

History Of The Elks



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The history of the Elks is a rich narrative that traces back to the late 19th century, encapsulating a journey of brotherhood, philanthropy, and community service. The Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, often referred to simply as the Elks, was established in 1868, initially as a social club for entertainers in New York City. Over the years, it has evolved into one of the largest fraternal organizations in the United States, dedicated to fostering goodwill and charitable activities. This article will delve into the origins, evolution, major milestones, and the ongoing impact of the Elks in communities across the nation.

Origins of the Elks

Founding and Early Years

The Elks were founded on February 16, 1868, by a group of entertainers who sought to create a social club where members could gather, share experiences, and support one another. The original name of the organization was the "Jolly Corks," a nod to the drinking and performance culture of the time. However, as the club began to expand and take on more serious undertones, the founders recognized the need for a more meaningful name and mission.

In 1868, the Jolly Corks rebranded themselves as the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, signifying a commitment to benevolence and

protection. The name "Elks" was chosen to symbolize strength and loyalty, reflecting the animal's characteristics. The organization's motto, "Elks Care, Elks Share," encapsulates its dedication to community service and philanthropy.

Expansion and Growth

The Elks quickly gained popularity, and by the 1870s, lodges began to sprout across the United States. The first lodge outside of New York was established in San Francisco in 1876. This expansion was fueled by the organization's emphasis on charitable works and social activities, appealing to a broader audience beyond entertainers. Key developments in this period included:

1. Establishment of the Grand Lodge: In 1869, the first Grand Lodge was formed, providing a framework for governance and oversight of local lodges.
2. Introduction of Rituals and Traditions: The Elks adopted certain rituals and traditions that became central to their identity, such as initiation ceremonies and the Elk's pledge.
3. Community Involvement: Local lodges began to engage in charitable activities, which laid the groundwork for the organization's future philanthropic endeavors.

Major Milestones in the History of the Elks

20th Century Developments

The 20th century marked a period of significant growth and transformation for the Elks. Several key milestones during this era include:

1. Involvement in World Wars: The Elks played a vital role during World War I and World War II by supporting troops and their families. They provided assistance through various programs, including recreational activities and financial aid.
2. Establishment of the Elks National Foundation (ENF): Founded in 1928, the ENF was created to promote charitable giving and community service. It has since funded various programs focused on education, youth, and veterans.
3. Civil Rights Movement: The Elks took a stand during the Civil Rights Movement by promoting inclusivity and diversity within their ranks. This was a significant shift from earlier practices, as the organization began to welcome members from various backgrounds, including those of different races and ethnicities.

Modern Era and Continuing Legacy

In recent decades, the Elks have continued to adapt and respond to the changing needs of society. Some notable aspects of their modern legacy include:

1. **Youth Programs:** The Elks are heavily involved in youth programs, offering scholarships, mentorship, and opportunities for young people to engage in community service.
2. **Veterans' Support:** The organization has a longstanding commitment to supporting veterans, providing assistance through various initiatives such as the Veterans Service Commission and the "Elks Heroes" program.
3. **Community Service Initiatives:** Local lodges engage in numerous charitable activities, including food drives, health fairs, and educational programs, reinforcing the Elks' motto of caring and sharing.

Philanthropic Endeavors

The Elks have a long-standing commitment to philanthropy, which has defined the organization since its inception. Their philanthropic efforts can be categorized into several key areas:

Scholarships and Education

The Elks National Foundation allocates millions of dollars annually in scholarships to deserving students. The organization offers:

- **Most Valuable Student Scholarship:** This program awards scholarships based on academic achievement, leadership, and financial need.
- **Legacy Award:** Specifically designed for children and grandchildren of Elks members, this award aims to support educational aspirations.

Veterans Services

The Elks are dedicated to serving veterans and active military personnel. Their initiatives include:

- **Veterans Service Commission:** This body focuses on providing assistance to veterans in accessing benefits and services.
- **"Elks Heroes" Program:** A network that encourages local lodges to engage with veterans and their families through community events and support services.

Community Health Initiatives

Local lodges often participate in community health initiatives, offering services such as:

- Health Fairs: Free health screenings and information sessions on various health topics.
- Youth Programs: Activities aimed at promoting physical and mental well-being among young people.

Challenges and Adaptations

Despite its rich history and philanthropic success, the Elks have faced challenges, particularly in recent years:

Membership Decline

Like many fraternal organizations, the Elks have experienced a decline in membership. Factors contributing to this trend include:

- Changing Social Dynamics: The rise of digital communication and social media has shifted how people connect and seek community.
- Perceptions of Fraternal Organizations: Some younger generations view traditional fraternal organizations as outdated or irrelevant.

Adapting to Modern Society

In response to these challenges, the Elks have taken steps to revitalize the organization:

1. Increased Outreach: Local lodges are leveraging social media and digital platforms to reach potential members and promote their activities.
2. Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives: The Elks are actively working to create a more inclusive environment, welcoming members from diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

Conclusion

The history of the Elks is a testament to the power of brotherhood, community service, and philanthropy. From its humble beginnings as a social club for entertainers to becoming one of the largest fraternal organizations in the United States, the Elks have continually adapted to meet the needs of

society. Their dedication to charitable endeavors, support for veterans, and commitment to youth education reflect their core values of care and compassion. As the organization looks to the future, it remains steadfast in its mission to foster goodwill and positively impact communities across the nation. With a legacy that spans over 150 years, the Elks continue to be a vital part of American society, embodying the spirit of giving and community service.

Frequently Asked Questions

What year was the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks (BPOE) founded?

The BPOE was founded in 1868.

What was the original purpose of the Elks organization?

The original purpose was to create a social club for actors and entertainers, providing support and camaraderie among its members.

How did the Elks evolve from a social club to a charitable organization?

The Elks began focusing on community service and charity work in the late 19th century, expanding their mission to include helping those in need.

What is the significance of the Elks' motto 'Elks Care, Elks Share'?

The motto reflects the organization's commitment to community service, philanthropy, and supporting those in need.

What are some major charitable initiatives of the Elks?

Major initiatives include scholarships, youth programs, veterans' services, and support for individuals with disabilities.

When did the Elks become involved in veterans' services?

The Elks began their involvement in veterans' services after World War I, providing support and assistance to returning soldiers.

How does the Elks organization support youth programs?

The Elks support youth programs through scholarships, drug awareness initiatives, and various community activities aimed at empowering young people.

What role do local lodges play in the Elks organization?

Local lodges serve as the primary units of the Elks, engaging in community service, hosting events, and managing charitable activities.

What does the Elks National Foundation do?

The Elks National Foundation provides funding for scholarships, grants for community projects, and support for various charitable initiatives.

How has the Elks organization adapted to modern societal changes?

The Elks have adapted by expanding their focus on inclusivity, embracing diversity, and addressing contemporary social issues through their programs.

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