

SAGAS OF THE EARLY ELKS

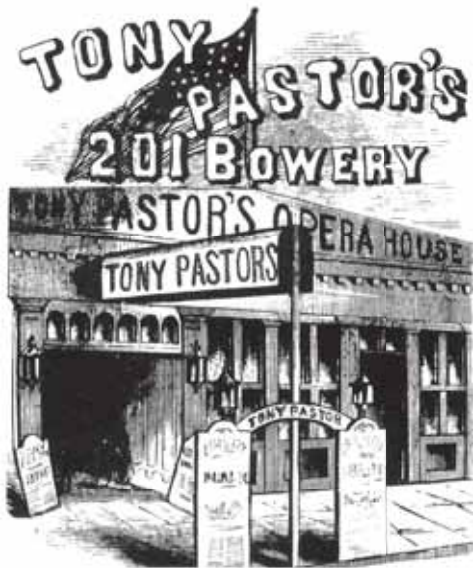
The Historical Backdrop to the Elks' Rituals of Memory

The Jolly Corks were a drinking club, but in a real sense the Elks started with a funeral:



In the latter part of December—just before the holidays—Charles Vivian [and fellow corks] returning one afternoon from a funeral of a friend—Ted Quinn, of local concert hall fame—dropped into Tony Pastor's. There they found Billy Gray, Tony and 'Dody' Pastor, John Fielding and William Sheppard, who became interested in McDonald the story of the 'Jolly Corks,' and all of them strolled over from Pastor's to 'Sandy' Spencer's, where they found George F. McDonald and others. After hearing the story of the funeral the 'Jolly Corks' had attended, McDonald suggested that the organization should become a 'protective and benevolent society.' During the next week or ten days McDonald broached the idea to a number of Jolly Corks...

(Nicholson, *History of the Elks*, 14)

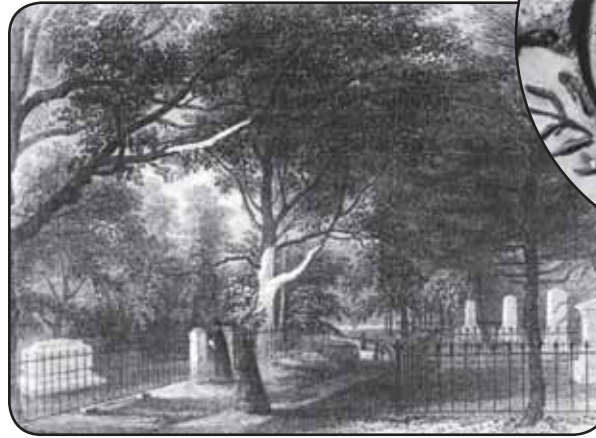


This thoughtfulness about death and bereavement was not unusual during the 1860s, when few people remained untouched by loss because of the Civil War. Social historian Maris A. Vinovskis writes that "Looking at the North and South together, approximately 8 percent of the estimated population of white males aged 13 to 43 in 1860 (the individuals most likely to fight in the war) died in the Civil War. Considering the North and the South separately, about 6 percent of Northern white males aged 13 to 43 died in the Civil War, and about 18 percent of their Southern counterparts died. ... The heavy casualties experienced by military-age whites in the mid-nineteenth century are unparalleled in our history. Many young men died in the Civil War, leaving dependent widows, and grieving parents and friends. Many who survived were wounded or disabled during the war and carried visible reminders of the conflict with them for the rest of their lives. Given the war's magnitude, most Americans who were adults in the second half of the nineteenth century probably either participated in the war or had close friends or relatives who fought in it." (7)

In earlier times in America, the dead had been buried in close proximity to the living, in places such as churchyards, and even in vacant lots and public commons. But by the nineteenth century this was no longer desirable. People were not only concerned about public health, but also rethinking the meaning of commemorating the dead. As historian Stanley French argues, burial grounds were increasingly viewed as "instructional institutions," and rural settings as the most appropriate environment for the dead:

