

Shriners on Parade

The Shriners have been called the fun group of Masonry. And that it certainly is. You still see them in summer parades, especially in smaller towns. If you have never seen the Shriners on parade, then you have missed something. They are easily the most colorful of all the units you'll see in a 4th of July or Labor Day parade. When the Shriners gather for their annual international meeting, there will be a parade exclusively made up of scores of Shriner units. It is a once in a lifetime spectacle. There will be motorcycles of all sizes and shapes, miniature cars, horses and sometimes camels, precision marching, clowns, Arabic costumes and brass bands. The Chicago Shriners have a parade unit consisting of perfectly matched black horses. It was said at one time that the two organizations that bought the most Harley Davidson motorcycles were the Shriners and the Hell's Angels. If Harley is not your style, there is a Honda Gold Wing group. The first unit I joined in Illinois had 50 cc. Honda mini-bikes. We were the Lilliputians of the motorized units. Another tradition the Shriners have is the Shrine Circus, with practically every group holding a circus. They are part fund raiser, part community outreach and part fun. We give a treat to children who would normally not be able to afford a circus ticket. There aren't that many traveling circuses left and the Shriners help keep them going.

But today the Shriners are only a shadow of what they used to be. Membership has shrunk, in some places more than 50 percent in the last generation. Part of the reason is that the Masons, who supply the source of members, has itself suffered a loss of equal proportions. (Being a Mason is a prerequisite to membership in the Shriners.) Masonry peaked around 1960 when the fraternity had 3,000,000 members in the United States. But even as the population in general has grown, Masonry has declined. The Masons aren't alone of course. Others have suffered huge declines, from the Veterans of Foreign Wars to the Moose (Loyal Order of Moose) and the Elks (Benevolent and Paternal Order of Elks). Another fraternal organization you never heard of has suffered similar declines – The International Order of Odd Fellows which is almost as old as the Masons and sharing an English heritage.

Officially, the Shriners are the A.A.O.N.M.S. or Ancient Arabic Order Nobles of the Mystic Shrine. There were two founding members who were Masons from New York, an unlikely duo of a medical doctor and an actor. During travels to the Middle East, the actor was said to have been initiated into a secret and exclusive group. Taking the experience to his doctor friend, they formed the Shriners in New York, open only to Masons and took on the trappings of the Middle East. For headgear we wear a fez, which is still traditional in some North African countries like Morocco and Egypt and in Turkey. Our buildings, formerly called temples – there is nothing religious about it – have names like Mecca, Medinah, Syrian, even Mohammed. I doubt that such an institution could be founded in today's politically correct atmosphere. We'd have to change the names and motif. But from humble beginnings with two members, the Shriners grew to hundreds, then thousands and finally to over a million before starting to decline. There are nearly 200 Shriner Centers (formerly temples), the furthest and newest one being in Manila which took on an un-Middle East name of Mabuhay or Tagalog for long life. It was started only two years ago. There was a group of Shriners in Manila during my father's time consisting mostly of expatriate Americans. Since there was no Manila Shriner center then, my dad belonged to the Seattle Shrine.

Fifty years after their founding, the Shriners decided to start a charity. They set up a children's hospital dedicated exclusively to treating children suffering from orthopedic conditions such as club feet, scoliosis and spina bifida. Later on they added a hospital to

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treat burns. Today there are 22 hospitals, 19 for orthopedic conditions and 3 for burns. The hospitals were initially called Shrine Hospital for Crippled Children but have now been changed to Shriners Hospital for Children. Here is the best part – the Shriners have never charged their patients. For 90 years the Shriners have treated children of every race, color and creed without charge.

The 22 Shriners Hospitals in North America takes an enormous amount of money to operate. There is a substantial endowment, but it isn't enough since the care is provided for free. The last publicly released budget 2 years ago was in excess of \$800,000,000. That is not a typo and it amounts to over two millions dollars a day. Not one iota from local, state or federal governments. We supplement this with fundraisers. In Jackson, TN I volunteered to stand in front of places like Kroger and Wal*Mart with a container shaped like a fez. People dropped in their dollar bills and coins. Whenever I saw anyone I knew, I'd badger them for more. "Come on, you can afford more than that!" It usually worked. My collection averaged a dollar a minute. This fundraiser was done across the country. There are other fundraisers as well.

We don't know what will happen in the future. Hopefully there will be a revival in membership starting with the Masons. If the previous trends had continued, the future would not have been encouraging. But despite flagging for many years, interest has been revived thanks to the least likely of sources, Hollywood and best selling author Dan Brown. A movie titled "National Treasures" starring Nicolas Cage had a Masonic backdrop. Dan Brown didn't treat the Catholic Church too favorably in his 2 books "Angels and Demons" and "The Da Vinci Code." In his latest book "The Lost Symbol," Masonry was the main theme. Although the villain was a Mason, he was a rogue. The history of Masonry and its principles were revealed in a very favorable light. Shortly after its release, the movie generated renewed interest in the Masons. Membership may have gained an up tick.

Nevertheless the legacy the Shriners International is leaving behind will live forever. Those are tens of thousands of children that have overcome their burns and their orthopedic problems and are leading normal lives thanks to the Shriners. This work will continue. Thanks Nobles!