

Pythian Sisters face decline with grace



PYTHIAN SISTERS IN 1993: Front left, Jean Lacks, Mildred Eastwood, Mary Elizabeth Goodwyn; rear left, Beulah Bridgman, Ella Church, Louise Rogers, Peggy Newcomb, Ruby Williams. Virginia Orange is not present. (Photo by Ed Conroy)

The Fraternal Order of the Knights of Pythias was born in 1864 when Justus H. Rathbone wanted to heal the hatreds caused by the Civil War. Inspired by the ancient Greek story of Damon and Pythias, whose friendship for each other transcended death, the Knights of Pythias soon grew to an international order known for its moral content and works of charity.

In 1888 Joseph Hill conceived the Fraternal Order of the Pythian Sisters when a raindrop on a window ledge threw a rainbow on the wall. Hill saw its colors—white, red, yellow, and blue—as Purity, Love, quality, and Fidelity. On this foundation of principle, Pythian Sisters built temples across the country, spreading their message of good works and love.

When the Knights of Pythias came to Blackstone in the 1930s, the Pythian Sisters soon followed. Later they bought the Draper Funeral Home on South Main Street, where their sign hangs today.

Now over fifty years have passed, and the once bright colors of the Pythians are fading. Blackstone's younger generations have no recollection of the Pythian Sisters, who once marched proudly in parades and knocked on doors to collect money for the heart fund with smiles that couldn't be refused.

When the Knights, like aging veterans from a forgotten war, disbanded for lack of members, the Sisters knew they would soon follow. With no new members to replenish their ranks, the Order grew older and smaller. Last year it had to give up serving suppers to the Rotary Club, its only source of income.

“We’re all getting older, and we just got tired,” said Ella Church, the Order’s Secretary for the last 15 years. “And I’m getting tired of this job too, but nobody will take it.” The thought of finding a new secretary was so hopeless she could only laugh.

She held two role books in her lap, one with the charter members from 1938, the other starting in 1964. Back then the meeting hall was always full. Now there are not enough active members to fill the officers’ chairs.

Then there was excitement in belonging to the Pythian Sisters. “When you were initiated, you felt like a queen. You are up on a pedestal, wearing a long white robe...” Mrs. Church wouldn’t reveal what happened in the initiation ceremony because it was secret. The sacred ritual was kept hidden in the Black Book, which was not for the eyes of the uninitiated.

But the Red Book could be shown. Mrs. Church called the ceremonies conducted at each meeting “ritual work.” Each officer gets up and tells what her duties are. “It doesn’t take long once you get familiar with it,” she said, rattling off her “ritual work” like she was cramming a three minute talk into a 30 second space. These were the words that bound the Order together all over the country.

“Your goal is to do it correctly,” said Beulah Brigmen, who began learning the Pythian rituals in 1942 when she joined the Blackstone Order after high school. Then it was a great honor to be considered for membership. Of course, you had to pass investigation and the white or dreaded black ball vote.

“But no one here ever got blackballed,” said Mrs. Church. And she couldn’t recall when an investigation, which two members conducted on nominees, ever turned up damning evidence.

Becoming a Pythian was like going through a door into a higher life—not only in the community but in God’s world, as well. Being a Pythian made you feel your character reflected the Moral Order of the Universe.

Most Excellent Chief Mildred Eastwood (that’s what the local Order’s top officer is called) still holds to the Pythians with a strong grip. “You can’t let go of 38 years of your life easily,” she said.

“It was exciting when you joined. It was real important to learn all the rituals and do them just right, too,” she said, recalling those in the Order who kept a strict watch on the rituals. “If you didn’t do it just right, you’d get fussed at.”

She remembered how special the initiation made you feel, like you were chosen to serve and to sacrifice for your fellow man. It was as close to heaven as you could get on earth. Being a Pythian made you feel connected to something higher than yourself.

Knowledge of these principles and adherence to them would bring you through life successfully. “If you lived up to the principles of the Order, you won’t go too far wrong,” said Mrs. Bridgman knowingly.

“It was really a big thing!” exclaimed Mrs. Eastwood.

While the Pythians are still flourishing in other parts of the country, in Virginia the life span of the Order is about complete. “Now when you ask someone about joining, they look at you like you are nuts,” said Mrs. Bridgman.

“As we older ones pass along, I think it will gradually disappear. Everybody realizes it, and there’s not too much we can do about it. It’s not only here that it’s happening, but all over the state.”

Looking back through the book Mrs. Church found that the last new members were admitted in 1986. “And they got out! One came to two meetings and never came back. It seems like the younger generation is just not interested. It’s a shame.”

“People have other things to do than belong to fraternal organizations” added Mrs. Bridgmen. “Young people are not interested in anything like this.”

While television and women working play an obvious part in the fading of fraternal orders, why do churches and other organizations, like the Moose, for instance, still grow or hold their own? What is it about organizations like the Masons, the Eastern Star, and the Pythians that have caused them to lose membership? “There’s not a whole lot of difference in their rituals,” noted Mrs. Eastwood, whose husband was a Mason as well as a Knight. None of the ladies seemed to have an answer.

One wonders if younger women have lost not only their time for the Pythians, but a willingness to believe in such high ideals as the “Light of Pythianism.” The world of the late 20th Century doesn’t seem to put much stock in rituals like the Red Book. Nor is there much thrill in secret initiations like the Black Book. Rituals that don’t have a practical connection with the everyday world don’t make sense today.

But are the principles of Purity, Fidelity, and Equality fading along with the Pythians? The Sisters hope not.

While their meeting hall may succumb to time, and the pictures on the wall preserve faces few remember, the invitation to join the Pythians is still open.

All you need is a mind as clear as a drop of rainwater, and a heart big enough to hold the rainbow’s colors.