

## AOH History In the Beginning

The Protestant Reformation that swept Europe in the 16th century was marked by Royal intrigues over control of the Roman Church's wealth, and conflicts over which religion could be practiced. Violence erupted in many countries. Elizabeth I declared the Church of England to be the State religion, and considered Ireland part of her state. Most Irish did not agree. The Papacy launched a counter-reformation and Ireland became a battlefield between the two forces as the Irish, who embraced the Church introduced by St. Patrick, became the target of a campaign to reduce Rome's power by converting the masses to Protestantism. The persistence with which the Irish clung to their religion drove the English to extremes in repression. Penal laws disenfranchised Irish Catholics from the political, social, and economic life of their own country, and with their religion outlawed and their clergy on the run, they became an underground society practicing their religion in secret.

Not surprisingly, secret societies were formed to protect the values under attack. In various locales, groups with names like Whiteboys, Ribbonmen, and Defenders were identified with attacks on landlords, but each society included in its avowed purpose the protection of the Roman Church and its clergy. As time and government prevailed, some societies were suppressed, but most reorganized under a new name for the same purpose – defense of faith and homeland. History provides us with the names of many of these organizations, and even limited details of some. We know, for example, that the motto of the Defenders in 1565 was Friendship, Unity, and True Christian Charity, but the secret manner in which these societies operated left few records for modern analysts. As a result, a true history of their times may never be written.

## Secret Societies Exported

What history does tell us however, is that continued oppression and periodic crop failures forced many Irish to flee to other lands for survival. The inclination toward secret societies which had developed in Ireland by now became an Irish defense mechanism, especially among those emigrants committed to the ethnic slums of the lands to which they fled. Initially formed as fraternal associations to promote the welfare of its members and families, like the Hibernian Sick and Funeral Society in England, they soon found a militant dimension necessary to protect their church and clergy and defend members from bigoted opposition. In early nineteenth century America, the Ancient Order of Hibernians with its motto Friendship, Unity, and Christian Charity became the most recent link in the evolution of those ancient societies. Organized with the same intention of defending Gaelic values under attack, it can claim continuity of purpose and motto unbroken back to the Defenders of 1565. The need for a defensive society in America was the same as it was in Ireland.

Colonial America was an extension of England in language, customs and traditions and though American historians claim religious freedom back to William Penn's Pennsylvania, John Locke's Carolina, Roger Williams' Rhode Island, and many others, this freedom did not include Catholics. These were still English colonies and though the English were willing to accept other Protestant sects, they discriminated against Catholics because of a biased belief that Catholics owed their allegiance to a foreign prince - the Pope. By 1700, New York's Catholic population was almost stamped out by drastic penal laws. Then came the Revolution, and in spite of the large number of Catholics who supported Washington, the spirit of the leading colonists was still intensely anti-Catholic. The first flag raised by the Sons of Liberty in New York was inscribed No Popery. Not much changed after independence either. At the Constitutional Convention in 1777, a strong anti-Catholic faction was led by John Jay, soon to be first Chief Justice of the United States, who denied civil rights to Catholics until they swore an oath renouncing the authority of the Pope. Thereafter, Catholics remained barred from public office unless they took that Test Oath. This was the America to which a steady flow of Irish Catholics emigrated after the failed rising of 1798 in Ireland.

## The Early Irish in America

As the Irish population grew, anti-Catholic forces celebrated Pope Day, and carried straw effigies of St. Patrick on March 17 which were desecrated to taunt the Irish. The new Irish were quick to defend their honor; their reaction was swift, and violence was a normal result. The influence of the growing Irish population finally forced the city to ban such effigies in 1802. Then, in 1806, Francis Cooper became the first Catholic elected to the New York Assembly; he was told he would have to take the Test Oath. A petition signed by the parishioners of St. Peter's - the city's only Catholic parish - complained that the oath denied Catholics the opportunity of discharging their civic duties, and again, the large number of signatures prompted State Senator and city Mayor De Witt Clinton to sponsor a bill that abolished the Test Oath. But some forces were not happy, and a few months later, an anti-Catholic mob attacked St. Peter's Church. They were held off by members of the Irish community who formed a guard around the building, but the confrontation sparked two days of rioting

