

## Order of the Elks Issue

### Support Our Youth

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### **Improved Benevolent Protective Order of Elks of the World (IBPOEW)**

African Americans during the 19th and the first half of the 20th century were denied entry into any of the white fraternal organizations. However there was a distinct need and desire for these organizations in African American communities for the same reasons that they were wanted everywhere. They provided financial, spiritual and emotional aid and served their communities in many other ways. For African Americans, these organizations also provided a boost in self-esteem. The first of these African American societies were formed prior to the Civil War and they provided one of the few routes for the African American to economic and personal advancement.

One of these organizations, the *Improved Benevolent Protective Order of the Elks of the World* (IBPOEW), has become the largest African American fraternal organization in the world. The IBPOEW was modeled after the BPOE and its stated purpose is, "*that the welfare and happiness of its members be promoted and enhanced, that nobleness of soul and goodness of heart be cultivated, that the principles of charity, justice, brotherly & sisterly love and fidelity be inculcated, that its members and their families be assisted and protected, and that the spirit of patriotism be enlivened and exalted.*"

The *Black Elks* was formed in 1898 in Cincinnati, Ohio by B.F. Howard and Arthur J. Riggs, a Pullman porter. They had been denied membership in the all-white BPOE and they were determined to form an organization that granted membership to all qualified individuals without regard to race, creed, or ethnicity. Mr. Riggs was able to obtain a copy of the BPOE ritual and after consultation with an attorney discovered that it was not copyrighted. Riggs applied for and was granted a copyright of the ritual and on November 17, 1898 the first meeting of the *Black Elks* was held.

When the BPOE found out that African Americans were using their ritual, they

set out to dissolve the **Black Elks** by any and all means. The BPOE assembled a mob and marched on the **Black Elks** to demand that they give up the ritual . Riggs then asked the BPOE to produce their copyright and when they could not, he stated ,"*another word about a Negro Elk Lodge and I will put the entire white lodge in jail for infringing on my copyright.*"

Since the white lodge could not challenge the **Black Elks** on legal grounds, they tried intimidation. White Elks in Birmingham, Alabama pulled him from the train on which he was a porter and threatened him with lynching unless he relinquished the charter on his next trip to Birmingham. Under this threat to his life Riggs agreed, but never returned to Birmingham. Riggs was forced out of his job by the white Elks and could not find work anywhere in Cincinnati, so in 1899 under an assumed name Riggs and his family moved to Springfield, Ohio. Riggs said, "*By my action in getting the Order started, the white Elks in Cincinnati boycotted me and I could not hold a job. My family was suffering because I could not get work to sustain them.*"

B.F. Howard took over the running of the organization after Riggs went into hiding and with the help of another African American fraternity, the **Knights of Pythias**, the first chapter of the **Black Elks** was instituted in Cincinnati in 1899, with the full title of **Improved Benevolent Protective Order of Elks of the World (IBPOEW)**. The title change did nothing to quell the resentment among members of the White Elks. Although reconciled to the inevitability of a Black Elk organization, they resented the IBPOEW's use of the BPOE seal. Use of the seal by non-BPOE members was even ruled illegal in New York State in 1906. Sensing an opportunity to improve relations with the BPOE, the IBPOEW Grand Exalted Ruler Armand W. Scott ordered Black Elks to wear an IBPOEW pin and not the BPOE pin, even though they differed only by the initials engraved over the elk's head at center. This small difference, apparently, was enough and in 1918, the BPOE officially ended its opposition to the IBPOEW. The period of inter-fraternal strife was rendered closed.

Since that time, the IBPOEW and its women's organization, the Daughters of the IBPOEW, have continued to work for the African-American community. With departments as diverse as education, health, veteran's affairs, and civil liberties, the IBPOEW works to stay current to the concerns of African Americans and Black Elks worldwide.

**Sources:**

[Encyclopedia Africana](#)  
[North-by-South.org](#)

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