

Evolving Social Groups in Middletown: Fraternal Orders of Muncie, Indiana, 1870-1910

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When thinking of fraternities, you most likely think of college students partying on weekends or the vast assortment of Greek letters that make up their names. Fraternities are something that Muncie is known for, but it was not so long ago that another type of “fraternity” was attracting hundreds of men to their organizations. I am referring to fraternal orders, or organized groups of men that were brought together with some purpose in mind. These orders still exist to this day, but their peak was undoubtedly around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Fraternal orders, specifically the ones in Muncie from 1870-1910, will be the focus of this paper. The inspiration for this topic came from reading James Felsenstein and Frank Connolly’s *What Middletown Read*, which depicts much of the day-to-day life of Muncie’s citizens in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>1</sup> However, fraternal orders are only briefly mentioned in this book, which led to my further research on the subject. The purpose of this paper is to give a complete analysis of three of Muncie’s fraternities: the Freemasons, the Improved Order of Red Men, and the Knights of Pythias. Specifically, I will be looking at their demographic makeup, functions as an order, reasons for joining, among other things. To accomplish this, I will be using primary source documents found in Ball State’s archival collections. For any information that is unclear or nonexistent, I will be relying on the work of other historians to fill in the gaps. By using these different sources, it is my goal to portray Muncie’s fraternal orders as organizations that brought together individuals from all different walks of life through its use of comradery, benefits for their members, and solidarity around core values.

## **Broad Functions of Fraternal Orders**

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Felsenstein and James Connolly, *What Middletown Read: Print Culture in an American Small City* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2015).

First, it is important to establish the broad functions of fraternal orders during the era. Much like modern fraternities, those of the last century were organizations where like-minded individuals could find companionship with their peers. There was almost certainly a central theme for every fraternity that would serve to draw in members, such as religion, political issues, or an adherence to an idea. These will be apparent when the discussion shifts towards the specified groups.

From the primary source documents, it is evident that the selling of insurance to members was another vital function of fraternal orders. The mission statement of the Muncie Red Men included a poem, with a stanza reading, “Should death step in and take away, the spirit from its frame of clay; The widow and the orphan too, Will be aided by Red Men true.”<sup>2</sup> From this, it can be deemed that the Red Men sold some sort of life insurance that would be given to the family of a newly deceased member. The Knights of Pythias had documentation of selling insurance, as well. In a pamphlet from their organization, there was record of the national organization giving over \$760,000 in insurance benefits to their members, with the lodge in Muncie contributing to this total.<sup>3</sup> These practices support historian Brian J. Glenn’s claim that fraternal orders promoted a “welfare state” in which it was the organization’s duty to look after the well-being of their members.<sup>4</sup> With the opportunity to spend time with peers and the ability to get insurance in an era of lower life expectancy, it is no wonder that fraternities were extremely popular at the time.

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<sup>2</sup> Red Men Lodge, *The Indiana Red Men*, vol. 1, no. 10 (Stoeckel Archives of Local History, Muncie, Indiana).

<sup>3</sup> Knights of Pythias, *Welcome Lodge No. 37, Golden Jubilee pamphlet, 1873-1923* (Archives and Special Collections, Ball State University Libraries).

<sup>4</sup> Brian J. Glenn, “Fraternal Rhetoric and the Development of the U.S. Welfare State,” *Studies in American Political Development* 15, (Fall 2001): 220.

## Analysis of Three Muncie Fraternities

With the primary purposes of fraternal orders established, it is time to shift towards some of the prominent fraternities in Muncie, starting with the Free and Accepted Masons. The Freemasons can trace their lineage to London, England in 1717, where the first lodge was created. Their brotherhood was founded upon the ideas of, “universal brotherhood, sociability, toleration, and benevolence.”<sup>5</sup> The first lodge in America was created in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the Freemasons would later go on to welcome some Founding Fathers like George Washington and Benjamin Franklin.<sup>6</sup> The grand history and former members of the order certainly would have influenced people to join their ranks.