Anti-Catholic bigotry, cloaked in the guise of American patriotism, emerged in a nativist prejudice against immigrants — especially the Irish, who began arriving in large numbers. A period of extreme intolerance was launched in the early 1800s that began with social segregation, resulted in discrimination in hiring, and reached its climax in the formation of nativist gangs such as the Order of the Star Spangled Banner, the True Blue Americans and others bent on violence against the Irish Catholic immigrant population. These gangs would coalesce in 1854 into the American Party or 'Know Nothings'. Reminiscent of the penal laws, they sought legislation against the immigrant population who, it was stated, diluted American principles. The growing number of Irish, fleeing conditions in their native land, had become a focus of that prejudice. They were driven to the most difficult and demanding forms of labor where even minimal safety and welfare standards were ignored. In Ireland, the bias of their colonial masters made it necessary to guard their activities from public scrutiny; in America the prejudice from nativists and abusive employers made similar secrecy necessary. Gradually, they came together in the same type of secret societies that had protected them in Ireland.

Nativist prejudice grew from intolerance to violence. St. Mary's RC Church in New York was burned to the ground in 1831; in 1832, 57 Irish railroad workers suffering from Cholera near Malvern, Pennsylvania were refused medical attention, died and were dumped in an unmarked mass grave; in 1834, the Ursuline Convent in Massachusetts was burned down; while in 1834 and 35, nativist gangs attacked the Irish neighborhood of Five Points in New York resulting in several major street brawls that lasted for days.

## The AOH is Born

Then, in 1836, according to The Miner's Journal, a newspaper in Pennsylvania's Schuylkill County anthracite coalfield region, and other newspapers, journals and verified sources of information, we have learned that a contingent of miners from a local group called the Hibernian Benevolent Society traveled to New York's St Patrick's Day parade. While there they met with a group of New York Activists from the St. Patrick's Fraternal Society. The subject of the meeting is not recorded, but since nativist activity was becoming a national threat, it is not difficult to imagine the Irish seeking to coalesce several societies into one major defensive organization. Thus was born The Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH). In several versions of their own history, written and expanded over its lifetime, reference is made to the founding of its first Division at New York's St James Church on May 4, 1836 — less than two months after the historic meeting of the New York and Pennsylvania activists. Coincidentally, another Division was formed at the same time in the coal-fields of Pennsylvania. Local tradition notes that one Jeremiah Reilly of Cass Township, Hecksherville, Schuylkill County, PA started the first AOH division there, but no records have been found to authenticate this.

Know nothing activities spread across the country. In 1854, construction of the Washington Monument was halted when nativists stole and destroyed a granite block donated to the project

by Pope Pius IX since they would tolerate no Catholic stone in that icon to America's first president. The following year, a nativist attack on an Irish neighborhood in Louisville, KY caused 22 deaths and considerable arson and looting. Although the secrecy surrounding the early operation of the AOH makes their origins and their reaction to such attacks difficult to define, it is not unlikely that those who had been members of secret societies in Ireland and England called on their collective experience, and banded together in this new land for the same or similar defensive purposes and dispensed home-grown justice. Soon, other societies like the Hibernian Friendship Society in Arlington Virginia, founded in 1831, joined the growing union of Irish societies that became known as the Ancient Order of Hibernians. As nativist bigotry spread across America, so too did the AOH. True to their purpose, they provided social welfare benefits to members and stood guard to defend Church property. After their formation, actual attacks were few and far between, but the long, cold, and lonely nights of vigil were many. At about this time, a society in Ireland adopted the name Ancient Order of Hibernians and the organization now had Irish links.

As the heroism of the Irish Brigade and other Irish units in the American Civil War had America cheering for the exploits of the sons of Erin in American uniform, the honesty, devotion, and natural charm of the Irish girls, who had found employment as domestic help, were winning admirers on the home front. The natural result of this new regard was a decrease in prejudice against the Irish, and the Know Nothing movement, recognized for the bigoted group it was, faded away. It would emerge again in organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, and other groups dedicated to ethnic hatred and anti-Catholic propaganda, but never again would America politically support a national army of zealots. The AOH, on the other hand, grew stronger. It followed Irish immigrants as they worked their way across the country.

## The Early AOH

The early AOH in America remained a defensive, yet secret, society, and while little is known of its specific activities, it is known that it assisted Irish immigrants in obtaining jobs and social services. Membership was well-guarded and restricted to Irish-born. Even minutes books used member numbers instead of names to protect identities. The first national conventions of the Order were held in New York, but as the Order grew, other jurisdictions began seeking the honor, with Boston becoming the site of the first non-NY gathering. Other controversial issues of the early Order included opening membership to Irish Americans so that American-born sons of immigrants could join and the right of the AOH in Ireland to speak for the Order when they were still dominated by the Crown. At the same time, the militant Fenian Brotherhood began to infiltrate the AOH and run their people for top AOH offices. In the midst of all these issues the AOH split!

