TRIBE OF BEN-HUR MATERIALS, 1918

Collection Information

Historical Sketch

Scope and Content Note

Contents

Cataloging Information

Processed by

Brittany Deeds
June 2014

Manuscript and Visual Collections Department
William Henry Smith Memorial Library
Indiana Historical Society
450 West Ohio Street
Indianapolis, IN 46202-3269

www.indianahistory.org
COLLECTION INFORMATION

VOLUME OF COLLECTION: 2 manuscript folders

COLLECTION DATES: 1918


RESTRICTIONS: None

COPYRIGHT: Permission to reproduce or publish material in this collection must be obtained from the Indiana Historical Society.

ALTERNATE FORMATS:


ACCESSION NUMBER: 1991.0711

NOTES:
HISTORICAL SKETCH

The "Supreme Tribe of Ben-Hur" was a fraternal beneficial society based on the novel
*Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, by General Lew Wallace. The fraternity was incorporated in
1894 and converted into a commercial company in 1988. During its existence, the
fraternity succeeded in attracting over 100,000 members in 132 states.

What set the Tribe of Ben Hur apart from so many other fraternal organizations, besides
the appeal of the novel, was its novel insurance model and the equal inclusion of women
from the beginning. The fraternity had an official publication, *The Chariot*.

In the fall of 1893, two insurance men from Crawfordsville, Indiana, David Washington
Gerard and Frank L. Snyder, approached author Lew Wallace with an unusual request:
would Wallace consent to the creation of a fraternal organization based on the novel *Ben-
Hur*? Wallace approved the creation of a fraternity, but objected to the organization's
proposed name, "Knights of Ben-Hur." Wallace instead suggested "Tribe of Ben-Hur" as a
more appropriate name, saying that "there were only tribes in those days." The name was
readily adopted, and Wallace secured the permission to use the name from his publishers.
Wallace consulted with the founders about details of rituals for the fraternity, and he
reportedly chose Dr. Jesse Franklin Davidson (David Gerard's son-in-law) as the
fraternity's chief medical examiner. This indicates that Wallace knew insurance coverage
had always been one objective of the fraternity. However, Wallace never became an
official of the Tribe.

The order was incorporated in the state of Indiana on 9 January 1894. The next week, on
16 January, the first meeting of the fraternity's "Supreme Tribe" was held in
Crawfordsville. Ex-governor Ira Chase was elected the first Supreme Chief. The first
official chapter, Simonides Court No.1, was instituted at Crawfordsville on 1 March 1894.
The organization grew in popularity, gaining 12,322 members from across the nation by 1
January 1897.

At a national meeting in 1904, an attempt was made to move headquarters from
Crawfordsville to Ohio. To preempt any future relocation efforts, Ben-Hur delegates voted
to build a new headquarters building. Construction was authorized in 1910 and began in
1911. The five-story building, located at the intersection of Main and Water streets, was
completed in 1913.

In 1930, the Tribe of Ben-Hur changed its name to Ben-Hur Life Association. The
fraternity declined during the Depression and World War II. Efforts were made by Merle
W. Smith (president of Ben-Hur Life Association from 1972 to 1988) to revitalize the
fraternal organization, but pressure from the Internal Revenue Service to maintain the
organization's nontaxable status proved too difficult. The legal process to mutualize the
association occurred in June 1988. While the Ben-Hur life insurance policies remained in
force, the company changed its name to USA Life Insurance Company of Indiana. In 1990,
the name changed again to USA Life One Insurance Company of Indiana in response to protests from a similarly named insurance company.

Sources:


SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

The collection consists of two folders of official correspondence from the month of January 1918.

The first folder contains materials relating to the nomination of Supreme Representatives and Alternate Representatives for the Eleventh Regular Session of the Supreme Tribe of Ben-Hur, which was to be held in Crawfordsville, Indiana, on 4 June 1918. It includes a letter on official letterhead from Supreme Chief R. H. Gerard, dated 8 January 1918, to officers and members; an Official Proclamation Relative to the Nomination of Candidates for Supreme Representatives Jurisdiction, Texas; a sheet with Extracts from the General Laws of the Order; one blank nomination form for a Supreme Representative; one blank nomination form for an Alternate Representative; and one return envelope for the nomination forms, addressed to Supreme Scribe Jno. C. Snyder.

The second folder contains a letter on official letterhead from Supreme Chief R. H. Gerard and Supreme Scribe Jno. C. Snyder dated 15 January 1918. The letter details how the Secretary of the U.S. Treasury requested the presidents of all societies to encourage members of their organizations to purchase thrift stamps and war savings stamps for the war effort. The folder also contains the letter's envelope, which has a printed color picture of the fraternity's home office building in Crawfordsville, Ind.
CONTENTS

Materials Pertaining to the Eleventh Regular Session of the Supreme Tribe of Ben-Hur, 8 Jan. 1918
Letter from Supreme Chief R. H. Gerard to officers and members, dated 8 January 1918
Official Proclamation Relative to the Nomination of Candidates for Supreme Representatives Jurisdiction, Texas
Extracts from General Laws of the Order
One blank nomination form for Supreme Representative
One blank nomination form for Alternate Representative
Return Envelope for nomination forms, addressed to Supreme Scribe Jno. C. Snyder

Letter Promoting Purchase of WWI Stamps, 15 Jan 1918
Envelope has color picture of the fraternity's home office building in Crawfordsville, Ind.
CATALOGING INFORMATION

For additional information on this collection, including a list of subject headings that may lead you to related materials:

1. Go to the Indiana Historical Society's online catalog: http://opac.indianahistory.org/

2. Click on the "Basic Search" icon.

3. Select "Call Number" from the "Search In:" box.

4. Search for the collection by its basic call number (in this case, SC 3027).

5. When you find the collection, go to the "Full Record" screen for a list of headings that can be searched for related materials.