

Way We Were
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Who, who, who are the Owls?

*Here's to the man whose hand
Is firm when he holds your own
Like a grip of steel that makes you feel
You are not in the world alone
The Owls' Toast*

Fraternal organizations have been around for much longer than many of us are aware. They've existed as far back as ancient Greece and the rule of the Roman Empire. The word fraternity is rooted in the Latin *frater* meaning brother. They were organized as brotherhoods, both outspoken and formal as well as sometimes secret; they were groupings of men who held similar values, education and social connections. All across the United States these clubs formed and to this day they hold a very strong grasp over many communities.

Park City is no different. Many of these organizations were formed as a way to protect the families of miners; if anything were to happen to the miners, the order would take care of the widow and children financially. It was a common occurrence for an organization to build a house for the family of a deceased member and to provide them with every comfort necessary. For Park City residents, part of the draw to join these groups was the strong sense of family and community they held, and the desire to provide for their own families.

One such group was the Order of Owls. They were formed in South Bend, Indiana in 1904 by John W. Talbot and a small group of his friends and associates. The mission of the Owls was to "assist its members in business and in employment, provide help to the widows and orphans or the deceased members and to enjoy mutual fellowship with one another." The order was a secret organization, using both rituals and passwords were just some of the ways they kept it quiet. Each local lodge was known as a Nest. By the 1920s the Owls had over 600,000 members in 2,148 Nests throughout the country.

Per an article dated November 11, 1912 the *Park Record* advertised the coming of the Owls, "Another secret order is about to be instituted in our city. This time it is to be the Order of Owls...It pays sick, accident, disability and death benefits, teaches optimism and believes in smiles and good cheer. G.A. Walker and H.C. Gilmore are the organizers and are now busily engaged in securing a charter membership." For a membership fee of five dollars, a Park City man could insure that his family would be provided for long after his death. This, as with many other fraternal organizations, was a great pull, and for that reason many of these organizations flourished. To this day, they can be found dotted around the community. Unfortunately for the Order of Owls, it no longer has a Nest here in Park City. In fact, the numbers have dropped immensely and in the late 1990s there were less than five thousand members in only five states.

The Park City Historical Society & Museum is celebrating 30 years of preserving, protecting, and promoting Park City's history and heritage.



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Credit: Park City Historical Society & Museum, Kendall Webb Collection

Caption: A local poster advertising the family values that the Order of Owls held, date unknown.