

## Quasiquicentennial History of Wausau Lodge #248 B.P.O.E.

(The following is an amalgamation of a number of histories of our Lodge which have been accumulated over the years. I hope that my additions are up to the standards set by those gentlemen. - Mike Rebhahn)

In its early days Wausau resounded to the rhythm of the loggers axe and the hum of the sawmills. Logs and lumber from Wausau were sent down the Wisconsin River to help build the frontier towns of the midwest. As years passed the town grew into a city and its professions and industries diversified.

In 1892 Wausau was still a young city. Less than fifty years had passed since its founding. Third Street had become the main business street, though it had yet to be paved. One year earlier, in 1891, Wausau had seen the arrival of its second rail line as the Milwaukee Lake Shore and Western joined the already present Chicago and Northwestern Railroad.

Then in 1892, on the cold winter night of Monday, December 19th, in Gensmann Hall located near the corner of Third and Jefferson Streets, Wausau Lodge #248 of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks was regularly instituted with the following Charter Members: George H. Rice, Frank Kelly, Andrew L. Kreutzer, Louis A. Pradt, Frank G. Dana, A. Vint Gearhart, F.L. Bliss, John Fisher, Win H. Wiley, A.E. Witting, C.L. Powers, Robert Clark, Walter Alexander, Henry E. McEachon, A.N. Sicard, Charles S. Gilbert, J.D. Womer, and Carl A Hoeflinger. The Lodge was sponsored by Fond du Lac Lodge #57, with District Deputy H.H. Dodd of Fond du Lac presiding. The Lodge met on the first and third Fridays every month under the leadership of E.B. Sanders, the first Exalted Ruler. He was assisted by Leading Knight L.H. Pradt, Loyal Knight George Rice, and Lecturing Knight A.L. Kreutzer. Secretary was A.N. Sicard, Esquire Walter Alexander, Tiler H.E. McEachron, Chaplain A.V. Gearhart, and Inner Guard W.C. Davenport. Trustees were L.A. Pradt, D.D. Flanner, and J.D. Womer. By 1893 membership had grown to twenty six, a thirty seven percent increase.

Earlier historians of the Wausau Lodge reported that “during its first year of existence the Elks Lodge in Wausau was dedicated as it is now to meeting the needs of the community. First of all, by providing men with friendly and inspiring association in a warm humane organization and secondly by giving them the opportunity to be of service to the Wausau area”. What was true of the Elks Lodge in Wausau one hundred and twenty five years ago is still true today, and has been the case throughout the history of the Lodge.

Social events at the Wausau Lodge were often high points in social activities in the city. From 1893 to 1899 the Elks Annual Ball, held during the Christmas season, was the highlight of the social season. Reportedly guests attended from every part of the state. In the years prior to the First World War there were also many dances that filled the calendar. There were “Hard Time Parties”, Halloween, Thanksgiving, and St. Patricks Day events. When Carnival Parties were held at the Rothschild Pavilion, talented musicians and speakers were often invited to perform.

Wausau Lodge was called upon to help in the growth of the Elks organization by sponsoring several new Lodges. These included Rhinelander #598 which lost its Charter in 1946 and Merrill #696 founded on Tuesday afternoon, May 7, 1901 and closed in 1945. In June of 1914 the Wausau Elks was honored to host the Wisconsin State Elks Association (formed in 1902) for the first time. The week long Convention was headquartered at the Elks Hall, located on the corner of Third and Jackson Streets.

As is apparent from the above, the Wausau Elks Lodge has had a number of homes over the years. These include Gensman Hall, the Wisconsin Valley Trust Co. building (third floor), the Cawley Saloon Building (foyer of the Wausau Theater), the Weinfeld building, the Ruder Building (called Elks Hall), Schochow Building, Alderson Home, and the Odd Fellows Hall.

Finally, in 1917 the decision was made to purchase the former home of lumberman John C. Clarke, at 414 Scott Street. It was a three story Italianate mansion with a tower. It had remained a private home from its construction in 1875 to 1905, when it became the Wausau Sanitarium. It was purchased by the Wausau Elks Home Corporation for \$13,500.00 and became the Lodge. Remodeling labor was provided by the members.

Following World War I the Wausau Lodge provided numerous community services, which included providing a community Christmas Tree for downtown Wausau, on the corner property. Additionally a Children’s Christmas party was held and food was provided for the hungry, shelter for the homeless, baskets for the poor, aid finding employment, as well as entertainment and financial help for the needy. The tradition of helping the underprivileged at Christmas remains an important part of Elkdom

in Wausau today. The Goodfellowship Program makes certain that the children of families facing difficulties at Christmas still receive a visit from Santa who brings warm clothing, a basket of food, and warm memories.

