American Pride and Service to Youth

President John F. Kennedy, who was a member of the Boston, Massachusetts, Lodge, is pictured presenting the 1961 National Youth Leadership Award on behalf of the BPO Elks to Patricia Louise Kurtz in July, 1961. Looking on is GER John E. Fenton.

FILLED WITH PRIDE that John F. Kennedy, who was a member of the Boston Lodge, had been elected president, the BPO Elks at the 1961 Grand Lodge Session took up Kennedy’s challenge to “ask what you can do for your country” and inaugurated the Grand Lodge Americanism program. The founding document for the program was a Declaration of American Principles, which discussed the ideas of morality, freedom, individualism, respect for the law, and loyalty to the nation and closed with a call for everyone who believes in those principles to speak loudly in their defense. The declaration was sent to all local lodges with instructions that it be read at a lodge meeting and publicized widely within the community.

The Grand Lodge Americanism Committee also focused on other ways of encouraging the expression of patriotism among the Order’s
members and the general public. In 1966, during the Grand Lodge Session, the committee arranged for each state association president to enter the opening session carrying the flag of his state, a ceremony that has been observed during every Grand Lodge Session since then. The same year, the committee began the tradition of Elks providing new Eagle Scouts with certificates and US flags in recognition of their outstanding achievements.

Veterans Service

The escalation of American involvement in Vietnam during the 1960s resulted in hundreds of thousands of US troops being deployed for the war. The Order responded, much as it had during previous wars, by sending letters of encouragement and care packages to US troops serving overseas in an effort to let them know that their sacrifices were remembered.

The Veterans Service Commission continued to serve veterans in more than two hundred VA hospitals nationwide and made special efforts to help wounded veterans of the Vietnam War. In one instance, twenty-four air conditioners were donated to the Tripler Army Medical Center in Honolulu to improve the conditions of wounded servicemen being treated there. On the island of Guam, Elks, led by the Agana, Guam, Lodge, donated materials to build two pavilions to provide shelter for wounded servicemen being treated at Naval Hospital Guam.

A performance by the Racine, Wisconsin, Lodge Youth Band kicked off the July 4, 1976, ceremony in Chicago that rededicated the Elks National Veterans Memorial to honor the veterans of the Korean War and the Vietnam War.

On July 4, 1976, in recognition of the 200th birthday of the United States as well as the 50th anniversary of the Elks National Veterans Memorial, a solemn service was held during the 112th Grand Lodge
Session to rededicate the memorial to include recognition of the sacrifices of veterans during the Korean and Vietnam Wars.

**Youth Activities**

Between 1958 and 1978, the BPO Elks continued to expand its program of outreach to the nation’s youth. In 1970, Grand Exalted Ruler Frank Hise recommended that Elks across the nation take up the Hoop Shoot, an Elks tradition in Oregon that he had started at the Corvallis Lodge many years before. About one hundred thousand young people competed in the first year of the Elks National Hoop Shoot, and the competition only grew from there.

In 1972, the first Elks National Hoop Shoot finals competition was held in Kansas City, Missouri. It featured twenty-four boys from eight regions and was conducted under the supervision of national Hoop Shoot Director Gerald “Getty” Powell. In 1974, a girls competition was added, and male competitors included future NBA Hall of Famer Chris Mullin and future NCAA men’s basketball champion Steve Alford. In 1975, a permanent plaque listing each year’s winners was installed in the National Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Massachusetts. By 1978, the national finals involved seventy-two finalists from twelve regions, and an estimated 2.6 million competitors took part in all rounds of the contest.

Another youth program that began in the years between 1958 and 1978 was the Teenagers of the Month program, which local lodges used to recognize outstanding young people. About four hundred lodges took part during the program’s first year in 1971–1972. The Order also became increasingly aware during these years of the growing danger of drug abuse among young people. One notable moment was an address to the 1972 Grand Lodge Session by television personality and antidrug crusader Art Linkletter, who spoke movingly to the assembled Elks about his daughter’s tragic death from drug abuse.

After twenty-five successful years, the Grand Lodge Youth Committee decided to combine the Elks Leadership Contest with the ENF Most Valuable Student Scholarship to create a scholarship award that responded to financial need and recognized both academic excellence and community leadership. By the 1978–1979 fiscal year, Most Valuable Student Scholarships were awarded to 1,100 students and had a total value of more than

Radio and television personality Art Linkletter, pictured here in 1971, shared the story of the tragic death of his daughter during a speech on the dangers of drug abuse at the 1972 Grand Lodge Session.
$800,000—a figure that does not include the many scholarships awarded by local lodges and state associations.

Disaster Relief

On March 27, 1964, an earthquake in Alaska completely destroyed the Kodiak Lodge’s building and also significantly damaged the buildings of the Anchorage and Seward Lodges. Elks nationwide responded to the disaster, with a particularly generous donation coming from the Elks of the Manila Lodge in memory of how the Order had helped them rebuild their building after World War II. At the 1964 Grand Lodge Session, $155,000 was disbursed to the three Alaska lodges, and a permanent Elks Disaster Relief Program was created to allow the Grand Lodge to respond to major disasters in a timely manner.

Between 1958 and 1978, the membership of the BPO Elks increased at a steady rate, growing from just over 1.2 million members in 1958 to more than 1.6 million members in 1978. In the early 1970s, Gerald R. Ford, who was a member of the Grand Rapids, Michigan, Lodge, joined the list of Elks who held the office of the presidency of the United States. The Elks had become a solid presence in American society, and the Order would continue to have a positive effect on the lives of many Americans, including thousands of young people and veterans, over the coming years.

Join in the Celebration!

BEGIN CELEBRATING THE BPO ELKS’ 150th anniversary today by visiting www.elks.org/150. On the 150th anniversary web page, you can virtually join in the festivities, and you will have access to special 150th anniversary–related information. You will be able to participate in online auctions and have the opportunity to bid on Elks-related experiences, memorabilia, and gear. During the Grand Lodge Convention in San Antonio, Texas, you will also have the opportunity to bid on custom gavels used by GER Malcolm J. McPherson Jr. The 150th anniversary web page also provides information about the Elks National Foundation’s $1,500 Anniversary Grant, which can make it possible for your lodge to celebrate the Order’s anniversary through service. Additionally, the page contains resources that will help you plan your trip to the Grand Lodge Convention and allow you to explore Elks history and stay current with all the latest 150th anniversary celebration news!