

TURNPIKE TALES

by Jim Ford

"TURNPIKE TALES" #12

(Historical items from the "Madison Bouckville Antique Week" region)

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The Madison-Bouckville area has been rich in history from the arrival of the first settlers to the present day. As an addition to the website, we have decided to share some of that history in order that the patrons who travel to the Madison-Bouckville Show will have a better understanding of our truly unique region.

THE MADISON KNIGHTS OF PYTHIAS ORGANIZATION

During the course of American history, many fraternal groups have had a tremendous influence on our nation. We are familiar with names such as the Masons, Odd Fellows, Elks and the Knights of Columbus. A lesser known fraternal group, the Knights of Pythias, not only had a lodge in Madison, but its founder had strong roots to our Madison-Bouckville area.

The Knights of Pythias, or K-P as it was popularly known, was founded by Justis Rathbone in Washington, D.C. Mr. Rathbone was born in 1839 in Deerfield, N.Y., the son of a prominent Utica lawyer. He attended Utica area schools while growing up and later graduated from Madison University. (Today's Colgate University) From there he attended Carlisle Seminary in Pennsylvania.

Moving to Washington, D.C. in 1863, Rathbone procured a position as a government clerk in the United States Treasury Department instead of following his earlier passions to be a minister, music composer or actor. While living in Washington and witnessing the ravages of the Civil War, Justis Rathbone founded the Knights of Pythias.

The basis for the Knights of Pythias ritual and organization was the Greek story of the mythological friendship of Damon and Pythias. The legend illustrated the ideals of loyalty, honor and friendship. The concept of the legend spread quickly and "lodges" were formed in many areas, including Utica and Madison. The lodge in Utica was named Justis Rathbone Lodge # 290 and the lodge in Madison was chartered as Madison Summit Lodge #344. Interestingly, the lodge in Utica is still in existence.

Since the time that the Knights of Pythias was formed, many famous Americans have been members of the organization. Included have been Presidents Warren G. Harding, William McKinley and Franklin D. Roosevelt; Vice-Presidents Hubert H. Humphrey and Nelson Rockefeller; Supreme Court Justices Hugo Black and Benjamin Cardozo; Senators Robert Byrd and Charles Schumer and House of Representatives member Peter T. King.

Madison Summit Lodge was formed in 1893. Membership was initially around 40, but that number increased substantially during the following years. Only males were admitted to the lodge. During the early years of the club, meetings were held in Dunster's Hall, or in Academy Hall. Dunster's Hall, which was the site of Reynold's Garage many years later, was also the meeting place for a number of other clubs and organizations. The Knights referred to Dunster's Hall as "Castle Hall." A Castle was the term for the meeting place of a lodge.

Academy Hall, on South Street, was the upper floor of the District #1 School. The building, which had originally been one of the Madison County Fair buildings in Morrisville, was moved to Madison and known as Military Hall during the years of the Civil War era. The citizens of District #1 bought the building in 1871 and began extensive renovations. The lower floor of the two-story building was used as the school and the upper floor was used for club meetings, town meetings, elections, etc.

The Pythians of Madison were soon engaged in projects to help the township communities of Madison, Bouckville and Solsville and sponsored events to enhance friendship within their own group. Picnics were held at Madison Lake, parades were conducted at the lake or on Main Street in the village, plays were held at Academy Hall and guest lecturers were obtained to enhance the knowledge of the local citizenry.

All of this led to great respect for the Knights and a desire by many to join the group.

The Knights of Pythias organization also offered a military marching group known as the Uniformed Rank. After you had risen through the ranks of Page, Squire and Knight in the Pythian Order, you were eligible to join the Uniformed Rank. Summit Lodge formed Summit Company #43, Uniformed Rank in 1905. Uniforms were purchased and drilling began in the precise formations prescribed by the Supreme Council of the Knights of Pythias in preparation for competitions held at the annual Supreme Assembly.

The Madison Knights quickly gained a reputation for excellence at these competitions. Prizes were won at assemblies held at Auburn, Far Rockaway (Long Island), Schenectady, Malone, Poughkeepsie, Oswego, Amsterdam and Malone. The members traveled by train to these venues and were often gone for a week or more. For many years, the group was also accompanied by the local Knights Band.

In 1909 an opportunity was presented to the Knights for a new Lodge Hall. The Madison Congregational Church had disbanded and sold their church building to the Knights. Meetings and social events were now held in K-P Hall as it was popularly named. Graduation exercises for the local school were also held there. Today the building is the site of Taylor's Auction Service on South Street.

At times, the events that the Knights participated in were solemn in nature. An example would be the funeral services for a deceased member. One such occasion was the funeral of Samuel S. Taylor. Mr. Taylor grew up in Bouckville, was a member of the Knights, and Captain of the Uniformed Rank. He was a conservation officer, and while in the line of duty, was shot and killed in Rome, New York while apprehending poachers. His was the first death of a conservation officer in the line of duty in New York State. On the day of the funeral the Uniformed Rank marched from their lodge in Madison to Bouckville.

1915 saw the formation of a Pythian Sisters group in Madison. This was Summit Temple #45. There were 82 members named on the original charter. The Sisters were soon sponsoring banquets, plays, musical entertainment, speaking contests and motion picture shows.

Pythian Hall was certainly a popular gathering place.

The Knights of Pythias, like many other fraternal groups, began to lose membership as the years passed. From a peak membership of almost one million during the 1920's, the numbers have diminished to approximately 50,000 Pythians today. In New York State the majority of active lodges are in the New York City and Long Island areas. As we previously mentioned, Utica, New York also continues to have an active lodge.

Our lodge in Madison was sold in 1943. Since that time, the building has been used as a truck repair facility and as we mentioned, an auction house. We can certainly look back with pride on this chapter of community involvement provided by the Knights of Pythias organization. When visiting Madison, please drive by the former Knights Hall and visualize the events that transpired in that historic building.