

Fraternal: Improved Order of Red Men



Not to impune the feelings of any Native American (that's the current politically correct term in use) members we might have, but this fraternal organization *does* seem somewhat odd. One doesn't even have to be Native American to join. You only have to be 'into' Native American customs, terminology, and ritualism, which, for the Improved Order of Red Men, means those which are patterned after the early native Americans. The basic tenants of the organization are freedom, Friendship, and Charity.

What makes it even odder is that this really isn't a Native American organization. It was formed by "white men" as a charitable organization founded in 1833 to preserve the traditions, culture and customs of the American Indian by incorporating them into the rites of the organization. Indeed, up to 1974, its "ladies' auxiliary," Daughters of Pocahontas, would not even allow non-whites to join! (sort of a "We love your culture, but we can't stand you" attitude!). Be that as it may, I'm sure the organization has done a lot of good over the last 150+ years.

Even more interesting is the fact that at one time, this was actually one of the primary fraternal organizations in the country. The 1896 World Almanac, for example, listed the Improved Order of Red Men as having 161,408 members. Compare that to the fact that at the same time Elks members only numbered 27,000. As a matter of fact, this was the very first fraternal order of American origin.

During the latter half of the 19th century, the number and size of fraternal orders in the U.S. greatly increased, including the Improved Order of Red Men. A mark of fraternal organization influence in general was the adoption of the lodge form of organization by a number of trade unions. In the Improved Order of Red Men, the lodges are called "tribes."

This century, however, has not been as kind to the Improved Order of Red Men. Membership has been dropping over the decades, and many of the original fraternal buildings have long since been abandoned. The organization definitely still exists, though. Their national headquarters' web site (<http://www.redmen.org/>) doesn't give any information on how many current chapters and members the organization has.

What about the covers? Not much here, I'm afraid. No numbers are available, but I can give you some idea. I've been collecting Indians for years, and the covers shown here are two of the few I have (18), so draw your own conclusions!

You might check your own Indian and/or Fraternal collection and let us know if you can come up with anything else.

