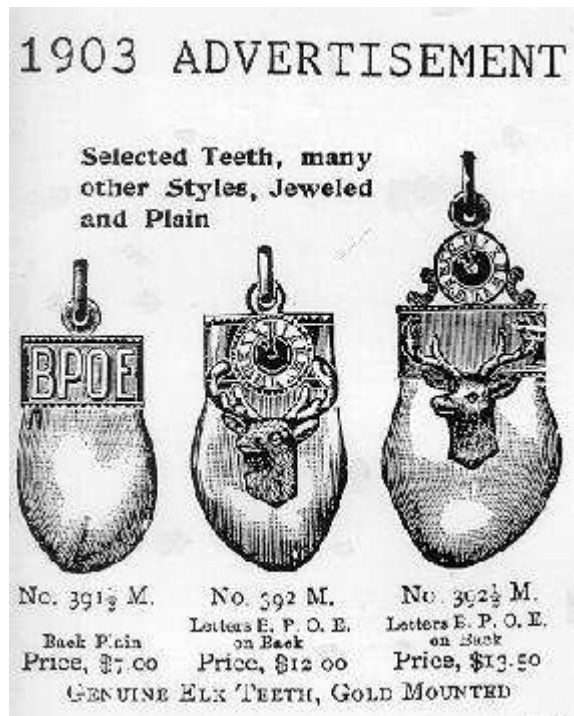


What Starts out in a Mouth And Ends up on Your Tie?

by Mike Kelly
Grand Lodge Historian

Well, in most cases, it's either soup or some other part of your diet. But within the borders of that strange and mystical country known as YESTERELKDOM, in many cases there was absolutely no answer more acceptable than your Elks Tooth, mounted simply or ornately, given to you as a token of appreciation by a grateful Lodge or bestowed by a proud Elk father on his son at Initiation into the ancestral Elks Lodge.

The increasing reappearance of these dental ornaments has provoked considerable interest among the younger members of our herd who instantly recognize in them windows back to the Order's golden past. Aside from the provenance of each individual piece, the question invariably arises as to what point in time and circumstances surrounded the birth of this uniquely Elkian tradition.



Pursuit of an answer to this mystery has found no specific incident or responsible personality in today's files at the Chicago headquarters; thus, for the time being it must be left to our Order's "Historians-in-the-field" to uncover the who, when and why of the first Elk who picked up an elk tooth and started carrying or wearing it in connection with his membership in the Order.

Given the strong and expressed emphasis on "ALWAYS CARRYING YOUR CORK" in the Jolly Corks from whence we spring, it is almost certain that on Day One of the Elks, a similar practice was adopted, especially since it would be many years before the advent of the official membership card (the only proof of membership in good standing was simply a Lodge receipt for the paid dues -- very tacky looking).

You can also reasonably assume that many variations were tried, since the cork does not have a simple and clear equivalent in relation to our revered animal. One or more of our founders carried an elks ear, tail, or items made from elk hide or horn before the teeth were settled on by popularity.

Wearing the elk teeth as decorations may even have been appropriated by west-bound Elks upon seeing the ceremonial clothing worn by American Indians in various touring Wild West shows bedecked with hundreds of teeth, adopting the practice as a fashion fad. In the early 1900s, Elk members then had to defend themselves from charges of decimating western elk herds just for teeth, and easily did explain that the supply from Indian trading and a vast stockpile existing long before the Order came into being precluded killing a single animal for decorative purposes.

Although not as common since the '30s, showing off your grandfather's elk tooth seems to be on the rise again, with these heirlooms being seen more often at state and Grand Lodge gatherings where they become instant conversation pieces. The favorite hunting ground to acquire these is any antique store or flea market within driving distance.

Once you have an elk tooth pin, ring, fob or whatever, it's your choice to just enjoy wearing it or to trace its history from inscriptions or information obtained from the seller. With literally millions of elk teeth items having been created, any member, young or old, should have no difficulty in finding and wearing an authentic piece of fraternal history, but think twice before you commit your time and energy to tracking down its origin. As hundreds of jewelers were involved in the manufacture and sale of these "fraternal calcium oddities," tracking down the particulars for your personal piece of elk tooth jewelry just might be a case of "biting off more than you can chew."

Fraternaly yours,

Mike Kelly, Grand Lodge Historian
March 12, 1997