



Elks Emblem

History and Meaning

At a meeting held on the 2nd of February, 1868, presided over by Charles A. Vivian, George F. McDonald motioned that a committee be appointed to organize “the Jolly Corks” as a benevolent and fraternal lodge and to select a new name.³ While looking for inspiration, they were most impressed by a fine elk’s head with spreading antlers at Barnum’s American Museum, and a work of Natural History at the Cooper Institute Library that described elk attributes worthy of being cultivated by members of the new Order: The Elk is a distinctively American animal that habitually lives in herds and doesn’t prey upon other species. The largest of our native quadrupeds, it is yet fleet footed and graceful. Its perception is keen; and while usually gentle, even timorous, it is strong and valiant in defense of its own. The title ‘Elk’ was chosen because, in the words of Brother George F. McDonald, the Elks are urged to become “strong of limb, fleet of foot, quick and keen of perception; quick to see or hear the sign or cry of distress, timorous of doing wrong and fleet of foot to aid the unfortunate.”³

The Elks Order was formally organized on February 16th, 1868, in New York City, only a few years after the close of the Civil War, under the corporate name of The Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the United States of America.

“A representation of the majestic head of the male, with its spreading antlers, was adopted as the first badge of the Order; and it is still the most conspicuous element of its fraternal emblem.”²

The Eleven O’clock Toast was a beloved informal tradition. After the Grand Lodge was formed in January, 1871, it provided that this ceremonial be observed during lodge sessions. At 11 P.M., the Exalted Ruler recites this toast: “My Brothers, you have heard the tolling of eleven strokes. This is to impress upon you that with us the hour of eleven has a tender significance. Wherever an Elk may roam, whatever his lot in life may be, when this hour falls upon the dial of night, the great heart of Elkdom swells and throbs. It is the golden hour of recollection, the homecoming of those who wander, the mystic roll call of those who will come no more. Living or dead, an Elk is never forgotten, never forsaken. Morning and Noon may pass him by, the light of day sink heedlessly in the West, but ere the shadows of Midnight shall fall, the chimes of memory will be pealing forth the friendly message: ‘To our absent Brothers.’”

“The clock tolling the eleventh hour is part of the B.P.O.E. official emblem, and is placed directly behind the representation of an elk’s head in the emblem of the order.”¹

At the 1903 Grand Lodge session in Baltimore, a committee recommended that “the official emblem of the order shall be the combination of the antlers, the letters B.P.O.E., and the dial showing the hour of eleven o’clock.¹ At the 1908 Grand Lodge session, the James M. Challiss Commission (1907 – 1909) reported that the Elks head and antlers was the recognized emblem that had been used by the Order on its stationery, stamped on the cover of its constitution, as well as on printed reports and proceedings, and incorporated in the seal of the Grand Lodge for upwards of forty years. The committee recommended that the Grand Lodge adopt an official version of this emblem.

“That the combination of a dial showing the hour of eleven with a white face and red Roman numerals circumscribed by a blue circle containing the initials B.P.O.E. on which dial and circle shall rest an elk’s head and antlers which shall be surmounted by a red star, be adopted as the official emblem of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the United States of America and that the same be patented.”¹

At the Grand Lodge session of 1909 the Commission followed up on its duty to secure a patent upon the official emblem adopted at the previous Grand Lodge session.

“It therefore took steps to secure a patent upon the design as the official emblem in the name of Frederick Hughes, original designer, for the benefit of the Grand Lodge. A patent then was issued upon the design as originally adopted by Frederick Hughes, the patentee, and was by Frederick Hughes immediately without compensation assigned to the Grand Lodge.”¹

¹ ‘History of the Order of Elks 1868 – 1988’ by James R. Nicholson, Lee A. Donaldson, Raymond C. Dobson and George B. Klein (Revised edition). This history was published by the Grand Secretary’s office of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the United States of America.

² ‘An Authentic History of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks’ by Charles Edward Ellis, published in 1910.

³ History of the B.P.O. Elks Order by GER Meade D. Detweiler, published in 1898.