



1898-1918

Growing into Benevolence and Patriotism

THE PERIOD FROM 1898 to 1918 saw the BPO Elks continue its massive increase in membership. Growing more than ten fold during this time frame, the Order went from about 44,000 members in 1898 to more than 490,000 members by the end of World War I. This rapid growth inevitably led the Order to assume ever-greater roles in the community and on the national stage, and as the years went by, members made their benevolence and patriotism felt more strongly than ever.

From War to Conservation

The Elks' first national call to patriotism took place during the waning years of the nineteenth century, when the United States became involved in a war with Spain in 1898. During the war, the Order remitted military volunteers' dues during their period of enlistment and undertook the support of their dependents during their period of service. One Elk who was involved in the Spanish-American War was a thirty-eight-year-old first lieutenant in the US Army named John J. Pershing. Lieutenant Pershing was the quartermaster for the 10th Cavalry Regiment. He was cited for gallantry for his part in the Battle of San Juan Hill and would go on to an even more illustrious military career.



EVERETT COLLECTION HISTORICAL/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

US Army officer John J. Pershing is shown here sometime prior to the beginning of World War I and becoming General of the Armies.

It was also around the time of the Spanish-American War that the Order began preparing to create a home for needy members. The idea was initially approved during the 1898 Grand Lodge Session, and in 1902, a former hotel in Bedford, Virginia, was purchased for this purpose. At the 1911 Grand Lodge Session, the Order approved the construction of a new building in Bedford, which was dedicated in

1916, and for nearly a century, the Elks National Home was a symbol of the BPO Elks and its benevolence.

The Elks' capacity for benevolence toward their fellow humans was also amply demonstrated in the early years of the twentieth century following the massive earthquake and subsequent fire that destroyed most of downtown San Francisco in 1906. The disaster claimed the building of Lodge No. 3, as well as the homes of many San Francisco Lodge members, but the Elks' first response was to come to the aid of their fellow San Franciscans by setting up a field hospital and relief camp.

Thousands of Elks from across California participated in a relief effort that was coordinated by the Oakland Lodge, which served as the staging area for the response. Provision wagons based at the lodge were the first supply wagons to enter San Francisco following the fire. Support poured in from Elks around the country, including an immediate \$10,000 grant that was sent from the Grand Lodge, and a total of more than \$109,000 (about \$3 million in today's dollars) was eventually collected. California Governor George Pardee would later write that "among all those who responded so nobly to our cry of distress, there was none who did so with more benevolence than did [the BPOE]."

The same year as the San Francisco earthquake, a new stability was achieved in the Order's governance when it adopted a constitution based on the US Constitution. This new constitution specified that the legislative power resided within each Grand Lodge Session, that the executive power rested with the Grand Exalted Ruler, and that the judicial power rested with the Grand Forum. While many amendments to the constitution and statutes have been made, the Constitution of 1906 remains the basis of the Order's governance.

With the national organization set, Elks began to consider how they could work together at a state level. The answer was devised during the 1915 Grand Lodge Session, when the Constitution was amended to specifically allow for the creation of state associations. As the state associations flourished, they each adopted local charitable causes to support as their major projects, and today, a significant portion of the Order's charitable work is carried out through the activities of these diverse projects.

Another issue that came to the Elks' attention during this period was the serious threat to the western American elk population. Some early twentieth-century estimates placed the total number of animals at fewer than fifty thousand, down from many millions of animals. Some observers suggested that the slaughter of elks for their antlers and teeth was a major cause of the herd's decline. Among the customers for elk teeth were the members of the BPO Elks, many of whom wore an elk tooth in honor of the Order's emblematic animal. In 1907, believing this to be the cause of the animals' demise, President Theodore Roosevelt wrote to GER Henry Melvin to ask if the Order could seek "the abolition of this destructive custom."

Distressed at the thought that the Order might be contributing to the downfall of the animal it revered, the Order of course complied

and also undertook a detailed survey to determine the exact cause of the western American elk's decline. The report determined that the primary cause for the herd's declining numbers was the animals' lack of access to grazing grounds. The report served as a call to action, and the Order successfully lobbied for the creation of protected areas to allow the elk to recover its numbers.

The year 1907 was a watershed year for the Order for another reason as well. During the Grand Lodge Session that year, GER Henry Melvin officially recommended that Flag Day be celebrated by the Order every June 14. The Order recognized that the holiday, which was first observed in the classroom of schoolteacher Bernard Cigrand in 1885, was a perfect fit for its patriotic nature. A Flag Day ritual was drawn up and adopted during the 1908 Grand Lodge Session, and it was made mandatory for all lodges in 1911.

The BPO Elks and World War I

The Elks' patriotic mettle was again tested when the United States entered World War I in 1917. At the Grand Lodge Session in 1917, PGER John K. Tener chaired a committee that recommended that the Order "give first consideration to the sick and wounded on the battlefields of France and equip base hospitals for their care; that the Order create a fund for war relief work."

To accomplish this, \$1 million was raised at the lodge level for the War Relief Fund. This fund was then administered by the Elks War Relief Commission, headed by PGER Tener. The Order's first action was to equip the first two field hospitals that accompanied the American Expeditionary Force to Europe. The Order also contributed \$60,000 (more than \$1.1 million in today's dollars) to the Salvation Army to help support its work in relief of soldiers on the battlefields of France.

An estimated seventy thousand Elks members served in the war, and more than one thousand of them lost their lives. Perhaps the most famous Elk to serve in the conflict was General John J. Pershing, the commander of the American Expeditionary Force.

Following the war, the Elks realized the immense needs that the returning soldiers would have. To help meet these needs, the Order funded the creation of the first veterans hospital in Boston, Massachusetts, and then turned the facility over to the US government.

Throughout the period beginning with the Spanish-American War and ending with the conclusion of World War I, the BPO Elks had grown into a vast and influential national organization that seized



Past Grand Exalted Ruler John K. Tener served as the chairman of the Elks War Relief Commission during World War I.

every opportunity to demonstrate its benevolent nature in the community and its intense patriotism and love of the nation. Although the Order's truly explosive growth was now behind it, the following two decades would see the foundation of institutions that would carry its benevolence forward through the next century of its existence. ■