



## **AMVETS Ladies Auxiliary Department of Florida History 1945 - Present**

*It has often been said, "Behind a successful man, there is a woman," and it also can be said "Behind a successful veteran's organization, there is an auxiliary."*

History has been defined as the ideas, acts, and events that shape the future. AMVETS Auxiliary, Department of Florida has been shaped by its history – the ideas of resourceful leaders, positive actions by the membership and events of the world in which we live. As World War II servicemen returned to civilian life, they joined together to form veterans' clubs. Soon their wives, having mutual interests, organized their own groups. The first AMVETS Post in the Nation was Post #1 in St. Petersburg, founded by George Burke. It is understandable that the first auxiliary was also in St. Petersburg. The date of the charter application was March 7, 1944, and 28 names were on the list. The founder and first president was Ruth Burke (Mrs. George) who later in 1954 was elected National President. Officers who served "Auxiliary of Veterans of World War II" or "Auxiliary of AMVETS", as the groups were called, included President, 1st Vice President, 2nd Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer, Patriotic Instructor, Conductress and Color Bearer, Bylaws, Rituals and Child Welfare Committees were appointed.

Also, in 1944 Dorothy Griner of St. Petersburg suggested that the White Clover be selected as the official flower of AMVETS. When the American troops landed on Normandy during the War the fields were covered with white clovers. After thousands and thousands of men trampled those fields, the white clover blossoms continued to prosper. The AMVET White Clover symbolized the strength of AMVETS and means "Think of Me." Today, as in the beginning, the White Clover is used to raise funds to support the volunteer work in the Veterans' hospitals. December 7<sup>th</sup> is White Clover Day.

Florida was probably the first department to do hospital work in the name of AMVETS Auxiliary. As far back as May 1944, weekly visits were made to Bay Pines Veterans' Administration Hospital under the leadership of Marguerite Blanton. The women gave magazines, gum and candy to the hospitalized and on Christmas 1944 gave gifts to every World War II veteran. Then in 1946 presents were given to every patient in the hospital – a total of 1000.

As the number of Posts grew in Florida, so did the Auxiliaries. On April 7, 1946 at Daytona Beach, the first planning meeting to organize a department was held. Five auxiliaries were required to form a state department. Membership eligibility was limited to wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters (16 years of age) of AMVETS. On June 30, 1946 the Department of Florida was organized. Pro-tem officers were selected, and Marguerite Blanton of St. Petersburg became the President. Local dues were \$3.00 of which \$.50 per capita was forwarded to the Department. Delegates in attendance represented St. Petersburg #1, Miami #4, Sarasota #5, Daytona Beach #6, Pensacola #7, and Fort Lauderdale #9 Auxiliaries.

The first Department Convention was held in Miami on September 13-15, 1946 at the McAllister Hotel. Elizabeth Roose of Sarasota was elected President. Other elected officers were the two Vice Presidents, Chaplain, Recording Secretary, Treasurer, Conductress, and Guard. Assigned committees were responsible for Rules, Resolutions, Finance/Budget, Memorial Service, Constitution/Bylaws, Credentials, Courtesy, Greetings, and Membership. "Think of Me" written by Mr. & Mrs. Les Rohde of Miami #4 was adopted as the official state hymn.

The President was allowed a travel allowance of \$.05 per mile. Corresponding Secretary received \$25.00 for supplies while the Treasurer was allotted \$35. The Recording Secretary received \$10.00 for supplies and \$.05 per mile for travel.

In 1946 the 2<sup>nd</sup> National Commander of AMVETS, Jack Hardy, called for the formation of a National AMVETS Auxiliary. He instructed AMVETS National Liaison Officer Barnhardt to contact all Auxiliaries and invite representatives to come to Pittsburgh. On September 21-22, 1946, delegates from 13 states met to discuss the initial details in organizing the National Auxiliary. Florida sent two representatives, Elizabeth Roose and Marguerite Blanton. They have the distinction to be known as National Founders and served on the first National Executive Committee. This committee set in motion the wheels of the organization. Thirteen was considered a lucky number and a special omen since 13 colonies were the nucleus for the beginning of our Nation.

