

## Small Towne Short Stories

*Elks Lodge #1475 and the 1888 Cultural Center*

By Alma Fausto



Leland Fischbach remembers when his life in Orange began. "I called up my mother in 1950 and said 'Mom, I know where I'm going to live.'

Leland, now 84 years old, was a Northern California boy working in the forestry and later fire department. The firefighting brought him to Orange where he fought fires in the city's department for more than 40 years.

Soon after settling in the city he joined Elks Lodge #1475. It was 1952 and he wanted to be part of an organization that helped others and played a big role in the community.

Leland has the second oldest registration number at the lodge, owned by the Elks since 1934, and says it hasn't changed much since he first joined.

He remembers the land around the lodge building. The core buildings in The Plaza had been built but there were still plenty of trees.

"You could smell the orange blossoms for miles," he said.

That's one of the differences Leland sees when he arrives at the lodge these days. "The trees came down and more buildings went up."

He says the lodge, on the corner of North Orange Street and East Chapman Avenue, looks the same save for some slight architectural changes. The lodge was remodeled in the early 1970s with much of the labor donated by its members. The building had been constructed in 1925 and was once the tallest building in downtown Orange.

Leland had stopped going to the lodge after a few years and later returned at the behest of his wife who has since passed away.

"The women do so much for the Elks," Leland said. "And we've got a lot of younger people doing a lot. If it wasn't for them, this would have died off already."

The Elks began admitting women in the early 2000s, which grew its membership. The membership also got younger; the average age is 57. It continued to grow and currently has more than 1400 members.

\* \* \*

Once you enter Elks Lodge #1475, you notice the wood paneling in the entrance parlor and walls full of awards for the organization, photographs of members past and present, and thank-you plaques from police agencies, scout troops and high school teams. You also notice various antlers, the symbol of the elk: figures of them, murals dedicated to them and ornaments of them, adorn several walls around the building.

Craig Coleman, the lodge secretary, navigates the labyrinth within the second and third floors of the lodge.

"It's a big space, kind of a maze," he says as he walks through each room—turning on lights at every doorway and sharing a brief history of artifacts along the way.

The building was constructed by the Independent Order of Odd Fellows. But when the Depression hit and the Odd Fellows couldn't find tenants for the storefronts of the building, they were deep in debt and lost their new building to the bank.

The Elks first rented the building and later bought it in 1942 for \$15,000. It was a great deal considering the Odd Fellows had invested \$100,000 in its construction.

"The Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks is the name," Craig said with a laugh.

Today it's much like it was during its roots: a group grounded in philanthropy and community. Several local politicians, police officers and other civic leaders are members as were the movers and shakers of young Orange. Its current membership is made up of much of the same people.



Soon into Craig's recount of the lodge's membership requirements a man entered the club room.

"This is our Exalted Ruler Walt McBride," Craig says and explains the title. McBride is head elk.

The 77-year-old has an easy smile and hearty laugh. His white hair is combed back and he's got a tattoo on his forearm. Walt is at the lodge several times a week and takes pride in the accomplishments of their organization.

"It's not about what the organization can do for you," Walt said. "It's what it does for other people. That's how it started."

"People get involved and somehow all their friends end up being Elks whether it means their friends join too or they end up spending their time with the members they meet," he said.

From there Craig and Walt lead the way into a sprawling 150-seat dining room where dances, events and fundraisers take place. It's a generous sized banquet hall.

At one point the trek leads to a narrow, wooden staircase no more than 3-feet wide. It leads to a small space, no bigger than a bathroom, with two rectangular windows that look down upon another room below.

"These are the projection windows," Craig said. "From here they set out the projector or the spotlight."

The 1920s spotlight is tucked away in the corner and still works. But when looking down through the windows you're met with a majestic room—reminiscent of a political forum.

The first thing you see is green—it's on the carpet, in the drapes, and every theater seat lining the sides of the room. The auditorium-like chairs point toward the center of the room.

"This is where initiations happen," Craig said.

Large antlers rest on the center podium. The words *Charity, Justice, Brotherly Love* and *Fidelity* hang on the wall above where more than 100 of the men and women gather every Wednesday to decide on how their membership can serve the city.

\* \* \*

There's another story after leaving the lodge.

Just a few steps away from the Elk's entrance is the Chapman Antique Mall at 201 East Chapman Avenue. It's inhabited the building since 2002 and is one of several



antique shops still located in The Plaza. The Chapman Antique Mall is one of two storefronts in the lodge building.

And more than 90 years after the building was constructed, 1888's Cultural Center will inhabit the second storefront at 115 North Orange Street, contributing to a long history of community-based businesses including a print shop, barbershop and the Gospel Hall of the Seventh Day Baptists.

---

Alma Fausto is a reporter at the Orange County Register where she covers crime and breaking news. When not reporting on grisly crimes, Alma spends her time reading and visiting bookstores everywhere. She is also board member of the OC Press Club. Alma has a Master's in journalism from Columbia University in New York City. Before city life, she studied and reported in California's rural Central Valley, receiving a bachelor's at UC Merced where she was editor of the student newspaper. And way before that she was born and raised in OC and now calls Costa Mesa home.

This Small Towne Short Story was compiled through the published works and interviews with Orange County historian Phil Brigandi, and Elks Lodge members Craig Coleman, Leland Fischbach, and Walt McBride.

Subscribe to [\*The Paper Trail\*](#), our free subscription newsletter, to receive our monthly installments of Small Towne Short Stories.

The Orange Elks Lodge #1475 located at 221 East Chapman Avenue in Orange, California, 1965. A furniture store occupied the ground level, and the Elks meeting rooms and lodge hall on the upper levels of the building. The building was constructed in 1925 for the Orange Odd Fellows but they lost their building in foreclosure, and the Elks took over at the end of 1925. Courtesy of the Orange Community Historical Society Collection, Orange Public Library, Orange, CA.