The founding date for the lodge in Delaware County is unknown from the available documents, but there is enough information to deduce some of the Muncie lodge’s practices and motives. A souvenir pamphlet from the Muncie Freemasons includes standard information about their by-laws and club dues, but a statement regarding the fraternity’s specific purpose was noticeably absent.<sup>7</sup> This lack of an agenda could support sociologist Jason Kaufman’s claim that many groups like the Freemasons were “intentionally apolitical” to focus more on improving relationships amongst all members of their association.<sup>8</sup> The primary method to accomplish this was the Mason’s Christian background, specifically Protestantism. The pamphlet is filled with religious language, including the Freemasons calling themselves “Handmaids of Christianity.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Jessica Harland-Jacobs, “All in the Family: Freemasonry and the British Empire in the Mid–Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of British Studies* 43, no. 4 (October 2003): 449.

<sup>6</sup> Neil L. York, “Freemasons and the American Revolution,” *The Historian* 55, no. 2 (Winter 1993): 315-16.

<sup>7</sup> Free and Accepted Masons Delaware Lodge No. 46 Souvenir Pamphlet, 1905 (Archives and Special Collections, Ball State University Libraries).

<sup>8</sup> Jason Kaufman, “Three Views of Associationalism in 19<sup>th</sup> Century America: An Empirical Examination,” *American Journal of Sociology* 104, no. 5 (March 1999): 1305.

<sup>9</sup> Free and Accepted Masons Delaware Lodge No. 46 Souvenir Pamphlet, 1905.

From this, it can be assumed that they saw it as their duty to spread love and benevolence to members and the surrounding community through the vessel of Christianity. There is no documentation of this fraternity requiring Protestantism from its members, so it is unclear whether Catholics or members of other religious groups were permitted to join.

Also included in the source is a somewhat detailed description of the fraternity's internal hierarchy. At the top of the hierarchy was the Worshipful Master, which is the equivalent of a lodge president.<sup>10</sup> Beneath this position were those of Wardens (deputies of the Worshipful Master), Treasurer, Secretary, and Tyler (lodge guard). Some of the position's duties can be inferred, but there is no explanation for the specific responsibilities of each position. It is also ambiguous as to whether every member was assigned to these five positions, or if these were reserved for more tenured individuals.

The second prominent Muncie fraternity is the Improved Order of Red Men (IORM). The first IORM lodge was founded in Baltimore, Maryland in 1834, mostly by previous members of the Society of Red Men that wanted to distance themselves from their former order.<sup>11</sup> The IORM drew most of their ideology from the Sons of Liberty and the Tammany Society. In fact, the appropriation of Native American culture that is often associated with the IORM was inspired by the Boston Tea Party, where members of the Sons of Liberty dressed as Mohawk Indians to sabotage British supplies of tea. This was allegedly a way to help distinguish themselves from the mostly British culture in fraternities at the time, seeking instead to link their values to that of the New World.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Elaine A. Peña, "More than a Dead American Hero: Washington, the Improved Order of Red Men, and the Limits of Civil Religion," *American Literary History* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 62.

Like the documents for the Freemasons, the available IORM source does not say when the lodge in Muncie was established. From what is available, the Muncie Red Men were deeply concerned with the well-being of its members, as is seen by the earlier poem. What sets the IORM apart from many groups like it is their emphasis on ritualism. It is already established that they centered their traditions around those of Native American culture, and although there is no information detailing these rituals of the Muncie Lodge, they certainly held their own interpretation of Native American ceremonies. Historian Dale Knobel claims that, in addition to their promises of brotherhood and mutual benefits, the allure of their aggrandized rituals and regalia was a primary reason for some to join the order.<sup>12</sup> Ceremonialism was not unique to the IORM, but the use of an exotic culture surely gave the fraternity a mystifying aura that appealed to some.

