When one analyzes the workings of Slovak-American communities, one quickly realizes that they consisted of three very important components: parish churches, newspapers, and fraternal-benefit societies. The last-named, in fact, appeared first among American Slovaks and often took the lead in establishing the parishes and newspapers. Since almost half of the 619,866 Slovaks who lived in the United States in 1920 resided in Pennsylvania, it is not surprising that more than half of their national fraternals also appeared in this state. This article will outline the origins, growth, functions, rituals, and eventual decline of Slovak fraternal-benefit societies in Pennsylvania.

When Slovaks started to immigrate to the United States in large numbers in search of work in the 1880s, they found this country singularly devoid of social services. If an immigrant fell ill, had an accident, or died, no one gave him or his family any support or compensation. Therefore, the pioneers quickly concluded that they had to help themselves, if they were to survive in America’s capitalist society.

Whether they remembered fraternal-benefit societies or craft guilds that had existed in Hungary, or copied societies that arose among other immigrants in America, Slovaks in the United States established fifty local fraternal-benefit societies in the 1880s, twenty-five of them in Pennsylvania. By 1890 these local fraternals began to federate into national bodies, and about half were headquartered in Pennsylvania.

Between 1890 and 1918, five large and three small national fraternals appeared among Slovaks in Pennsylvania. The first, and most important, was the National Slovak Society, with its headquarters in Pittsburgh. Founded on February 15, 1890, its goal was to unite Slovaks of all religious persuasions into a national fraternal that would provide them with accident, illness, and burial insurance, while at the same time championing the right of Slovaks in their homeland, the Kingdom of Hungary, to home-rule or independence. By 1920 it had 39,473 members.

Religious, and other, differences, however, kept the Slovaks from uniting into one national fraternal. On September 4, 1890, Roman Catholic Slovaks in Cleveland established the First Catholic Slovak Union, and a little later Slovaks of other religious persuasions followed suit. Thus, in 1893 Slovak Lutherans created the Slovak Evangelical Union in Freeland, Pennsylvania, and in 1901 Slovak Calvinists (Reformed) set up the Slovak Calvin Presbyterian Union in Mount Carmel, Pennsylvania. By 1920 the former had 7,821 members and the latter almost one thousand.
Since Slovak men established the first fraternals only for themselves, their wives soon created parallel organizations. Thus, in 1891, a group of Slovak women established the 'Zivena' Slovak National Women's Benefit Society in New York City; it copied the National Slovak Society. In 1892, Slovak Catholic women in Cleveland created the First Catholic Slovak Ladies' Union, and in 1898, Slovak Lutheran women set up the Slovak Evangelical Women's Union in Pittsburgh. By 1920 the latter had 3,328 members.

Indeed, even regional fraternals split along gender lines. Thus, after a group of men had established the Pennsylvania Slovak Catholic Union in Wilkes-Barre in 1893, a group of women in 1898 created the Ladies Pennsylvania Slovak Catholic Union in Hazleton. In 1920 the men had 21,612, and the women 12,771 members.

Finally, personal rivalries and jealousies led to the establishment of two small fraternals in Pennsylvania before World War I. One was the Independent National Slovak Society, headquartered in Pittsburgh, and the other was the Slovak Catholic Brotherhood, with its home base in Braddock. Since neither of these fraternals could attract more than two thousand members, they were later absorbed by the much larger fraternals mentioned earlier. As mentioned above, the main purpose of fraternal-benefit societies was to provide accident, illness, or burial insurance to their members. In the early years of their existence, the fraternals generally charged fifty cents a month in dues, and paid accident, illness, or death claims, depending upon their resources. Later, they came to be regulated by the states in which they were located, and the dues paid and the compensation provided was standardized according to state rules and regulations.

Besides providing insurance for their members, local lodges also served many community functions. Almost all Slovak parishes, of all religious denominations, were founded by fraternal-benefit societies. Furthermore, these fraternals controlled their members' behavior by fining them for such spiritual transgressions as drunkenness, swearing in public, or missing certain religious services. In this way they helped to "Americanize" their members.

