

Fraternals: Lions International

We began a series wherein the “smaller” fraternal categories are examined (“smaller” compared to, say, Elks). First, we take a look at Lions International. I believe it falls in the “smaller” classification here, because, although it is the largest service organization in the world, the number of existing covers doesn’t match that status (no pun intended). At least, none of the numbers I’ve seen to date are very large.

Lions are members of community service clubs, dedicated to the idea that the men and women who live in a community are in the best position to know who needs help and why. More than 44,500 strong, these local clubs boast a current membership of 1.4 million, serving in more than 191 countries and areas. The association is both non-political and non-sectarian.

Founded in Chicago, Illinois, in 1917, by insurance agent Melvin Jones and others, Lions Clubs International has ever since offered business and professional people a way of sharing their success by helping those less fortunate than themselves. The association became international when a club was formed in Canada in 1920. A highlight of its early history was a speech at the 1925 convention, when the legendary Helen Keller challenged the Lions to become "knights of the blind in the crusade against darkness." They responded, and Lions are now best known for their sight-related programs, including SightFirst, the world's largest blindness prevention program.

Lions are dedicated to diabetes research, drug education, and especially blindness prevention. In 1990, the association launched SightFirst, an international effort to eliminate blindness. In fact, it’s the Lions which has established a majority of the world's eye banks, making possible over 18,000 corneal transplants in a single year. Lions Clubs also provide free glaucoma screenings to over 600,000 people annually. And, Lions have collected millions of used eyeglasses for redistribution to the needy, while also providing guide dog schools for the blind.

As for the covers, themselves, most, if not all, are 20s and 30s. I don’t think I’ve ever seen one without the Lion emblem/logo on it, so they’re readily identifiable. There are both stock and non-stock designs. Although the covers carry the location of the particular club, there is normally no club “number” (no lodge or post #, for example, as we see in many of the other fraternal organization covers).

Again, cover-wise, this is a small category. The largest collection I’ve been able to pin down is David Barbieri’s, CT, 125 such covers, but that was as of September 2005.

I collect Fraternals, and for all these smaller collections, I house them together in albums with other small Fraternal collections. That’s as opposed to the huge Fraternals, such as B.P.O. Elks, American Legion, VFW, etc.