Along with this, the Muncie Lodge had their own hierarchical system, much like the Freemasons.<sup>13</sup> As you would expect, the titles of these roles all had to do with Native American culture. Each lodge was known as a tribe, with the leader of each “tribe” being a Sachem. Underneath the Sachem were Junior and Senior Sagamores, which were the equivalent of Wardens in the Freemasons. The only other named position is the Keeper of Wampum, who was tasked with keeping records of tribal meetings.

The last major Muncie fraternal are the Knights of Pythias. Unfortunately, this fraternity has the least available information on it, both in primary sources and outside research by other historians. Because of this, it is hard to know the origins of the national lodge, as well as the ideas and themes which it was founded upon. From what is available, the Muncie lodge were

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<sup>12</sup> Dale T. Knobel, “To Be an American: Ethnicity, Fraternity, and the Improved Order of Red Men,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 4, no. 1 (Fall 1984): 68.

<sup>13</sup> Red Men Lodge, *The Indiana Red Men*, vol. 1, no. 10.

huge providers of insurance and benefits to its members, which was already discussed in the conversation about broad functions of fraternities. In accordance with other Muncie fraternities, the Knights of Pythias also boasted an internal hierarchy.<sup>14</sup> Their lodge leader was known as the Chancellor, with his underlings being Vice Chancellors. Similar to the IORM, they had a record keeper known as the Keeper of Records and Seals. Despite not knowing enough about the order's philosophy or origins, we can infer that they operated very similarly to the other prominent fraternities in Muncie.

### **Demographics and Reasons for Joining**

Now that the three main fraternities of Muncie have been covered, it is time to analyze the demographics of the fraternal orders. In other words, what kinds of people joined a fraternal order from 1870-1910? Sadly, only the Knights of Pythias included a list of members within their pamphlet.<sup>15</sup> Using the What Middletown Read Database, which is a search engine based on the circulation records of the Muncie Public Library from around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I was able to search over 500 names from the Knights of Pythias to try to identify their social class designations.<sup>16</sup> Of the 500 names searched, only 30 members were listed as library patrons with an available class designation, with 20 (66%) being white-collar, and 10 (33%), being blue-collar. This is certainly a small sample size, but it stands to reason that all three fraternities would have a similar makeup if all class designations were known.

Perhaps the most striking realization from this is the healthy number of working-class individuals that participated in fraternal orders. If we were skeptical of the low sample size and

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<sup>14</sup> Knights of Pythias, Welcome Lodge No. 37, Golden Jubilee pamphlet, 1873-1923.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> "What Middletown Read," Ball State University, accessed April 11, 2022, <https://lib.bsu.edu/wmr/>.

said that around 20% of fraternity members were working-class, this is still a high number in a time where the two distinct social classes tended to stay away from each other. White-collar individuals often had more time and money for leisure, which explains the different activities associated with the upper-class. Working people often congregated at bars with their fellow workmates. However, the data suggests that fraternal orders in Muncie broke this traditional mold. This supports historian Mary Anne Clawson's claim that fraternal orders often broke societal norms by mixing blue and white-collar individuals in a single organization.<sup>17</sup> It is possible that blue-collar individuals sought after the death benefits that fraternities could provide. Although, perhaps unintended, this could be another primary function of fraternities of the time.

The primary documents for the Freemasons and IORM did not have a member list, but they did name people that held important positions within the orders.<sup>18</sup> Using the same function from the What Middletown Read Database, I searched approximately 40 names of officeholders within the IORM and Freemasons. All these individuals were white-collar, with most of them being high-status professionals (doctors, lawyers, etc.). This shows that, while members of the working-class were welcome to participate in the fraternities of Muncie, their highest positions were reserved for those of the upper-class.

In terms of race and gender, it is likely that the vast majority of fraternity members were white men. The various primary sources make no mention of any minority or female members, but this does not mean that they did not exist, especially when looking at fraternal orders nationally. Social science historian Joe W. Trotter suggests that black people did participate in

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<sup>17</sup> Mary Anne Clawson, "Fraternal Orders and Class Formation in the Nineteenth-Century United States," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* Vol 27, no. 4 (October 1985): 693.