In the new type of cemetery the plenitude and beauties of nature combined with art would convert the graveyard from a shunned place of horror into an enchanting place of succor and instruction. The world of nature would inculcate primarily the lessons of natural theology. The fullness of nature in the rural cemetery would enable people to see death in perspective so that they might realize that [as a pamphlet to Mt. Auburn cemetery put it] "in the might system of the universe, not a single step of the destroyer, Time, but is made subservient to some ulterior purpose of reproduction, and the circle of creation and destruction is eternal." (47)

It is no coincidence that French quotes from a pamphlet from Mount Auburn cemetery. Situated along the Charles River near Boston, Mt. Auburn became the prototype for the "Rural Cemetery Movement." (Also sometimes referred to as the "Park Cemetery Movement," or, after the Civil War, "the Lawn Cemetery." The idea, novel at the time, was to arrange cemeteries as park-like environments of solace and reflection. Ashland's own cemeteries, including Mountain View where the Elks Lodge has its lots, all follow this model.



above: detail from memorial to departed Elks now in Ashland's Mountain View Cemetery

left: Mount Auburn

Even the word "cemetery" was initially unfamiliar in the decades leading up to the Civil War. As Susan-Mary Grant reports, the cemetery was:

a new type of burial place designed not only to be a decent place of interment, but to serve as a cultural institution as well. 'Deliberately invoking [ancient] Athens' famous *Kerameikos*, antebellum Americans not only repositioned places of burial, but popularized the term *cemetery*, fully cognizant of its etymological roots as a "sleeping place" or dormitory. Furnished with guidebooks, both locals and visitors were encouraged to admire these new "Gardens of Graves," and to derive spiritual solace from them. (79)

In the wake of the Civil War, these ideas became incorporated into the design and popular understandings of the new national cemeteries built for soldiers who died far from their homes. In particular, the Greek democrat Pericles' funeral oration for the Athenian war dead helped citizens make sense of the sacrifices made by soldiers killed during the great national struggle. As historian Gary Willis argues, when Abraham Lincoln gave his justly famous address at the dedication of the Gettysburg cemetery, Pericles' oration was an unspoken backdrop, and the cemetery itself was part of new, larger development in burial arrangements. Since many Elks were Union veterans, and would have been receptive, and probably familiar with, these trends. It is no surprise, then, that many of the new rural cemeteries had an "Elks Rest" set aside for B.P.O.E. members.

Attitudes about death itself shifted along with changes in how the dead were commemorated. In post Civil War popular culture, death and the afterlife were increasingly portrayed as something familiar, even domestic. Published in 1868, the year that the Elks were founded, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps Ward's wildly popular novel, *The Gates Ajar*, describes heaven to a grief stricken sister who has lost her brother in the war. Heaven, in Phelps' account, turns out to resemble Kansas, complete with houses, privacy, and familiar social conventions.



death as home-like

Parody works best when its object is ubiquitous, and Mark Twain satirized *The Gates Ajar* in his *Extract from Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven*. Literate Elks would certainly have known *The Gates Ajar* and its sentiments.

What is most remarkable about the Elks, however, is not that they were concerned to honor and commemorate the dead when the order was founded, but that they have faithfully continued to remember and honor the departed. Some have argued contemporary American culture is distinctive for its *avoidance* of death. If so, the Elks are welcome and salutary exception.

—Warren Hedges, B.P.O.E. #944 Ashland, Oregon

References

- French, Stanley. "The Cemetery as Cultural Institution." *American Quarterly* 26 (1974).
- Grant, Susan-Mary. "Patriot Graves." *American 19th Century History* 5.3 (Fall 2004).
- Nicholson, James R, et al. *History of the Order of Elks: 1868-1988*. Rev. Ed. New York: BPOE, 1992.
- Vinovskis, Maris A. *Toward a Social History of the American Civil War*. NY: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Willis, Gary. *Lincoln at Gettysburg*. NY: Simon & Schuster, 1992.