The STARS & STRIPES newspaper on October 3 1946 published a notice that the first National Convention of AMVETS Auxiliary would be held in St. Louis, Missouri on November 21-24, 1946. Edith Males from California was elected National President, and Elizabeth Roose was elected the first Senior Vice President. Ruth Burke, founder of the first auxiliary, was honored to install the first slate of National Officers. At this historic convention the Constitution and National Bylaws were adopted as well as the slogan **“We Waited Together --- Now, Let’s Work Together.”**

In one of the bulletins to the membership Vice President Roose wrote “I would like to emphasize the individual member is the most important basis of our entire organization – Local, Department and National. Our programs of service, legislation, and cooperation cannot function properly unless each member fulfills her own responsibility. Consequently, our programs and our value to the Nation will be just what the individual member makes it.”

At the 2<sup>nd</sup> state convention, October 2-5, 1947 in Sarasota, Ruth Burke King was elected President. It is interesting to note that the convention registration fee was \$6 that included the cost of the banquet. On October 20, following this convention, the State Executive Committee had its first meeting at the Post #5 home in Siesta Key. The Department of Florida was well on its way to bigger and better things.

The official uniform has had several changes during this time. The first uniform was a light gray shirtwaist dress. Then came the forest green dress, long sleeves with cuffs, a belt at the waist and a gold satin square knot tie. (Often members were mistaken as Girl Scout leaders.) For special occasions there was a dark green cape, lined with gold satin, a colorful outfit when the sides were thrown back over the shoulders. Later the uniform was changed to the A-line forest green dress, green skirt, and white jacket. Also acceptable are green slacks, white or gold blouse and the white jacket.

The first “fun and honor” group was formed in Florida in November 1946. This organization, known as “Sad Bags” had as their goal “to create fund and goodwill and to encourage auxiliary members to be better workers.”

We owe a debt of gratitude to the first leaders in Florida. Ruth (Burke)(King) Nickerson, the founder and first President of the first auxiliary in the Nation, the 2<sup>nd</sup> President in the Dept. of Florida, and the 9<sup>th</sup> National President, and as late as 1978, the founder of Auxiliary #50 in North Fort Myers. Her motto was “You only get out of AMVETS and AMVETS Auxiliary what you put in it.” Marguerite Blanton, the Dept. President, Pro-Tem, when the Dept. was only a blueprint in the hearts of the local auxiliaries, one of the National Founders. Elizabeth Roose, 1<sup>st</sup> State President, 1<sup>st</sup> National Sr. Vice President, listed among the National Founders. These leaders were pioneers

in the auxiliary and demonstrated their dedication, commitment, and faith in the ideals of AMVETS Auxiliary.

Florida continued to organize new auxiliaries. Membership has had its “ups and down”, but the faithful members were supportive of the big four service programs – Hospital, Child Welfare, Community Service, and Americanism. Auxiliary members conducted parties in the hospitals, prepared layettes for new babies, supported community endeavors, and marched in patriotic parades. Local auxiliaries met on a regular basis; the department conventions were held around the state in small hotel rooms and schools; and AMVETS Auxiliary was alive and well.

In the 1980’s, as new programs were introduced by National and adopted by Florida – Paws With A Cause, John Tracy Clinic, Freedoms Foundation, Scholarships – and as Florida’s population grew, the membership in AMVETS Auxiliary expanded.

In 2008-2009 Past Department President Charlene D. Kee was elected the first Black American AMVETS Ladies Auxiliary National President, in her hometown Orlando FL.

In 2016-2017 Past Department President Evelyn McElvin was elected as National President in Reno, NV.

In 2019-2020 Past Department President Dolores “Dee” Baggett was elected as National President in Louisville, KY. Due to COVID-19 Dolores “Dee” Baggett was asked to remain the National President for the 2020-2021 year, and she did. Dee was the first ever to serve as the National President for two terms.

Past National President Patty Piening transferred from Ohio to Auxiliary 8 in St. Petersburg, Florida. She then became a Department of Florida officer and went up the chairs. She was elected the Department President for the year 2023-2024.

As in the beginning and even today, Florida AMVETS Ladies Auxiliary is a very energetic and engaged Department.

Today, there are 59 Auxiliaries; membership is over the 6,000 mark; the future looks bright. The present leaders have the commitment as the early founders to “serve” and to “help” the members are dedicated to “work” and to “give.” Yes, the ideas and accomplishments of our predecessors have prepared us well for the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.