In 1883, the Land League called for a Philadelphia convention of all the Irish organizations in America to support Charles Stewart Parnell's Irish Parliamentary Party in their fight for Home Rule. The Irish AOH endorsed Home Rule and Alexander Sullivan, a former member of AOH Div 8, Chicago, who had been suspended for non-payment of dues, aspired to Presidency of the new American branch of the Land League. Sullivan conspired with Henry Sheridan of Div 8, to have the Division financial secretary give him credentials as the Division representative to the convention instead of an officer named O'Malley, who had been elected by the membership. Sullivan was nominated for President of the American Land League, and Andy Brown, County

delegate from St Louis, seconded the nomination guaranteeing a subscription of \$60,000. If Sullivan were elected. Sullivan was elected. When asked where the money would come from, Brown replied, "from the AOH". Sullivan went to AOH National Delegate (President) Jeremiah Crowley, asking that an assessment be levied on every member to honor the pledge he made at the Convention. The assessment was so ordered with no regard for the feelings of the members - many of whom vehemently objected to the Irish AOH position.

## Division of the Order

Meanwhile, many of the rank and file of the American AOH refused to communicate further with Crowley, and appointed Francis Kiernan as National Delegate until the next National Convention in Cleveland on May 16, 1884. At that convention, Crowley appeared and, after a bitter credentials battle, was seated. At the end of a stormy convention, Henry Sheridan of Chicago, Sullivan's co-conspirator was elected National Delegate by a slim majority, and Crowley was made Chairman of National Directory. Three months later, a notice in the New York Times announced that another National Convention of the Order had been held on August 13 in New York City during which the members of the National Board, who were elected in Cleveland, were tried and expelled on charges of conspiring to introduce Irish National Politics into the American Order and merge it with the fragmented Fenian Brotherhood. John Nolan (formerly of the Irish AOH) was elected National Delegate.

On August 26, the 'expelled' Board sent a circular to all Divisions reporting, "a conspiracy has been unearthed in New York which has been in secret operation for 18 months, headed by Hugh Murray of New York County and aided by one Mr Nolan, ex-member of the Irish AOH." They accused the 'conspirators' of holding a mock convention, electing officers, and seceding from the organization. They also revealed that they had come to New York to determine the state of affairs, and learned that before the Cleveland Convention had even met, the New Yorkers had raised \$800. and sent Mr Nolan to Ireland with a message to the Irish AOH that he would be elected National Delegate for America if the Irish AOH would support them as the legal AOH. The circular reported that the Irish order agreed, and, by that agreement, had conspired with the 'New York traitors' and thereby demonstrated that they were "unfit to preside at the head of an organization of the magnitude of ours". The Cleveland Board therefore announced that they had severed all links with the group that they had once "looked to as a faithful friend and father" adding, for good measure, that they were a drain on the Order in America, intellectually a disgrace, and had sacrificed the whole organization for a few New York favorites. It was signed by the Cleveland National Board including Henry Sheridan, National Delegate and Jeremiah Crowley, Chairman.

Law suits followed by both sides over Division and County property and the right to use the name 'Ancient Order of Hibernians'. There were now two organizations in America: one took the name of the AOH, Board of Erin, and the other the AOH in America. American branch also changed the title of National Delegate to National President. Some of the Board of Erin members in Ireland continued to send correspondence and merchandise to the Board of Erin in America, while others recognized only the AOH in America. In 1886, National President Nolan of the American Board of Erin traveled to the Board of Erin Convention in Ireland to stop them from communicating with the AOH in America. He charged that some of the Board of Erin members had continued their support for the American faction, and the animosity which had split the Order in America was thereby exported to Ireland and they too split with expulsions and law suits resulting.

## American Reconciliation

Thus did politics, personal greed, and petty jealousy bring to a shameful and disgraceful state, one of the noblest of the ancient Orders of Ireland. It would be many years, filled with accusations, lies, and treachery before saner heads prevailed and the two factions in America were brought to true brotherhood through the intervention of Antrim-born Bishop James McFaul of Trenton, NJ. At an AOH national convention in Trenton, Bishop McFaul encouraged the warring factions of the AOH to come together and charter a merger. The American Branch, represented by its President, P.J. O'Connor of Savannah, GA and the Board of Erin Branch, represented by its National Delegate, Rev. E.S. Phillips of the diocese of Scranton agreed and the Board of Erin Branch was re-absorbed into the American Branch in July, 1898.

