

Donation of the Month

Object: B.P.O.E. photo, 1960
Catalog #: 2001.56.1
Donors: Bob Goodwin & Rod Billings



What will you find behind a framed picture in a garage sale in Enid, Oklahoma? Well if you're Brother Rod Billings of the Enid Elks Lodge No. 2104, you might find a 1960 photo showing the installation of officers for Rogers Lodge No. 2144, which Billings thoughtfully sent on to Brother Bob Goodwin in Rogers. Take a closer look at this photo and you'll find the rich and fascinating history behind fraternal organizations and their impact in shaping their members and their communities.

In the late 19th century as many as one in five American men belonged to at least one fraternal organization, the meetings of which were often shrouded by secret ritual and ceremony. Groups such as the Order of Free and Accepted Masons, the Knights Templar, the International Order of Odd Fellows, and the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks (B.P.O.E.) were formed throughout the country, in small towns and large cities.

The Elks began in 1868 as a fraternal organization devoted to fellowship and helping others in need. Its founder was Charles Algernon Sidney Vivian, an English comic singer and dancer who moved to New York in 1867 to try his luck on the stage. An engaging man, he formed a loose confederation with a number of fellow actors and entertainers. When one of the members died, leaving his family destitute, the Elks were officially formed to help the family and others in need. As their fame in social activities and benefit performances spread, other cities wanted to form lodges too. In 1871 the New York State legislature granted the Elks a charter allowing them to establish a grand lodge as well as local lodges all over the country.

Why were so many men drawn to ritualistic fraternal orders during the 19th century? In part because it

was a time of political crisis and rapid and disruptive social and economic change. Many factors made an impact in everyday life - industrialization and the triumph of the factory over the craftsmen, urbanization and increasing geographic mobility, growing class conflict, and the trauma of the Civil War. Fraternal organizations offered brotherhoods that crossed class and sectional lines with rituals celebrating the artisan, the woodsman, the knight, or some other figure from the pre-industrial past.

But the appeal of lodge ritual went deeper still. For the 19th century was also a time when gender roles became sharply differentiated and narrowed. Although men were economically productive and dominant in the larger world, they were considered to be "corrupted" by the world's materialism and harshness. Women became the keepers of hearth and home and society's moral guardians and therefore had a greater role than men in instilling "good Christian values" in their children. Perhaps the demands of work combined with this ideology of "separate spheres" for men and women led men to the lodge in hopes of finding some type of fathering experience.

By the early 1900s the tension of the 19th century had eased. Gender roles weren't as narrowly defined and men were able to spend more time and energy on their children, in part because more men were working for larger, more secure employers and enjoying shorter work hours. Inventions such as radio and movies dimmed the appeal and entertainment value of lodge ceremonies. As the 20th century progressed ritual fraternalism declined as attendance and enthusiasm lagged. Some organizations continued to exist, but they became essentially civic clubs or social organizations. By the 1950s lodges were the stuff of television comedy as viewers chuckled at Ralph Kramden and the Loyal Order of Racoons.

At the turn of the 20th century Rogers had its share of fraternal organizations. The local encampment of Odd Fellows, a ritual (rather than social) organization, was begun in 1883, just two years after the town's founding. They were followed in 1887 by the Masons. The Knights of Pythias, established in 1890, promoted membership across sectional lines to heal the wounds of the Civil War. Organized sometime in the 1890s or earlier, the Ancient Order of United Workmen offered fraternal death benefits to its members, an important function during a time when commercial life insurance seemed cold and impersonal. In the 1890s two Grand Army of the Republic posts, made up of Civil War veterans, were founded before advancing age caught up with the membership and the organization faded away in the early 1900s.

In 1896 supporters of the free-silver movement and William Jennings Bryan organized a local chapter of the Patriots of America, a secret, briefly lived organization largely financed by Bryan's friend, W.H. "Coin" Harvey of Monte Ne. The Rogers camp of the Woodmen of the World was established some time before 1901 and was soon followed by the Modern Woodmen of America in 1908; both organizations had a well-established life insurance program. In 1911 the Loyal Order of Moose was formed. The local chapter of the Knights Templar, the highest branch of the York (or American) Rite of Masonry, was organized in 1917.

Rogers Elks Lodge No. 1223 was organized February 11, 1911. Forty-six charter members were inducted, with George D. Locke serving as Exalted Ruler. Following the ceremony the members and their guests, officials from other Arkansas lodges, boarded a special Memphis & Kansas City Southern train to the resort of Monte Ne, just southeast of Rogers, for an elaborate banquet at the Club House. In their charter application, under the question "What can you say regarding the quality of your membership?" the Exalted Ruler responded that the membership included "the leading business men and most influential citizens of Benton County, Arkansas."

The Elks' first home was in the Union Building at the southeast corner of Second and Walnut but the

rooms proved too small. By 1917 the Elks had taken out a long-term lease for the second floor of the Vandover building, just across the street. Notable architect and Exalted Ruler A.O. Clark designed and oversaw the construction of an impressive portico at the front of the building (no longer in existence) and the renovation of the lodge rooms. On February 22 *The Rogers Democrat* reported that the room would include "ladies parlors, a kitchenette, and toilet. These rooms will be devoted exclusively to the wives, sisters and daughters of the Elks and will be open to them at all times, and no man is to enter these sacred portals except at such social events as are planned for the entire order."

The Elks were one of the most active social and welfare organizations in Rogers. During World War I the reception rooms were used as a sewing center for the Red Cross. The Elks held fund-raising performances including the comedic play "Wife Wanted," a "womanless wedding" (featuring men dressed in ladies' clothing), and a boxing contest with well-known local boxers such as the Brooks twins and Blackwell of Fayetteville. It's unclear why, but in 1934 the lodge officially disbanded and the Rogers Elks faded into history.

A new lodge, Rogers-Bentonville Elks Lodge No. 2144, was chartered in 1959. Our featured photo shows the officers for 1960 in their tuxedos. From left: Bill Beaver, Joe Applegate, George Barnes, Andy Anderson, JC (Bill) Brashears, Charlie Minor, Dr. Harry White, William J. Davis, Jim Newlin, and Maitland Duffy.

In May 1962 a new \$100,000 lodge building was dedicated just south of Oakley Chapel, on Highway 71 between Rogers and Bentonville. It was a special evening for the crowd of 150, including a buffet supper and dancing. Today area Elks support a number of local and national programs such as a Boy Scout troop, "Hoop Shoot," several rehabilitation centers for Arkansas children, the Fayetteville Veterans Administration Hospital, and the scholarship-awarding Elks National Foundation.