On Monday, December 1, 1919 a fire broke out in the Lodge. No one was hurt but damage was extensive. Beginning on December 7 a series of meetings were held in the Council Chambers of City Hall and other locations and discussion of how to relocate ensued. A number of activities continued. "Jollies", dances, "Carnival" parties, as well as meetings and initiations occurred in various venues in the city and in Rothschild. A membership drive to acquire new members to bring numbers to over 600 was launched. With only just over 300 at the time this was a tremendous undertaking but was successfully completed. An Orchestra was formed, and in 1922 an Elks band, float, and marching unit participated in the Armistice Day parade.

Desire for a new building was evident, and with membership rising, finally on May 29, 1922 the Home Corporation Charter was amended to provide the funds to construct our present building. Dues were increased so that each member paid \$50.00 and received one share of stock in the corporation. Further shares could also be purchased. The motion to do this was passed unanimously on March 3, 1921. Obviously this was not easy for some members and a number dropped their membership or took demits. And for others it took self denial to give this money for something that they truly believed in.

The cornerstone was laid in 1923 and the building completed in 1924. William Oppenhammer of the firm of Oppenhammer and Obel, himself an Elk, was the architect. Much of the work was done by members as well. Total cost was \$130,000.00. Dedication of the building took place on September 3, 4, 5, 6, and 8th, 1924 with G.E.R. John G. Price of Ohio presiding. In 1927 Wausau was again the home of the Wisconsin Elks Association State Convention.

When the Great Depression arrived, hard times hit the Lodge and its members. At one point, it had been negotiated that the Lodge would pay its debts for 50 cents on the dollar. E.R. Litz Schroeder headed a membership and dues drive that put the Lodge back on solid financial ground and paid all bills in full.

In 1937 an Elk's Scholarship was created to promote good citizenship and Americanism among the students of Wausau High School. This support continues with the Wisconsin State Elks Association U.S. Constitution. Scholarships are open to graduates of all local high schools.

In the 1940's, Wausau Lodge, along with the entire nation, devoted its energy and strength to the winning of WW II. Many of its members served with distinction, or had a child who was in the armed services. Others, on the "Home Front" made important contributions to the war effort in positions of leadership and responsibility. When the War ended, the Lodge joined other Lodges across the nation in welcoming home our veterans. The Wausau Lodge is proud to continue its work with Veterans through things like the Honor Flight, collection of deer hides for gloves, and of course Grand lodge which continues to be second only to the U.S. Government in helping our veterans.

In 1943 the Lodge celebrated its Fiftieth Anniversary with a Golden Jubilee which coincided with the Seventy Fifth or Diamond Jubilee of the Grand Lodge. For three days the rededication of the Lodge occurred.

Thursday, February 18 was an open house for Elks throughout the entire day. At 6:30 the annual P.E.R. Banquet was held with Orchestra and Choral music from the Elks' groups, followed by "Old Timers Reminiscences". This was followed by calling the Lodge meeting to order and performing an initiation. The opening and Initiation were performed by P.E.R.s and the Closing by the regular Lodge officers.

Friday, February 19 was dedicated to an "Informal Get Together" for Elks and their ladies and out of town guests. There was music, card playing and bowling, with evening cafeteria service from 11:00 to 12:00.

Saturday saw another open house for Elks and their ladies and out of town guests. A dinner and dance beginning at 8:30 PM were provided at no charge. Bowling and card playing were also available.

The end of WW II was a time of adjustment, with the gradual return of many functions of the Order that had needed to be suspended for the duration. The Lodge quietly brought back its ambitious program of benevolent and charitable works that continue today. There were also the fraternal events, dances, golf, picnics, Old Timers Night, State President and District Deputy visits. A Veterans show was

organized with the proceeds going to the Veterans Hospital in Tomah, Wisconsin. Wausau was the number one contributor in the State.

The Wausau Elks Lodge Club building provides our membership with what must rank as one of the best in our State, and indeed, one of the most interesting in the Nation. There have been many remodeling, renovation, and modernizations that have kept the Lodge a viable part of the community and the venue for many community events. This has been due to the dedication of the many individuals who have served, not only as the Officers of the Order, but as the Trustees and management of the Club, as well as volunteers to provide the necessary labor.

Having been built in 1924 our building can show its age. There have been several times when serious discussion was held on the topic of whether we should remain in this building or seek other accommodations. The decision has always been to remain and so extensive remodeling was done in the 1950's, again in the 1970's, and 1990's, as well as into the 21st Century.

In February of 1996 there was a plumbing backup at the Lodge and it had to be closed. After extensive investigation it was discovered that the main line had collapsed under the building. A Minneapolis company, Infratec, was brought in to resolve the problem, which turned out to be even more severe than believed and there was a chance that the lower level would have to be completely closed. It was decided to install a "Lift Station" with lines through the interior of the building rather than under it. This required a trench through the floor in the lower level and as a result we have a red stripe on the floor. Fortunately a number of members with businesses helped out, not only with excavation and repair, but also providing venues for bowling and other scheduled events. The Lodge was shut down for three weeks.