At their monthly meetings the local fraternals promoted American democracy as practiced through their by-laws. The president opened the meeting with a prayer (or a salute in secular societies), the secretary read the minutes of the previous meeting and the names of the members in good standing, while the treasurer collected the dues. After this the lodge dealt with payments made to ill or maimed members, or to families of the deceased. It also initiated new members, made loans to those who were deserving, and contributed to other lodges or churches which merited their support. The treasurer and financial secretary would report on the lodge's finances, as would the overseers. After dealing with any other business, the meeting would close with a prayer (or another salute).

In the early years the lodges had their own distinctive uniforms, banners, and badges. The uniforms were worn on festive occasions (such as the blessing of a church), or else to funerals. Indeed, every lodge member was expected to attend the funeral of a "brother" (or "sister"). The lodge president might even own a horse, which he would ride during a special procession. Often, the lodges also had bands, which would play music appropriate to the occasion. Lodge badges usually had two sides. The standard side would be in some bright color, and would be worn on regular occasions. The obverse would be black, and would be worn during funeral
processions. The badges of the officers, starting with the president, would be larger than the badges of regular members. The lodge banner usually consisted of the Slovak tricolor (horizontal bars of white, blue and red), with the name of the lodge sewn across it.\(^{14}\)

The larger lodges often built "Slovak Halls," either alone, or in concert with another lodge. Here they would hold their monthly meetings, stage plays, hold gymnastic events, open a bar and, perhaps, a bowling alley, and generally provide an agreeable place for community social activities.\(^{15}\) Almost every center of Slovak community life in the United States had such a "Slovak Hall," and many still have them today.

At the national level, many Slovak fraternals also published their own newspapers, usually weeklies. Among the Pennsylvania-based fraternals, the National Slovak Society published the Ndrodne noviny (National News, 1911- ), the Pennsylvania Slovak Catholic Union the Bratstvo (Brotherhood, 1899-1990), the Ladies' Pennsylvania Slovak Catholic Union the Zornicka (Morning Star, 1941- ), the Slovak Evangelical Union the Slovensky hidsnik (Slovak Herald, 1900-1962; since then United Lutheran), and the Slovak Calvin Presbyterian Union the Slovensky Kalvin (Slovak Calvinist, 1907-1962; since then simply The Calvin). While some of these newspapers have since folded, or have become monthlies, they served their members well by providing essential information about the activities of their lodges, their members, and the Slovak community at large.\(^{16}\)

Even though Slovak fraternal-benefit societies provided essential services to their communities in the early years of their existence, they began to decline in the second half of the 20th century because they began to lose their raison d'etre. The Great Depression of the 1930s made it difficult for unemployed Slovaks to keep paying their lodge dues, and many fraternals lost members as a result. Furthermore, the social-welfare legislation passed by the United States government as a part of its "New Deal" made many lodge self-help functions redundant. Then, too, the advent of television and spectator sports in the 1950s and 1960s made lodge social functions and entertainment less attractive. As a result, only the National Slovak Society, and the Ladies Pennsylvania Slovak Catholic Union, among the Pennsylvania-based fraternals, are still in existence, and their membership has declined precipitously. The other fraternals have merged into larger bodies and have either lost their Slovak identity, or their corporate existence. Thus, the Slovak Calvin Presbyterian Union is now the Presbyterian Beneficial Union, and the two Slovak Lutheran fraternals, which merged into one body in 1960, call themselves simply the United Lutheran Society.\(^{17}\)

All Slovak fraternals, whether Pennsylvania-based or not, face a struggle for survival. If they are to survive, they will have to find new reasons for their existence. Meanwhile, they have left us an interesting and colorful legacy of one ethnic group's attempts to deal with American society through collective action.

ENDNOTES


4. Stefan Vesely, "Prve slovenske spolky v Spojenych statoch Amenckych," Slovdec v zahrani, 4-5 (Martin: Matica slovenska, 1979),