The sad part is that the bond between the American and Irish branches of this noble order were never officially reconciled. The intervening years have dimmed the recollection of the dispute, but the memory that one existed was never truly forgotten.

Years later, the apolitical and religious posture of the Irish organization dictated their decision to support Parnell's struggle for an independent Ireland through Parliamentary reform and they became champions of Home Rule in Ireland. The appearance in the early 1900's of a more militant faction never swayed the AOH Board of Erin from that commitment, and they were often criticized for not being outspoken disciples of the revolutionary action proposed by the heroes of Easter Week. They remained true to their principles, and gave neither support nor opposition to the militants during the 1916 insurrection, the War of Independence, and the Civil War that followed. This again strained relations with the American AOH who supported the militants although AOH divisions in Ireland who remained affiliated with the American Board did take part in the rising.

For years, the two Boards remained as distant cousins who never spoke. Few remembered, or even knew, the old animosities, and fewer still held grudges against the branch of the Order across blue highway home, yet the breach remained - in spite of the fact that the AOH in America proudly pointed to their Irish heritage and the fact that the Irish organization had a litany of proud accomplishments and opposition to the Crown.

### **International Reconciliation**

Then, in 1981, Jack Connolly, President of the AOH in America, stopped into an AOH hall in Ireland. His historic gesture, opened dialogue between the two branches of the Order, and resulted in the visit of a group of Belfast Hibernians to Boston and New York to march in their St Patrick's Day parades. Hospitality was provided to visiting Hibernian officials during the next few administrations, but little of significance occurred until 1992 when Board of Erin Secretary Frank Kieran visited America. Hibernian hospitality was extended by the American Board and, in conversations held during that visit, it was proposed that the two branches consider a joint project. At the 1994 American National Convention in Louisville Kentucky, it was announced that the joint project would be a memorial to the victims of the Great Hunger to be erected in Ireland in 1995.

On August 20 1995, the dream came true as the American and Irish National Boards gathered in Ennistymon, Co. Clare to dedicate that memorial. In unveiling the memorial, Dail Eireann's Minister of State, Donal Carey, noted that this was the first national monument in all of Ireland to the victims of the Great Hunger, and it took the AOH to do it. It was a proud moment for the AOH, and a visible indication of what unity can achieve. More significant, but less publicized was an event that took place days earlier on August 12, just after the American Board had arrived in Ireland. It was the first joint meeting in history between the AOH National Boards of America, Ireland, England, Scotland, and Wales. That meeting opened a new chapter in Hibernian history, which was confirmed by the hospitality extended in Hibernian Halls in Counties Louth, Down, Antrim, and Derry where the American Board was hosted and celebrated. The American Order also marched in solidarity with Board of Erin AOH in Co Derry

in commemoration of the Feast of the Assumption and later, Bloody Sunday. As a result of those historic gatherings and marches, the prejudice of the past has been buried, and the AOH now stands, not only as the oldest Catholic Lay organization in America, but as the largest Irish Catholic society in the world with Divisions across the United States, and close ties with the AOH in Ireland, England, Scotland, and Wales.

### **The AOH in America Today**

In America, the Division is the basic unit of the Order. Divisions are combined into County Boards, which are in turn governed by State Boards, and an overall National Board elected

every two years. Annual dances, concerts, and parades sponsored at all levels of the Order raise millions for charity while providing a showcase for the positive contributions the Irish have made in every walk of American life. Divisions and Hibernian Halls across the country have traditionally provided a welcome for new immigrants. Here, the unique art, dance, music, and other interests of the Irish are fostered and preserved, making the AOH a home away from home for many. They are at the forefront of support for issues concerning the Irish such as Immigration Reform, MacBride Legislation, and the Right to Life. They serve their Church well, yet, they never forget their ancestral homeland, and can always be found lobbying, praying, and working for the total independence of a united 32-county Ireland — as their constitution avows: “by all means constitutional and lawful”.

The initials AOH may tell the story best. Those who say it means Add One Hour are describing the easygoing, no rush attitude of many of its members, while America’s Only Hope has been used to define the loyalty of the Irish to the principles of their adopted land. In any case, its members are best described by the statement, To be Irish is a Blessing, To be a Hibernian is an Honor.