<sup>18</sup> Free and Accepted Masons Delaware Lodge No. 46 Souvenir Pamphlet, 1905; Red Men Lodge, *The Indiana Red Men*, vol. 1, no. 10.



fraternities, and even mentioned the Freemasons and Knights of Pythias as a few orders that had active African American members.<sup>19</sup> Adding on to this, historian David Beito claims that fraternal orders were the only places that African Americans and women could, “exercise such governing skills as framing constitutions, campaigning for office, and dispersing funds for collective improvement.”<sup>20</sup> So, while there were not any records of minorities or women in Muncie’s fraternal orders, they likely did exist in some capacity, as they were sometimes prominent features of fraternities nationally.

The final point to explore is why an average citizen of the time would be attracted to join one of these fraternal orders. Attributing membership to finding company among people with similar interests could be the simple explanation, but there are potentially more specific motives for many. One of the primary reasons for someone to join would be for religious purposes. We have already seen that the Freemasons were heavily Protestant; it stands to reason that other Christians could have been attracted to a religious organization.<sup>21</sup> However, the Freemasons were not the only fraternity where religion was a central theme. In one of her articles, historian Amy Koehlinger gives a detailed overview of a fraternal order that was not heavily prominent in Muncie: The Knights of Columbus.<sup>22</sup> Religion was central to this fraternity, with the overwhelming majority of its members being Catholic. Their location in Connecticut is more

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<sup>19</sup> Joe W. Trotter, “African American Fraternal Organizations in American History: An Introduction,” *Social Science History* 28, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 355-56.

<sup>20</sup> David T. Beito, “To Advance the “Practice of Thrift and Economy”: Fraternal Societies and Social Capital, 1890-1920,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 29, no. 4 (Spring 1999): 587.

<sup>21</sup> Free and Accepted Masons Delaware Lodge No. 46 Souvenir Pamphlet, 1905.

<sup>22</sup> Amy Koehlinger, ““Let Us Live for Those Who Love Us”: Faith, Family, and the Contours of Manhood Among the Knights of Columbus in Late Nineteenth-Century Connecticut,” *Journal of Social History* 38, no. 2 (2004): 455-56.

reflective of the religious demographics of the area, but their existence shows that religion was central to many organizations, not just in the Midwest, but throughout the country.

The possibilities of social mobilization could have been another prominent draw to people, particularly those in the working-class. Most members were upper-class individuals, but there was a sizeable portion of regular working men throughout. Because of this, it makes sense that people of lower class could join these orders to associate themselves with those of higher living. It is a natural human behavior to want to be well-regarded; being involved in a fraternal society could give them a better reputation. Perhaps making friendships among your peers could provide opportunities that would not have been there normally. There are no sources that confirm these ideas, but they are logical explanations that could at least partially explain the membership of blue-collar men.

Along similar lines, some could be interested in fraternities for the prestige associated with it. Titles like the Worshipful Master could be very alluring to those with visions of grandeur. The robes, regalia, and ceremonies that would have been central to organizations like the IORM could have served as an escape from the trivial activities of every-day life in Muncie. This would have been especially true for lower-class people, as they would have been unlikely to receive any official titles within the organizations.

## **Conclusion**

The examination of fraternal orders in Muncie, Indiana from 1870-1910 reveals new perspectives on the fraternities themselves and, in some ways, daily urban life around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At a brief glance, these fraternities could look vastly different from each other, but they all had similar operations and functions, including the selling of insurance benefits and

the inclusion of an internal hierarchy. Many would also assume that membership in these organizations would be reserved for those in higher classes, with more money and leisure time. Though, as we have seen, these orders served more as a social melting pot where people from different backgrounds could make lasting connections with each other. Although they do reflect many issues of the time, including class, race, and gender-based discrimination, fraternal orders from this period seemed to be quite progressive in their benevolence for their own members.

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