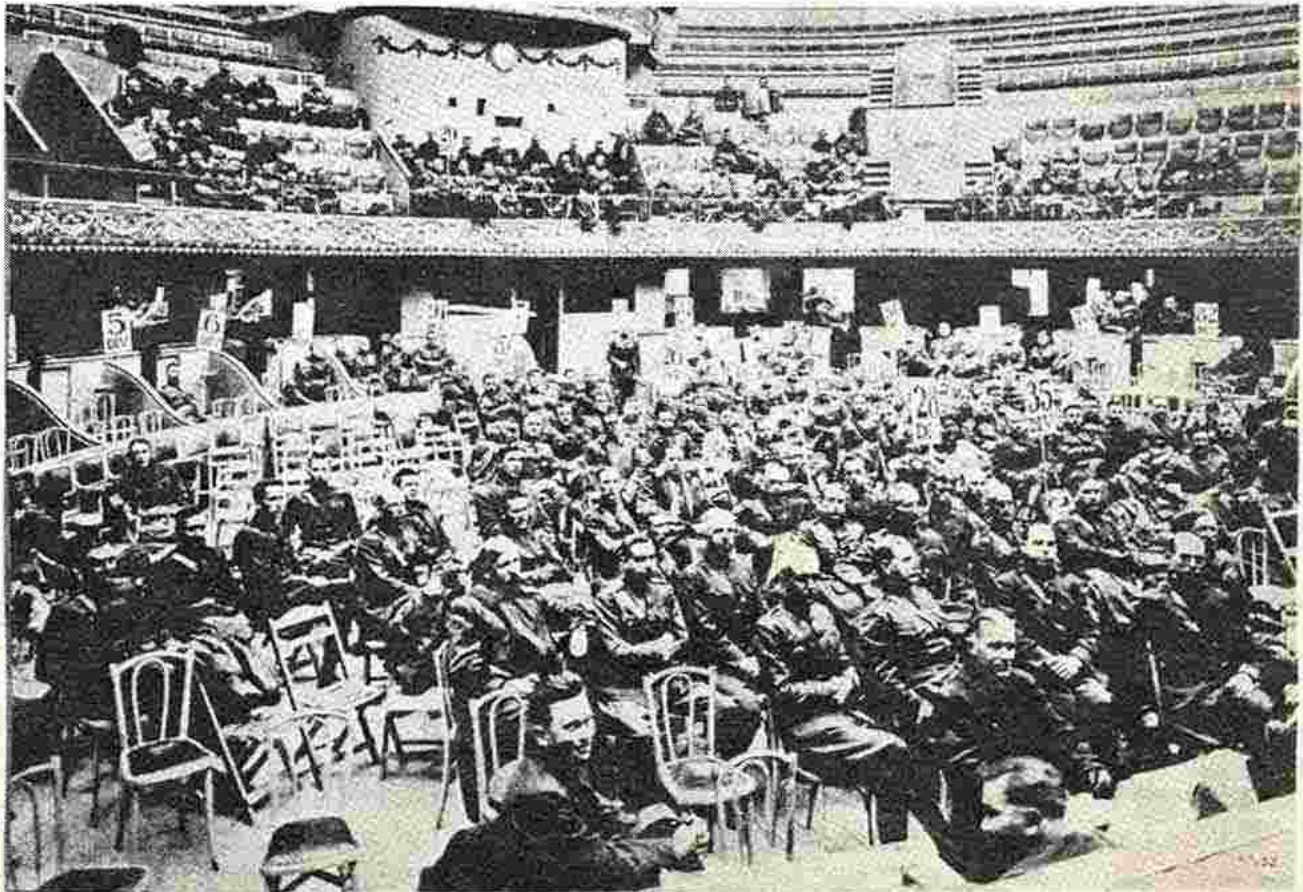


The Paris Caucus, March 15 – 17, 1919

by J. Edward Radley.

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Only known photo of the Paris Caucus of the Legion as it met in the Cirque de Paris on March 17, 1919.

Editor's note (1981): National Past President J Edward Radley has continued his active role in the American Legion since his presence at the Paris Caucus.

The Armistice of November 11, 1918, brought restlessness and discontent to the men of the AEF, most of them enlisted and drafted men. The war was won and their job of winning the war was done. They wanted to go home but they could not realize the magnitude of the task involved in transporting the millions in the AEF back to the U.S. The morale of the soldiers was so low that army discipline was, crumbling and falling into chaos.

General Headquarters of the A.E.F decided to take steps to eliminate the crumbling morale and ordered 20 non regular army officers, mostly lieutenant colonels, to a meeting in Paris. They reported on Feb. 15, 1919 and met at No. 4 Avenue Gabriel. A very comprehensive study was given to the problem and a number of recommendations were drafted to better the life of the soldiers and bolster the sagging army morale.

