

Westtown's Tribe Of "Red Men"

by Dave Walter, Township Historical Commissioner

Secret handshakes. Weird rituals. Elaborate regalia. Comical officer titles. Welcome to the wide world of fraternal beneficial societies in America in the 1800s and early 1900s. Writing in the "American Journal of Sociology" in 1901, B. H. Meyer observed: "These societies constitute a complex of organizations which embraces in its scope the most diverse elements with respect to race affinity, material possessions, religious beliefs, political affiliations, intellectual attainment, and social position. The thread of fraternity joins them all in one great roundtable of equality and democracy." Westtown men were part of this pervasive phenomenon which combined all of the above in service to the community, welfare for the unfortunate (most typically, their own members), political influence, and fellowship for all ranks of society.

By the latter third of the 19th century, fraternal societies were springing up in communities all over America. Some, such as the Freemasons, had long lineages. Dozens of others – the Odd Fellows, the Knights of Columbus, the Knights of Pythias, the Grange, the Elks – were of more recent establishment. The Odd Fellows, by 1900, had more than 1 million members, and it is thought that up to 40% of adult males had belonged to one of these fraternities.

The fraternal societies served a role comparable to the urban areas' saloons; however, saloons were public while fraternal societies admitted only those they deemed suitable. It was an age before radio, television, movies, the automobile, and modern entertainments. The clubhouse was a place for men in rural and suburban areas to meet after the farm chores were done or the shop swept. They got away from the family to review the events of the day, discuss the weather and crops, network, gossip, and plan political gambits. Some societies permitted drinking and gambling. The Red Men appear to have been very sober.

The "Improved Order of Red Men" (I.O.R.M.) was established in 1834; however, they claimed descent from the Sons of Liberty and the Boston Tea Party "Indians." Another predecessor was the post-Revolutionary War Tammany Societies, named for the peace-loving Lenni-Lenape Chief Tammany. The corrupt Tammany Hall political machine in New York City evolved from one of these groups too. I.O.R.M. pushed temperance and patriotism and grew to about 500,000 members by the 1930s. Local units were called "tribes" and their meeting places were "wigwams." Their officers used Native American titles. Native American regalia was worn in private settings.

Unfortunately, no known photos of the Westtown tribe have been located, but photos of other tribes show members wearing feather headdresses, fringed buckskin jackets, and holding war clubs. In 1886, tribes typically collected dues of 12 cents per

week which went into a fund from which a member who became disabled could draw \$3 per week for six months. Members would wear a lapel pin, "T.O.T.E." ("Totem of the Eagle"), to be identified by fellow Red Men all across the nation.

A news clipping, dated Dec. 21, 1872, announces, "New Tribe of Red Men—Chester County is to have a new Tribe of this order at Tanguy's Store. It will be instituted next week, when the wild men of that vicinity will smoke the pipe of peace." It was officially "Tamed Tribe No. 192, I.O.R.M" and their "wigwam" was established in the new Union School on the northeast corner of Street (Rte. 926) and S. Chester (Rte. 352) Roads. Within a year, they bade farewell to a charter member, Marshall J. Taylor, whose funeral was "25th Sun, Beaver Moon, at 2d Run-Setting of the Sun" (2pm, Nov. 25, 1873). Taylor was just one of the familiar local names associated with the Tribe over the years; Yarnall, Eachus, Osborne, Darlington, Cheney, Hoopes, Faucett, and Hickman being others.

There are 78 newspaper clippings, spanning the years 1872 to 1924, in the Chester County History Center files about Westtown's Improved Order of Red Men. Nearly every clipping concerns election of officers and initiation of "palefaces," picnics and socials, and the annual Oyster Supper. Not one clipping mentions any charitable assistance to fellow members or to the community. Of course, this isn't to say there wasn't such assistance: perhaps the Red Men didn't brag about such works, and privacy concerns kept them from publicizing them.

Various clippings enlighten us about the titles of the Tribe's officers: Prophet, Sachem, Senior Sagamore, Junior Sagamore, Chief of Records, Keeper of Wampum. In July 1873, their first of many picnics was reported as "(T)he big and little 'Injuns'... together with their squaws and papposes, will spend the day in the Fair Grounds of the Chester County Agricultural Society, on which occasion they will indulge in dancing, feasting, etc." Such events, including the annual Oyster Suppers at various West Chester hotels, regularly drew 150 or more people.

By 1888, Tamed Tribe could boast "We have 120 members, and there is not a sick one among us." Tamed's "wampum" was estimated to be about \$4,000 in 1887, making it "as rich as any other in this section of the country."

In January 1882, the Red Men purchased for \$3,200 the Tanguy Store at the northwest corner of Street and S. Chester Roads, leasing out the first floor store operation and setting up their "wigwam" on the second floor. In August 1894, the Red Men removed the pitched attic and built a new full third floor with a Mansard-style roof. The present owner of this property, Steve Maguire, has described the layout of the third floor when he acquired it in 1972: "The third floor 'meeting hall' was finished



Red Men Lodge (1549 E. Street Road)

with one very large room, for meetings and for dancing, and several smaller 'meeting' rooms. All rooms had doors with 'peep' holes and hinged covers that could be opened to see who was on the other side. The large room has a raised floor on two sides, where I assume chairs for seating would be placed, and then an even higher floor, or 'stage' centered at one end. This stage sits about 14 inches higher than the 'dance' floor. This entire third floor was accessible only by a single outside stairway, which is still there, a covered stairway, rising from the outside porch... there are 31 steps to the top with no landings."

The History Center files contain no newspaper clippings about the Westtown Red Men dated after 1924. Arthur James, in his 1973 history of Westtown, "From Farmland to Suburbia," wrote, "In 1937, the lodge was in debt and owed back taxes. It was sold

to a succession of owners, including the National Bank of Chester County and Trust Co...."

Three principal factors led to the decline in fraternal societies. The Depression of the 1930s made participation a financial burden for many men. Then, New Deal welfare programs, such as Social Security, decreased the need for private beneficial help. Finally, after World War II, young men established families and their spare time focused on their children and programs like Scouts and Little League.

Today, the Red Men have only 15,000 members nationwide. The nearest tribe to Westtown is in Tuckerton, New Jersey. No longer do their war whoops echo around the former wigwam at Street and S. Chester Roads.