

History



A group of early Hibernians, Coaldale PA

The Origins of the AOH

The month of January has always been a time of reflection; of remembering the past and taking those experiences and looking toward the future. So it is appropriate to look at the history of our own organization: The Ancient Order of Hibernians.

The earliest roots of the AOH are often traced to the “Defenders” of Rory Og O’Moore. The Defenders were organized in 1565 in response to a proclamation making it a crime punishable by death to be a Catholic priest in Elizabeth I’s occupied Ireland. The Defenders under the motto of “Friendship, Unity and Christian Charity” protected the Catholic clergy and ensured that Irish Catholics could practice their faith in the face of oppression.

As the years passed, fresh persecutions gave rise to new secret societies dedicated to protecting Irish people and their freedoms. In the 1760’s the White Boys, so named for the color of the shirts they wore, were formed to protect native Irish Farmers being evicted by the landlords. Another society, the Ribbonmen, formed from an alliance of the Defenders and the White Boys to combat the growing persecutions of the Orangemen. The Ribbonmen were so named because they wore ribbons of green (denoting unity) and red (denoting the blood they were willing to sacrifice).

When Irish Immigrants came to America, they found many of the same practices of hatred and prejudice they had left in Ireland. Despite the liberties won by the American Revolution, New York still had a “test act” which required all public office holders to deny the authority of the Pope. When the parishioners of St. Peter’s, the oldest, and at that time only, Catholic Church in New York, successfully petitioned for the repeal of the Test Act, angry mobs attempted to attack St. Peter’s and were only held at bay by the

efforts of the Irish American community. As Irish emigration increased so too did nativist bigotry: St. Mary’s RC Church in New York was burned to the ground in 1831; in 1832, 57 Irish railroad workers suffering from cholera near Malvern, Pennsylvania were refused medical attention, died and were dumped in an unmarked mass grave; in 1834, the Ursaline Convent in Massachusetts was burned down. Several anti-Catholic Immigrant societies would eventually come together to form the “American Party”, more commonly referred to as “The Know Nothings” after the standard response members would give when asked about their activities.

It is not unnatural that the Irish American Community turned to their past for an answer to this persecution. In 1836, members of Pennsylvania’s Schuylkill County Hibernian Benevolent Society traveled to New York’s St Patrick’s Day parade. While there they met with a group of New York Activists from the St. Patrick’s Fraternal Society to discuss a coordinated response to this persecution. It was from this meeting that the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH) was born, the founding of its first Division at New York’s St James Church on May 4, 1836, taking the motto of “Friendship, Unity and Christian Charity” of the original Defenders.

As the AOH spread, overt attacks on Catholic Churches and Irish Americans declined. Finally, as a result of the brave sacrifices of Irish Americans on the Battle Fields of the Civil War, some of the more extreme prejudices against Irish Americans abated somewhat. This allowed the Ancient Order of Hibernians to concentrate efforts in other areas. Welfare committees helped Irish Americans find jobs and provided much needed financial and emotional support. The AOH promoted Irish Culture and “kept the tradition alive” while at the same time fighting

Did you Know that....

- Hibernian is derived from the Latin name the Romans gave Ireland, Hibernia
- In the late 1890’s, Catholic University of America became the first school in the United States to grant graduate degrees in Irish Studies. They did so thanks to a gift of \$50,000 from the Ancient Order of Hibernians, a tremendous sum at the time.
- The burning of the Ursaline Convent in Massachusetts was the result of a fiery anti-Irish/anti-Catholic sermon given by Lyman Beecher, the father of Harriet Beecher Stowe the author of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin”
- Hibernians protecting the Church in America is not strictly a 19th Century mission of the AOH. In 1992, when, at the request of Cardinal O’Connor, over 1000 Hibernians stood guard over St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York when political activists threatened to disrupt the celebration of mass.
- The original seminary for the Archdiocese of New York was to be located in Nyack. It was burned under “suspicious circumstances” before it’s completion in 1833.

the caricature of “the Stage Irishman.” The AOH along with German American Organizations fought for a more diverse curricula in schools; one that recognized the contributions of all Americans irrespective of heritage. Finally, the AOH did not forget the land of their birth, giving aid and support to the cause of Irish freedom.

We as Hibernians can be justly proud of the organization we belong to, but it would be wrong to consider the challenges that earlier Hibernians faced as “a thing of the past.” Our faith today still comes under attack both physically as in the recent vandalism at St. Zita’s and, more ominously, intellectually through the media in movies such as “The Golden Compass.” Certainly in the current rough economic times there is a need to help our fellow Irish Americans find employment. The caricature of the “Stage Irishman” is still with us, surprising so in an age of “Political Correctness”. Despite great progress in bringing diversity to our school curricula, the contributions of Irish Americans are still largely ignored. Great progress has been made in the peace process in Northern Ireland, but much remains to secure a unified Ireland through all peaceful means.

As we enter into 2009 we as Hibernians should all look back with pride on our heritage and history of the organization we belong to, and dedicate ourselves to keep faith with those who came before by in Friendship, Unity and Christian Charity, working to address the needs of Irish Americans today.