The meeting lasted until nearly midnight and it was decided that they should direct their organization work to creating an organization of discharged soldiers that would reflect the opinion of these ex-soldiers and work for their betterment in peacetime. They realized

that it would be difficult to have a caucus in France as delegates would be subject to military rules and regulations but they decided that a meeting in Paris, France would add tradition and a later meeting would be held in the U.S. free of military domination to complete the organization.

On March 11, 1919, a small group of these organizers met at the Inter-Allied Officers Club in Palis, France, and made final arrangements for the caucus.

The caucus was called to order at 2:55 p.m. at the American Club, 9 Gabriel Ave., Paris, on March 15, 1919. The late hour was necessary to give army privates more time to travel. The officers, who had money and got

U.S. Travel Orders, made up 90% of the delegates. The lowly private either got dubious Travel Orders or "thumbed" his way. He had little left of his monthly \$30.00 base pay, after paying for his War Risk Insurance (he paid for insurance on his life) and sending an allotment home. General Headquarters U.S. Army, permitted delegates to leave their posts - but did not officially sanction or disapprove the caucus. It must be noted that the caucus procedures were contrary to military law. Generals and privates, on the floor, deliberately shed their rank and debated as equals. Each man was already regarding himself as a civilian, free of military rank and status, and enjoyed the "no rank" rule.

Major E. F. Wood served as temporary chairman in the place of Lt. Col. Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. who had been returned to the US. He explained the Feb. 15, 1919 meeting and the steps that had preceded the Paris Caucus. Lt. Col. Bennett C. Clark was named as presiding chairman and he made an impassioned plea that the organization serve to protect the U.S. against future dangers, from within and without, and the urgent need to preserve American patriotism as wartime soldiers knew it.

No meeting was arranged for Saturday, March 16, 1919, but soldiers kept pouring in until more than 1100 officers and men were in attendance. No one kept count! 487 registered who had Travel Orders - all Regular soldiers, but many soldiers came from leave areas attracted by the fun and sport in Paris. The closing session, on Sunday, March 17, 1919 was moved to the Cirque de Paris, an amusement hall that had been taken over by the Y.M.C.A. that provided greater seating capacity for the caucus. The first order of business was to appoint a committee of five to call on President

Woodrow Wilson to invite him to address the caucus. President Wilson was in Paris attending the negotiating sessions of the Inter-Allied War Council discussing peace treaties. He did not go to the caucus!

The committees read their reports, which had been prepared the previous day, and they were taken up in order: Five names were suggested: "Legion of the Great War", "Veterans of the Great War"; "The Legion"; "Society of the Great War" and "American Legion". The name "American Legion" was adopted upon motion of Maj. M. K. Gordon, Madisonville, Ky.

The Committee on Constitution gave its report that included plans for the proposed organization and outlined eligibility requirements. The opening paragraph of the report contained the fundamental principles, reworded and refined, at the St. Louis caucus; that became the Preamble to the Constitution of The American Legion and remains unchanged to this date.

The Committee on Permanent Organization recommended that the officers be designated as: President, Vice-President, a Secretary, a Treasurer and a Board of Directors. This reflected the intention to create a civilian organization conforming to the precedent established in the parliamentary proceedings of the caucus that had banned military titles and military rank among the delegates.

The Committee on Convention recommended that a later convention be held in the U.S. with delegates to be chosen from the different military units of the U.S. Army that had served in the World War. The caucus disapproved this report and passed a substitute motion that representation be based on the "place of residence" not on military unit service.

Differences were growing by the hour and many delegates demanded that unsettled matters should be left to the later caucus to be held in the United States. Routine business was transacted and a motion was adopted that the reports of the Committee on Convention and Committee on Permanent Organization be referred to a new committee of 15 to be appointed by the chairman.

After a recess to 3:30 p.m. the new report was adopted that an Executive Committee be named "to go back home" and organize groups of veterans in every community then have another caucus with a broader base; that the Executive Cmte. members should be named from every state of the Union.

Compliant to this direction, a 50-man Executive Cmte. was named from officers and enlisted men of the delegations present who had registered at the caucus.

A deficit had occurred in the expenses of the caucus and regular officers agreed to pay an assessment of twenty francs each that realized 3320 francs and paid the debt. The several committees and the Y.M.C.A. were commended and thanked.

Nothing that was done nor any of the business that was transacted at the caucus was final. Everything was temporary and in preparation for the caucus to be held in the United States only seven weeks away.

In retrospect, it is remarkable that a large, unwieldy and contentious group of soldiers took a groping idea and transformed it into a nationwide organization. It conceived the idea of The American Legion in Paris and the birth of the organization followed at the second caucus in St. Louis. where the permanent organization came-into being.