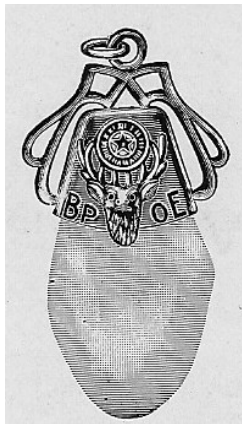


What's That Odd-Looking Thing You Have Hanging From Your Neck?

Most of the following information and some of the text is from the book "History of the Order of Elks 1868-1988" section E, published by and available from the Grand Secretary's Office in Chicago, and from the article by Grand Lodge Historian Mike Kelly, "What Starts out in a Mouth And Ends up on Your Tie?" which is posted on the website www.elks.org.

Sometime between the founding of the Order of Elks in 1868 and the end of the 19th century, no one including the Grand Lodge in Chicago is sure when the tradition began, and continuing into the 1930's, it became popular for a member of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks to acquire and wear a genuine elk's tooth. The tooth was usually rounded, then polished, mounted in and suspended from a gold casing, and commonly worn as a charm, watch fob or pin. Today it is a popular practice among our members to hang one of these old charms or fobs on a gold chain and wear it as a pendant around the neck. Many of these pieces had a single polished tooth, but some were made with two teeth mounted side by side, the appearance of which has an unintended vague familiarity. These pieces are common enough that you need only do a search on Ebay in order to see a variety of them.



President Theodore Roosevelt, on December 2nd, 1902, in a speech to Congress, suggested that the elk herds were being slaughtered partly to obtain their tusks (teeth) and antlers, and were in danger of someday disappearing. The next day the Grand Exalted Ruler responded to the President, thanking him for his recommendation to Congress to take steps for the preservation of the elk. Whereupon President Roosevelt replied to the Grand Exalted Ruler asking the B.P.O.Elks for their aid and requesting them to use their influence in order to protect the elk.

This prompted the Elks Grand Lodge, over a number of years, to appoint commissions and committees to investigate the issue. In 1907, Theodore Roosevelt wrote a letter to Grand Exalted Ruler Henry Melvin, stating that he understood that the great slaughter of elk was because of the wearing of elk's teeth by members and asked the G.E.R. to abolish this custom. G.E.R. Melvin then made a suggestion that the Grand Lodge forbid the wearing of elk's teeth by the members of our Order, and referred this suggestion to the Committee on Good of the Order. The Committee looked into the matter and reported that even though none of their members admitted that the wearing of teeth was responsible to any considerable extent for the destruction of the elk, they recommended that the incoming Grand Exalted Ruler appoint a special commission to investigate, and that a resolution be adopted requesting the membership of the Order to cease wearing the elk tooth as an article of personal adornment. These recommendations were adopted.

In 1908 the specially appointed commission of three issued an exhaustive and detailed 8,000 word report after having spent two weeks in elk territory talking to settlers, guides, game wardens and hunters, which concluded that the elk were dying out because of the impossibility of finding food in winter, due to the advance of civilization cutting them off from their natural grazing grounds. They concluded that killing them for their teeth had only the smallest impact on the herds. According to Grand Lodge Historian Mike Kelly, Elks members in defending themselves were able to easily explain that the supply of teeth from Indian trading and a vast stockpile existing long before the Order came into being precluded killing a single animal for decorative purposes. And as a side note, there was at least one large manufacturer of fraternal items, the D. & N. Manufacturing Co. of Providence, R.I. which listed all of its versions of the above-described 10k and 14k gold charms in their circa 1925 catalog as being "Genuine Walrus Ivory Teeth". This of course did nothing for the unfortunate walrus population but presumably allowed some of the elk to retain both their teeth and their lives.

Through all of this, for about fifteen years, the Elks concentrated on attempting to influence Congress and the individual states where there were elk herds to enact legislation to preserve ranges for them to feed. These efforts ultimately resulted in government legislation creating refuges such as the Jackson Hole National Elk Refuge in Wyoming in 1912.

A special committee was again appointed in 1911 to continue to look into the preservation of the elk. The committee in 1913 concluded that the herds were actually increasing by large amounts due to the legislation passed in Wyoming and in other states, partly due to the influence of the Elks. Thanks to these efforts, today there are more elk than you can shake an antler at. We just wish that our human Elks would increase their membership numbers at such a rate.