

Hello my name is Ben Brown, the director and curator of the Clarke Historical Museum. We are closing for the month of January for renovations and to install a new exhibit called Humboldt County Fraternal Organizations, Long Ago and Today.

In the early 1900s, Humboldt County saw an explosion in its number of Fraternal Organizations. At this same point in time, the population of Humboldt County was rapidly increasing due to improving accessibility to the area and the booming logging, maritime, and farming industries. From 1857 to the present, Humboldt County has seen over 120 Fraternal Organizations. Early clubs included Masonic-associated groups, Independent Order of Oddfellows, Native Sons of the Golden West, and the Knights of Pythias. The types of clubs introduced changed over time and in response to demographic shifts in Humboldt County, leading to the rise of cultural-based Fraternal Organizations like the Sons of Norway, Order of Runeberg and the Croatian Fraternal Union. Many of these specific organizations formed to provide a space for members to speak the language of their home country, celebrate traditional holidays, and receive insurance benefits through the payment of dues. Many Fraternal Organizations appeared in multiple towns in the county, providing an opportunity to connect neighboring towns that share organizational ties. The more popular and prolific groups were known to build meeting halls that were then rented out by other groups, providing space for other club's meetings and events. Many of these buildings still stand today and have been recognized as historical sites.

Besides serving as an economic support for members, Fraternal Organizations fill an important need for individuals: a sense of community. One of the ways that fraternal organizations cultivate community is through ceremonies with elaborate, meaningful regalia filled with symbolism and meaning best understood by those within the organization. This insider knowledge creates closer ties between members, ties that can transcend towns and countries in some cases. Many organizations use historical-occasionally biblical- symbols which can link the organization to a history beyond the group's founding. This provides the group with a history to connect with and a story that unites members of each individual group and multiple groups across time and physical space.

The exhibit features a variety of expression of community within Fraternal Organizations through shared symbolism. This shared symbolism is expressed in the regalia, uniforms, ritual books and other items of interest created, maintained, and used by the organizations. The scope of the exhibit covers a wide range of items from the 1850s, through the golden age of Fraternal Organizations (1870-1910) to the present and represents items from some of the historical and currently active Fraternal Organizations in Humboldt County.

The museum and the exhibit will open during February's Arts Alive. It's never too late to become a member to help us keep history alive for future generation.

This is Ben Brown with Community Comment.