

Local Odd Fellows lodge marks sesquicentennial

By KASIA McDONOUGH
Post Staff

DALLAS - Getting up the wooden flight of steps leading to a simple, sparsely decorated meeting room isn't as easy as it used to be for the members of Oneida Lodge #371 Independent Order of Odd Fellows.

The group, which will mark its 150th anniversary this fall, has seen its numbers dwindle in recent years. "I'll tell you why I don't come to meetings all that often," said Tom Reese, Representative to the Grand Lodge. "It's these damn stairs."

While climbing to the second floor is a challenge for many of these gentlemen, the obstacle is not enough to spell the end of the oldest fraternal organization in the Back Mountain. "Now you know why we're called Odd Fellows," said Reese. "We meet in a room none of us can get to anymore."

The Odd Fellows, a fraternal organization originating in England in the early part of the 19th century, first began gathering locally in August of 1849. "We started over in Huntsville, meeting in a room above the hardware store there, but it burned down and the group moved to Dallas," said Ed Roth, a 50-year member who is helping make arrangements for an anniversary banquet to be held September 23.

The blaze destroyed their former home and all the group's charter records. "We don't have information about who started the lodge or who its first members were," said David C. Jones, Noble Grand. "But Tom (Reese) can probably tell you how we got this building."

Reese feigned dismay at the implication he may have been around to witness the move, but immediately obliged the request. "Don't ask me how they got here, I was just a kid when it happened," he said. "What I do



International Order of Odd Fellows plan 150th anniversary. Seated (from left): Ed Roth, Tom Oliver, Fred Templin, Tom Reese, and Walter Gosart Standing in second row: Mike Hagan, David C. Jones, Fred Brokenshire and Peter L. Roushey.

know is that they have twice had to move this building back from its original position to accommodate transportation."

Streetcars carrying passengers to Harveys Lake passed dangerously close to the structure, requiring the Odd Fellows to have it re-positioned. "They had a porch on the second floor that hung out over the tracks and the folks who ran the streetcars warned Lodge members to remove it," said Reese. "They didn't get around to it quickly enough so one day the locomotive pulling the streetcar just clipped it. That's what my family used to tell me, anyway."

Years later, when the Department of Transportation approached the Odd Fellows with a request to move the structure back a second time, to make room for a highway,

the group did not hesitate. "We were about 10 feet closer to the road before those projects required the building to be moved to its current location," said Jones.

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Tom Reese
Representative to the Grand Lodge

Social changes, not geographical shifts, have had the biggest effect on the Lodge over the course of time. "You're going back to an era

when things were a lot different than they are today," said Roth. "Circumstances were such that people had to band together and behave like brothers."

Groups like the Odd Fellows were a common thread in the fabric of early American life. "When it was time for young men to go out into the world they would join an organization like this one as a way of establishing business contacts," said Roth. "Then if they found themselves having to move to a strange town they could look up Odd Fellows to help them get started."

The bond shared by Lodge members is deeper than that of business associates, however. "Our motto is friendship, love and truth and those words have been placed in three links to indicate how they are bound together," said

Jones.

Friends depended upon one another for help and for fun. "In the old days, the group would meet on nights of a full moon because that was the only time there was enough light to travel after sundown," said Roth. "Back then, a meeting like this was a major social event and it was one of the few opportunities people had to relax and enjoy themselves."

In addition to providing an opportunity for recreation, the Lodge offered, and still offers, support to a variety of charitable groups. "The Odd Fellows used to run orphanages — there was one in Sunbury — for children who had lost their parents," said Roth. "The members made them a home, gave them an education and made sure the kids learned a trade or skill. Today, of course, there is hardly a need for that kind of thing."

Assistance was given to families and widows of Odd Fellows, also. "We've always had a certain amount of donations that we gave to family members to help them out a little," said Roth.

Today the Lodge continues the tradition of altruistic endeavors. "We contribute to the Odd Fellows Home in Middletown, PA," said Reese. "That's a place aging Odd Fellows can go if they don't have a lot of family to help care for them."

Oneida #371 supports the Arthritis Foundation and a United Nations Tour as well. Each year, a student from the Dallas School District joins 41 students from around Pennsylvania in visiting Niagara Falls, Ottawa, Boston, and New York City. While in New York the group attends a United Nations work session to observe that organization in action.

The trip is an opportunity to see history in the making, but its hard to imagine the experience could be more enlightening than an evening with the Odd Fellows.

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Per a company investigation, persons identifying themselves as employees of Commonwealth Telephone Company have called Commonwealth customers and asked for account information, including names, addresses, social security numbers and telephone numbers, while claiming that they are testing the telephone lines for year 2000 compliance. After disclosing the requested information, unbeknownst to them, these customers' long distance carriers were then changed. Commonwealth Telephone Company would like to inform its customers and the public that it has not contacted and has no need to contact customers for this type of information in regard to year 2000 issues.

Commonwealth Telephone Company has filed complaints with the attorney general's offices in Pennsylvania and New York regarding this case. Further legal action is pending.

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