

October 10, 1998

## The Willimantic Elks (Part One of Two)

**The Willimantic Elk's new clubhouse on completion in 1927..**



Everyday, thousands of people speed down Pleasant Street, unaware of one of the most attractive buildings in eastern Connecticut. Situated on a hill, overlooking Route 32 is the Benevolent and Paternal Order of Elks' (BPOE) Willimantic headquarters. It was built in 1926/27, in the style of a English Tudor-style mansion, and is one of Willimantic's most outstanding structures. But before recounting the local history of the Elks and

their Pleasant Street clubhouse, let's take a quick look at the wider history of American Elkdom.

The BPOE, or "Best People On Earth" are well renown today for their charitable acts and patriotism. There are currently around 1.3 million Elks in America, located in 2,230 lodges across the country. They came into being during the years after the Civil War. In 1866, a New York City Sabbath Observance law closed the city's saloons and theaters. The Thespians were distraught, and a young Englishman, Charles Algernon Vivian, founded an occasional social group called the Jolly Corks. The Corks eventually decided to draft a constitution and create a more formal, permanent organization. But they decided not to call themselves the Jolly Order of Corks. The members agreed that their new name ought to be based on the positive traits of a specific animal. But what kind of animal? One day, as the story goes, several Corks, while walking down the Great White Way, entered Barnum's New York City Museum in order to view the stuffed animals and gain some inspiration. Should the actors call themselves the Bears, or Beavers? But the Corks were struck by the fine appearance of a stuffed elk head in the Museum. An accompanying definition stated that the noble Elk was "fleet of foot, timorous of doing wrong, avoiding all combat except in fighting for the female and in defense of the young and helpless and weak." The Elks were born on February 16, 1868. But the first Elks were strictly actors and literary men. The group's primary objective was to bring writers and actors into a closer union of "good fellowship." But this distinction was soon dropped. The BPOE attracted wide social groups of new members. The thespians and writers were alarmed and resented the newcomers and dismissed them as "drug clerks selling pills," and "dry goods clerks selling tape." But by 1910 there were 1,155 lodges and 304,899 members nationwide.

The Willimantic Lodge was inaugurated in 1914, and they assembled in a number of halls and rooms across the city. Elkdom was at its zenith in 1925, when the members of the Willimantic Lodge decided to build a new home. The BPOE had almost one million members nationwide. A year after the opening of the new Willimantic clubhouse, the

Brooklyn, New York Elks built a twelve-story clubhouse costing in excess of \$6m.

On May 10, 1927, after a year of construction, the new home of Willimantic's BPOE 1311, an "imposing monument to Elkdom" was opened for public inspection. The home was considered to be ideally situated, on the summit of the knoll in Elk's Park, some 26 feet above the level of Pleasant Street. It was easily accessible from the center of the city, yet removed just far enough from the business section. The Elks were also proud of the new home's surroundings, the "sturdy oaks" and "towering hemlocks" in the 4.5 acre Elk's Park, enclosed by an extensive rubble stone wall and ashlar pillars mounted by large electric globes.

Continued Next Week.