

Collection #  
SC 3027

## TRIBE OF BEN-HUR MATERIALS, 1918

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## COLLECTION INFORMATION

VOLUME OF COLLECTION: 2 manuscript folders

COLLECTION DATES: 1918

PROVENANCE: Robert G. Hayman Antiquarian Books, Carey, Ohio, 1991

RESTRICTIONS: None

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ALTERNATE FORMATS:

RELATED HOLDINGS: Iliff, David Gerard. *The Lost Tribe of Ben-Hur*. (Fall Creek Review, 1994), Pamphlet Collection: HS1355.T73 I4 1994 and Tribe of Ben-Hur. *The Chariot*. General Collection Folio: HS1355.T75 C5

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:

Stevens, Albert C. *Cyclopædia of Fraternities: A Compilation of Existing Authentic Information and the Results of Original Investigation as to the Origin, Derivation, Founders, Development, Aims, Emblems, Character, and Personnel of More Than Six Hundred Secret Societies in the United States*. (New York: E. B. Treat and Company, 1899), pages 190-191. Accessed on 6 June 2014 via Internet Archives, <https://archive.org/details/cyclopdiaoffra00stevrich>

Illiff, David Gerard. *The Lost Tribe of Ben-Hur* (Fall Creek Review, 1994).

## **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.

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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

Folder 1

Letter Promoting Purchase of WWI Stamps, 15 Jan  
1918

Folder 2

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.