

Ethnic Societies

An American Tradition with Old World Roots

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Imagine. You are helping your mother gather your three brothers and all your belongings around you. It is almost time to disembark from the ship that has brought you to Ellis Island where your father, Innocenzo Rizzo, is waiting to greet you. You are thirteen years old and you have not seen your father since you were seven. Your father left your hometown of Castrogiovanni [pronounced: Kaw stro joe vahnee], Sicily, in 1906 to join other townsmen already living in South Philadelphia, the neighborhood where the majority of Italian immigrants settled. These men had helped him find his first job. In 1912, in order to pool their resources, your father and other men from Castrogiovanni formed a mutual association called the Societa` Italiana di Mutuo Soccorso Napoleone Colaianni fra Castrogiovanesi e Provincia [The Napoleone Colajanni Italian Mutual Aid Society of Castrogiovanesi and [the] Province]. Your father wrote many letters mentioning how Lodge members socialize together in the little free time they have when they are not working. They also help one another adjust to life in America. In fact, in the last letter your father wrote to your mother, he said that Lodge members had helped him find the rented house that is all set up for your family's arrival.

Innocenzo Rizzo was a real immigrant who settled in South Philadelphia. According to Ellis Island records, Rizzo left Castrogiovanni in 1906 out of the port of Naples on the ship, the *Princess Irene*. He was thirty-two years old and married. We do not know if he had children. In the Society's by-laws that are in the archive at The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Rizzo's name is listed as one of the founding members. While the details of the arrival scenario above are invented, the description is similar to arrival stories of actual immigrant families that have been collected. The *Napoleone Colajanni* Mutual Aid Society was established in South Philadelphia in 1912. According to the society's constitution, its purpose was "to encourage and foster among its members a social and civic spirit, and to promote and propagate among its members fraternal principles for the relief of its members and their families in case of sickness, death and distress; and to accumulate a fund from dues and contributions of the members..."

American self-help societies have existed since the eighteenth century. In Philadelphia alone, every major ethnic group had its own friendly society to offer advice, protection, lodging, and financial aid to new arrivals. For instance, the Welsh established the Welsh Society in 1729, the Germans founded the German Society in 1764, and the Irish founded the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick in 1771.

By the late nineteenth century, with millions of Americans moving from farm to factory and new immigrants arriving, people were left without the family, neighborly, and religious ties they had relied on previously. Out of necessity, the numbers of these societies mushroomed as people looked for new sources of support. Rather than providing charity, a source of shame for many, these groups offered aid that grew out of the concept of reciprocity—that is, people helping one another. Since group members were usually from similar ethnic backgrounds and similar occupations, their goal of helping one another grew out of the knowledge that any of them could be in a similar needy circumstance at any time.

Until the 1890s, older American societies such as the Freemasons or Knights of Pythias welcomed people from different backgrounds. By the turn of the twentieth century, however, a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment and racist attitudes created a bias against allowing new immigrants and African Americans to join these established fraternals. In order to meet their social, psychological, and economic needs, immigrants and African Americans were forced to form their own mutual aid associations, fraternal groups, and social clubs. These societies provided a cushion of security and comfort in the company of people who shared similar values and beliefs. Let us look at the history of American fraternalism and the development of the ethnic fraternal tradition in relationship to it.

For new immigrants and African Americans, the primary associations they formed were the mutual-benefit societies that paid accident, illness, and death insurance to its members. Many joined them in order to be assured of having enough money for a decent burial. Providing economic help, although it was often less than one thousand dollars, was particularly important. Before the 1930s, when the New Deal programs and Social Security (1935) came into existence, federal and state governments provided minimal assistance for anyone in need (people living at poverty level, who had lost their jobs, or who were disabled either by birth or accident). People relied on their own families and friends, members of their churches, and organizations they themselves organized for emotional support and financial aid. For those with no one to turn to, there were two choices, both supported by tax dollars. One could go live in the poorhouse or apply to an elected official called an “overseer of the poor” to ask for help. Neither option was very appealing. The help was small and requesting aid carried an aspect of shame that people tried to avoid. While protection from poverty was an important function of these organizations, they also played a key role in helping the community define its identity and provided social, educational, and sometimes political benefits. Because many mutual associations were formed around villages of origin, this meant that people had connections before they arrived. These ties worked in the new immigrants’ favor since those who had arrived previously helped to locate jobs for newcomers as well as help them adjust to the American way of life.

Although these associations shared similarities no matter what ethnic or religious affiliation, they also differed in some ways depending on the particular situation of the group. For instance, the African American fraternals, in particular, devoted resources to education and job training. This fact is not surprising when we realize that until the 1960s, when the federal government established laws forbidding forced segregation, black children, especially in the South, were required to attend

black only schools. These schools were notoriously underfunded and understaffed, so that black children were at a disadvantage from the very beginning of their educational life even when compared with white children who lived in the same county.

One of the earliest societies formed to aid new immigrants and the oldest Irish organization in the United States is the Society of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick (founded on St. Patrick's Day in 1771 in Philadelphia). All the founding members were natives of Ireland or sons of immigrants and almost all were wealthy merchants. From 1792 to 1892, it was renamed the Hibernian Society for the Relief of Immigrants. A committee of the Society met all passenger ships arriving in port and assisted needy immigrant arrivals. They provided a variety of aid including helping immigrants find employment, paying for housing, clothing, and railroad fares, giving cash, and even aiding immigrants to return to Ireland. In 1847, when the Great Famine hit Ireland, the society cancelled its annual dinner and urged its members to donate as much money as they could to aid the famine victims. By the end of the nineteenth century, the society began helping any victims of disasters and abuse, both nationally and internationally. The society continued to help new immigrants into the twentieth century. Today it works to promote understanding between Ireland and the United States. The Friendly Sons was unique as a model of an early ethnic organization that provided charity. As we mentioned above, with the mass wave of immigration in the mid-nineteenth century through the early decades of the twentieth, most new immigrant groups formed local grass-roots beneficial associations. Oftentimes, these associations might have as few as fifteen members when immigrants from the same European village banded together in order to provide sick and death benefits. These lodges did not follow standard contractual practices, but instead depended on an informal system of payments based on the personal ties of the members.

