

Repeating family history

Czinder leads Elks a century after great-great-grandfather

By Candy Allan Pioneer Associate Editor

BIG RAPIDS — A member of Nicholas Czinder's family has been a member of the Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks Big Rapids Lodge No. 974 since its inception in 1905. In fact, his maternal great-great-grandfather Christian Petersen was one of the 28 charter members. Petersen served as Exalted Ruler, or president, for the 1917-1918 term. A century later, Czinder is serving in the same role. He was installed for the 2017-2018 term on April 1. "I'm pretty proud — it's cool," Czinder said. "It's hard to describe. I'm pretty sure no other lodge has this type of history in the United States."

This is Czinder's second term as Exalted Ruler. He held the position three years ago and was asked to step in this year when a vacancy occurred. "I originally thought I'd do two terms back-to-back, but I'm glad I didn't, because my life got a lot busier right after my first term," he said. "It's easy to get burnout of any organization, I think I needed to take that break and step back."

Carl Boroff, an Elks member who served as lodge secretary for more than 20 years, worked with many different Exalted Rulers in his tenure. "The first year, they're getting their feet wet, like doing anything else," Boroff said. "Usually in their second year, the person knows where they're going. Speaking of Nick, I truly believe he was attentive and understanding, trying to make things run smoothly, which he did. I think that's why he's back this year. I think he did a good job the first time. "Though Czinder has been an Elk for nine years, his memories of the organization go back much further. "I can remember as a little kid going to the Elks fish fry with my grandmother," he said. "During Lent, that was the place to be." At the time, women weren't allowed to become Elks members, but his grandmother was part of the women's organization the Daisy Chain, said his mother, Betsy Czinder.

The family has long been established in Big Rapids and in the Elks, Betsy said. Christian Petersen and two of his brothers, Christen and Johan, immigrated to the United States in 1872 from the Danish island of Lolland in response to an advertisement seeking men to work in the railroading and lumber industries. In Big Rapids, the three brothers helped build St. Olaf's Danish Lutheran Church, which still stands as Community of Christ church.

In 1874, the rest of the family — the boys' parents, sister and two more brothers — immigrated to Big Rapids. In Denmark, the family name was spelled Pedersen; in the immigration process, it was changed to Petersen, though some family members kept the original spelling. Christian Petersen, in addition to being a charter member of Elks Lodge No. 974, settled on a farm in Colfax Township, served on the road commission and a school board. His son, Edward Pedersen — who retained the Danish spelling — also was an Elks member and he and his wife, Martha, opened Pedersen's Cafe, which is now Szot's Bar and Grill. The Pedersens were among the first Big Rapids business owners to obtain a license to sell beer after Prohibition ended, Betsy said.

Edward's sons, Scott Pedersen (Nick's grandfather) and Glen Pedersen (Nick's great-uncle), also were Elks; as is Nick's father, Joe Czinder, and his uncle, Daniel Pedersen. "My dad sponsored Joe into the Elks," Betsy said. Nick is the first member of the fifth generation to join the Elks. He also is active in the Big Rapids Jaycees, and as an optometric doctor is a board member of the Michigan Optometric Association and participates in the Opening Eyes program, which serves Special Olympics athletes in Mount Pleasant. In the past, he has volunteered for St. Peter Lutheran School's Germanfest, Artworks and the Big Rapids Lions. Many service organizations have older members, and Nick encourages younger residents to step forward and fill positions in the community. "The leaders we have now are starting to step back and we need younger leaders to fill those gaps," he said. "At least for me, being involved and helping the community is something I've always wanted to do. "If you want to be involved, you just have to care about where you live. It's up to us now to start stepping up and being leaders."

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