

UP FRONT



CURATOR'S CORNER

By Emily Ruby, Curator

The Degree of Pocahontas

The image of the “noble savage” has long been connected to a uniquely American identity. Since the discovery of the Americas, representations of the American Indian both male and female remained the most potent symbol of this exotic new land. During the American Revolution, secret societies that adopted the dress and nomenclature of the American Indian became a powerful force for rebellion. The Improved Order of Red Men, a fraternal and patriotic society, traces its origins back to these revolutionary groups. Although never reaching the numbers of Freemasons in the United States, which topped four million, the Red Men had around half a million members at its height in 1935. It was officially formed as the “Improved Order” in 1834 to distinguish itself from earlier groups of Red Men who had been accused of drunkenness and brawling, but drinking remained a large part of its social gatherings. A ladies auxiliary, The Degree of Pocahontas, was proposed in 1885 and formed in 1887. Despite their names, both the Red Men and the Pocahontas only allowed white members over the age of 18 and of good standing to join until well into the second half of the 20th century. Members wore quasi-American Indian costumes to their meetings and used American Indian nomenclature, choosing to “kindle the council



Dolores Beiter in her council meeting uniform outside her home, c.1950.

HHC Detre L&A, Degree of Pocahontas records and photographs, MFF 4928.



Degree of Pocahontas uniform, c. 1940.

HHC Collections, gift of Dolores Sippos, 2013.1. Photo by Paula Andras.

**Degree of Pocahontas
headdress, c. 1940.**

HHC Collections, gift of Dolores Sippos,
2013.1. Photo by Paula Andras.



Forty Eighth Great Council Session of the Degree of Pocahontas of Pennsylvania convention program. The 48th convention was held at the Roosevelt Hotel, May 16–18, 1949. Dolores Beiter was one of the members of Zino Council #114 to participate in the Presentation of the Flag. The attendees were welcomed by Pittsburgh Mayor David L. Lawrence. Part of the festivities included a tour of the Heinz plant and a visit to Buhl Planetarium.

HHC Detre L&A, Degree of Pocahontas records and photographs, MFF 4928.

fire” rather than call the meeting to order and collecting wampum instead of money.

The Order of the Red Men, as well as The Degree of Pocahontas, were deeply patriotic organizations, with the express purpose of the Pocahontas order identified as increasing patriotism, love of the flag, and “preserving the American way of life.” In Pennsylvania the order also had a high concentration of German Americans. Many of the lodges conducted their meetings and recorded their minutes in German. A recent donation of several complete Pocahontas uniforms and accompanying regalia demonstrate the popularity of the order amongst local Germans in the first half of the 20th century. It is hardly surprising that a large number of immigrants, perhaps in an effort to shed their “Germanness,” would join a fraternal order with such patriotic aims, especially at a time when their loyalty to their country was in question in light of Germany’s bellicose aims.

The Zino Council #114 in Arlington Heights followed this historic trend as many of its members were of German descent, including Dolores Beiter, whose daughter, Dolores Sippos, donated the collection. The image of her mother dressed in regalia and heading off to a meeting is a persistent childhood memory, since Beiter was a devoted member from 1937 (when the Zino Council

formed) until it closed in the late 1950s. Her daughter was born in 1938 and remembers that conventions and meetings took up much of her mother’s time. There were four Degree of Pocahontas councils in the Pittsburgh area in this period, but only one remains today. Although it was distinguished by its unique costumes and language, the organization was much like other beneficial and fraternal societies in America. The councils provided

insurance for members, a venue for socializing with neighbors, and raised money for the community; in the case of the Pittsburgh organization, its members raised money for and operated the Degree of Pocahontas Home for the Aged. After the chapter closed in the late 1950s, Mrs. Beiter took in the large collection of the Order’s regalia, which she kept packed away until her death in 2010. *

The Zino Council “kindled their council fires” in Redman Hall on Arlington Avenue. Dolores is seated second from left.

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