For instance, at the end of the nineteenth century, one hundred thousand Irish immigrants lived in Philadelphia and they formed many societies representing the counties in Ireland from which they had emigrated. Groups such as the Mayo Association (<http://www.mayoassoc.com/>), the Donegal Society (<http://www.philadonegal.com>), and the Catholic Sons of Derry, among others, had a nationalist and religious focus. They remained active into the 1990s. Perhaps the most controversial society with political ties was the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH) (<http://www.aoh.com/>). Begun as a secret society in Ireland as a defense against repression, it formed an American branch in New York in 1836, giving it the distinction of being the oldest Catholic lay organization in the United States. In the mid-1870s, a conspiracy theory developed that the Hibernians were linked with the Molly Maguires, the group that organized resistance to the mining operators' unfair practices in the anthracite mining region. This association of the AOH tarnished its reputation and depleted its membership. It survived, however, and by 1908, membership in Pennsylvania was higher than in any other state.

By the early decades of the 20th century, most local lodges gradually became affiliated with the national fraternal societies, such as the Order Sons of Italy, the Polish National Alliance, and the Workmen's Circle. The Circle was a Jewish fraternal organization founded in 1892 in New York City that became national in 1900. The

national fraternal societies became both platforms and stepping stones for many of the small businessmen and other leaders in the ethnic communities. With the power that the national fraternal societies held in the ethnic communities, they became involved in internal community conflicts. Conflicts often centered on issues of politics and religion, with societies forgetting the economic needs of the ordinary people who were their members. A classic case of this internal division occurred between the two Polish national organizations. The Polish Roman Catholic Union emphasized religion over Polish nationalism while the Polish National Alliance, open to all regardless of their religious beliefs, stressed the importance of a Polish state.

There were mutual associations in the immigrants' homelands, but one clear way American versions differed was in the emphasis placed on preserving cultural heritage. In fact, some national fraternal societies formed with cultural preservation as a primary goal. Dr. Vincent Sellaro founded The Order Sons of Italy in America in New York City in 1905 explicitly "to preserve the cultural heritage of Italy and share it with all Americans and to promote the image of Italian Americans through involvement in community, charitable, educational, patriotic, and youth activities." At the same time that immigrants might embrace their new American homeland, they often feared that their children were losing Old World cultural values and traditions that they held dear. To counteract this, the societies formed youth branches with activities that appealed to younger members. These youth branches often had sports teams, dances, and their own newspapers. *Oddiel Mladez*, a primary source document included in this lesson, was the publication put out by the Slovak Educational Juvenile Section of the Slavonic Evangelical Union.

The national fraternal societies constantly sought ways to increase their membership. As we have seen, one way was by forming youth groups to attract a new generation of members. They also formed women's auxiliaries and expanded the sponsored activities to include adult sporting activities, social affairs, and national conventions. National fraternal societies also published their own newspapers. The press was important in that it kept all members informed about the activities and news of its members nationwide as well as keeping members abreast of news from the homeland.

While the importance of fraternal societies in ethnic community life cannot be disputed, their significance should not be overestimated. Although exact statistics are difficult to assess, we do know that a large number of immigrants and their descendants never joined a mutual association or a fraternal society and never read their publications. In terms of providing economic help, the associations never matched the help that family and kin provided. Also, the attitudes of the ethnic press and the stance the national fraternal societies took on political issues often did not reflect the feelings of their ordinary members.

After World War II, as the first wave of immigrants aged and died and their children wanted to Americanize, membership in the old fraternal societies declined and many closed their doors or merged with larger national orders. By the 1970s, with an increase in interest in ethnic identity, some of these organizations experienced a renewal and new organizations were formed. For instance, in Philadelphia during the mid-1970s, the Ancient Order of Hibernians attracted younger men and their

families. It again formed a women's auxiliary and a junior division. The group fostered interest in Irish culture, Irish dancing, and doing charitable work. Italian American residents who moved out of their old ethnic enclave in the neighborhood of Germantown in Philadelphia during the 1970s formed the Germantown Girls' Reunion as a way to maintain old friendships and to have an occasion to reminisce together.

After World War II and especially since 1965, large numbers of immigrants from Africa, Asia, and Latin America have settled in Pennsylvania, changing the populations of many cities and towns. Some of these new arrivals, such as Chinese and some Latinos (Latinos are people coming from countries in Latin America), had earlier roots in Pennsylvania dating to the 19th century. Africans, originally brought here as slaves, had an even longer presence in the state. These groups had established mutual aid organizations when they first arrived. For instance, in Philadelphia, Spanish speakers from Cuba and Puerto Rico began the Spanish American Fraternal Benevolent Association in 1908. It was still active during the 1960s. It was, however, only with the arrival of large numbers of Puerto Ricans after World War II that the Latino community took on its present shape. In order to deal with problems and issues that arose in a way defined by the community itself, various fraternal and other social organizations banded together to form the Council of Spanish Speaking Organizations (*Concilio*) in 1962. The goals of this umbrella group were to serve as a liaison between the Spanish-speaking community and the rest of the city, to strengthen existing Latino organizations, and to create new programs.

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