

State museum celebrates flag, man behind it

By LEON ALLIGOOD
Staff Writer

You've got to admire a man like Le Roy Reeves. One hundred years ago, the Johnson City lawyer recognized a problem and did something about it.

Today, every Tennessean recognizes his work.

What Reeves gave us was the stars, three to be exact, placed in a blue circle in the center of a sea of red on our state flag. Anyone who goes into a government building in Tennessee sees Reeves' handiwork, that is, if they take the time to look up. School kids view his work every day, too.

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As Betsy Ross is to Old Glory, Le Roy Reeves is to Tennessee's white-starred

creation.

Today, Reeves and the familiar icon he designed will receive their due as the Tennessee State Museum holds a birthday party and celebration of the state's official standard, which was adopted by the legislature on April 17, 1905.

The flag was all Reeves' idea, according to Candace J. Adelson, the museum's senior curator, who produced an exhibit on the flag and its designer. The exhibit is now on display at the museum.

"He felt the state needed a flag. We didn't have one at the time," Adelson said.

Alas, for Reeves, few know of the man behind the flag.

"Which is a shame, for he was an interesting fellow," the curator said.

Reeves, who lived from 1876 to 1960, was a lawyer in practice with his father in Johnson City. He was instrumental in founding the National Guard unit in that city in 1903 and eventually rose to the rank of major and was a judge advocate.

Flags, of course, are a potent symbol for the military-minded, so it's possible the captain's interest in filling the state's flag void came from his desire to have a banner fluttering in the wind as his troops trained.



Tennessee State Museum Curator of Education Miranda Fraley gives Portland's Oak Mount Elementary fourth-grade students a tour of a new exhibit on the Tennessee state flag. Fraley asked the students if they knew what the three stars on the flag symbolize.
SHELLEY MAYS / STAFF

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Or, Adelson noted, it could be that the state's unofficial flag that preceded the one Reeves designed was just so ugly on a flagpole that Reeves believed he could create a more visually appealing banner.

In 1897 the state legislature approved a flag of diagonal red, white and blue bars. The flag included the numeral "16," a reminder that Tennessee was the 16th state to join the Union.

Adelson noted that while the legislature passed a resolution making the 1897 flag the state's official banner, the legislature failed to pass a law that made it official.

"Reeves felt the flag was not an effective one. In fact, that flag was approved on the day the Tennessee Centennial Exposition opened in Nashville, so it may have been more a flag for the Exposition than as a real state flag," the curator noted.

The Tennessee Centennial Exposition was a six-month celebration of the state's 100th birthday and was a showcase of exhibits and displays that drew more than 2 million visitors. The Parthenon was built in Centennial Park for it.

Devereaux Cannon, a Sumner County resident, agreed with Adelson about the 1897 flag. Cannon, who is considered by Adelson and others to be a flag expert, lent his expertise to the museum for the current exhibition.

"Given the variant number of designs of that flag that exists, I think probably it was just being used by the Exposition as a decorative flag. The legislature chose one version of it to be the state flag," Cannon noted.

It's not that Tennessee's leaders didn't want a flag before 1897. In April 1861, the legislature considered placing the state seal on the first flag of the Confederacy, which had been adopted the previous month.

"But since the Tennessee legislature was still debating whether or not to secede when the proposal happened, the flag idea got tabled and never came back up," Adelson said. Just a few months later, Tennessee did secede.

"I think during the war, Tennessee figured we had better things to do," Cannon added.

If they had adopted the Confederate flag with the state seal, it no doubt would have become a matter of contention in years to come, Adelson noted. Georgia's former flag, for one, was a flashpoint in public debate in recent years because of its similarity to the Confederate battle flag.

Apparently Reeves was a man suited for the job of designing a state flag. He was well educated, with a talent for drawing, and apparently possessed the leadership skills and charm to shepherd his creation through the state legislature. There are two primary elements in the Reeves-designed flag: the "field of crimson" that takes up most of the flag space and, in the center, a circle of blue containing "three stars of pure white, representing the three Grand Divisions of the state."

The first of the new flags was presented to Reeves and remained in his possession until his death. At that time he bequeathed it to the state of Tennessee, and it is now on display in the state museum.

"It's a brilliant idea, simple, but it's caught on. Today, those three stars symbolize Tennessee," Adelson said.

If you go

The 100th birthday celebration of the Tennessee state flag will be from 2 to 4 p.m. today at the Tennessee State Museum, 505 Deaderick St., in Nashville.

The event is free. Free parking is available in the state employees' parking lot west of the Capitol. Featured activities will include music by the Tennessee Army National Guard Band and a one-man play about David Crockett.

Attendees will be able to tour an exhibit about the flag's creation.

The exhibit includes several unofficial state flags that were used before the current design was adopted on April 17, 1905. Also, the exhibit includes numerous flag-related artifacts on display, including flag designer Le Roy Reeves' original drawing of the three-star flag.

State flag has a top and bottom, really

If there is a design flaw with the Tennessee state flag, it's that there's no clear top or bottom, so often the flag gets hoisted upside down.

So here's how to know top from bottom, according to flag expert Devereaux Cannon, who said his advice comes from flag designer Le Roy Reeves of Johnson City.

"The proper way to fly the state flag is to make sure the star that is closest to the hoist is also the star that is closest to the top of the flag," Cannon said. (The "hoist" of a flag is the end where the rope runs through it.)

"A common way of stating it is that two stars are supposed to be over one, even though it's not quite two stars over one because the stars are not level," he said.

For those who can't figure it out, state flag vendors are now supposed to identify the top edge so that the banner can be hoisted right side up with ease.

Reeves' design was approved 100 years ago today, on April 17, 1905.

We're No. 14

Tennessee's state flag was ranked the 14th best flag on the continent in a 2001 survey done by the North American Vexillological Association.

The Volunteer State's three- star design came in one step above Ohio and a spot behind California's bear design.

The best-looking flags in the survey were New Mexico, with a mission-style cross in the center, followed by Texas' famous lone star.

The ugliest flags on the list, coming in at No. 70, 71 and 72, were those of Montana, Nebraska and the then-flag of Georgia, which has since been redesigned.

The association's tips for good flag design start with this piece of advice: Keep it simple.

Vexillology, in case you were wondering, is the study of flags.

Read the complete survey results online at www.nava.org.

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