Soon after this it was decided that we needed to make our Lodge building a more inviting site for parties, meetings, and wedding celebrations. One of the major needs was to make it more handicap accessible. With steps leading up to each entry, and then three floors with steps to reach them, it was obvious that the biggest need was an elevator. Member Dick Westcott and his wife Darlene took on the immense job of beginning a fundraiser to make this happen. It was a huge job, taking several years to accomplish, but on May 6, 1999 ground was broken. The ribbon cutting was held on November 18 of the same year, and a Celebration Ball on January 29, 2000. Total cost of the elevator was \$200,694.18, obviously the Westcotts' efforts were monumental. Today a memorial plaque near the main floor entrance of the elevator recognizes the many groups and individuals that assisted in making the project possible.

To continue the effort to make the building more accessible, in 2002 more remodeling was done, including the installation of handicap accessible restrooms on the upper floor. Additional improvements were made to the roof, kitchen, and bar areas.

In 2006 a three year project was begun to make the building more energy efficient. Over this time span all windows were replaced with energy efficient glass. At the same time a patio was added to the exterior of the building, with many flower planters and bricks dedicated to and by our members. This was completed in 2009 with a portion being enclosed with a fence and covered with a removeable awning. Additionally, the bowling alley was upgraded with new pinsetters in 2007.

Not all changes have been so noticeable. In April of 1998 the first web page for Wausau Lodge #248 was created, and in 2009 WiFi was added for the convenience of our members. Also an ATM was added in the Lobby in 2012.

A major change was enacted at the Grand lodge Convention held in New Orleans in 1995. Since the founding of the Elks in 1868 women had been prohibited from joining the fraternal organization. Spouses and daughters of members often founded auxiliary clubs with various names, such as Elks Ladies, Does, or as in Wausau, Elkettes. The Wausau Elkettes were founded in 1971.

In New Orleans in 1995 the motion was made and passed to allow women to join. It was voted on by each individual Lodge and received a 2/3 approval from them in September of that year. With their now being able to be full members the need for these auxiliaries declined and the Wausau Elkettes dissolved in 2012. Over those 40 years the ladies held many fund raisers and contributed greatly to the growth and maintenance of the Lodge both with funds and their energy.

The first lady to join Wausau Lodge #248 was Debbie Muelver, she was initiated on February 6, 1997 and remains active in the Lodge today. In April of 2003 our first lady Exalted Ruler, Jackie Heitmann, took office. Thus she became our FFER (First Female Exalted Ruler), as she signed her letter in the Lodge Bulletin.

Over these years, the many efforts to assist our veterans, youth organizations, provide scholarships, help the needy, and of course Goodfellowship continued. In June, 1997 L.O.R.E. (Loan Out Rehab Equipment) was begun in an effort to assist members in temporary need of these items. In 2008 with a grant from the Elks National Foundation the Wausau Elks Community Ramp Builders was formed. Their purpose was to provide handicap accessibility ramps to members of our community who were financially unable to have one built themselves.

Activity within the State and National organizations continued. Wausau Lodge has hosted State Conventions many times over the years. 1914, 1927, 1939, 1955, 1992, 1997, 2002, 2007, 2010, and 2011 all were years when Elks gathered in Wausau from all over the State. Additionally the Lodge also hosted the Fall Conference in September of 1993. Our officers were judged best in the State in the Ritual Competition in both 2004 and 2006, earning the right to compete in the National Competitions held at the Grand Lodge Conventions held in Minneapolis and Orlando those years.

Over the years, five members of our Lodge have served as President of the Wisconsin Elks Association. In 1927 Harry Kieffer (a five time Exalted Ruler of our Lodge) was elected. In 1953 E.H. Lattimer was elected. Jack Froom served in 1960, A.W. Kowalchuk in 1974, and William "Bill" Forrest in 1994.

A conservative estimate says that over the years Wausau Elks Lodge #248 has contributed more than \$2,000,000.00 to assist the citizens of our community. Add to this the hundreds of thousands of volunteer hours spent. Don't forget the contributions made by our members to provide assistance across the State, and at the National level as well. We can all be proud of where we have been and look forward to continuing all of these efforts well into the future.

#### CURRENT OFFICERS OF WAUSAU ELKS LODGE #248

Exalted Ruler-John Mijal  
Esteemed Leading Knight-Dale Krenz  
Esteemed Loyal Knight-Marcelo Coscio  
Esteemed Lecturing Knight-Adam Doede  
Esquire-Kevin McCarthy PER  
Inner Guard-Jim Ludwig PER  
Tiler-Garland Nelson  
Chaplain-Diane Echols  
Treasurer-Jonathon Fisher  
Secretary-Ridgely Schott PER

#### TRUSTEES

Chad Zerkle  
Henry Lamovec PER  
Tyler Bahl  
Scott Ziebell  
Tom Bloch