A Page From Our Past: Odd Fellows Representative of Grand Era of Fraternalism,

_The Pantagraph_

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The Independent Order of Odd Fellows was once such a popular fraternal or “secret” society that Bloomington’s foremost IOOF lodge didn’t think twice about building a showpiece temple—both in size and architectural style—in the heart of downtown Bloomington.

The first temple was lost to flames and its successor’s fate was tied to the rise of State Farm Insurance and its need for downtown office space. Both temples were owned by Odd Fellows Remembrance Lodge No. 77, though that chapter shared their space with other local IOOF lodges and fraternal societies.

The Odd Fellows order was established with conviviality, moral uplift and community service in mind, with members commanded to “visit the sick, relieve the distressed, bury the dead and educate the orphan.” There was also an important insurance component to Odd Fellows membership, for in the day before Social Security, Medicare, and other public and private social safety nets, the IOOF and most other fraternal organizations offered some measure of sickness, disability or death benefits.

The original Odd Fellows temple in Bloomington, located on the east side of the courthouse square and completed in 1886-1887, was an ornate building of brick and stone in the Victorian...
Romanesque style. Designed by Bloomington architect George Miller, this highly wrought beauty did not survive the Great Bloomington Fire of June 19-20, 1900.

Yet this being the "Golden Age of Fraternalism,” there was no keeping the Odd Fellows down. Some two weeks later, in early July, Remembrance Lodge sold their burned out commercial lot in favor of one a stone's throw away—at the southwest corner of East and Jefferson streets.

The contract for a new three-story temple building was closed in late August or early September, less than two months after the Great Fire, and by October construction was well underway. This neo-classic temple or lodge hall (see accompanying photograph) was the handiwork of Arthur L. Pillsbury, another prominent Bloomington architect.

At this time there were no less than eight Odd Fellow lodges in Bloomington-Normal, including the African-American Paradise Lodge No. 2829 and two female “Degree of Rebekah” lodges (the IOOF was the first major fraternal order to open its membership to women).

Fraternalism was at its apex at the turn of the last century, with the IOOF one of many secret societies that shaped post-Civil War American society. In fact, for a while Odd Fellows outpaced even Freemasonry in membership to become the largest fraternal organization in the U.S. Other secret societies with Bloomington chapters included the Knights of Pythias, Ancient Order of Hibernians, Independent Order of Good Templars, Improved Order of Red Men, Knights of the Globe, Modern Woodmen of America, and many others.

The new temple building, much like its Main Street predecessor, doubled as a commercial building. For many years Peoples Restaurant and M.L. Moore Co., a harness and saddlery shop, occupied the street level. Early second floor tenants included the Illinois Club, several smaller Odd Fellow lodges, and a few other secret societies, including the female auxiliary of the Knights of the Maccabees. Remembrance Lodge No. 77, the city’s largest and most prominent Odd Fellow chapter (and building owner), occupied the entire third floor.

On July 9, 1901, this lodge dedicated their new quarters with allegorical tropes and dramatic flourishes common to secret societies then and now. For instance, in the public ceremony for the new temple room, “heralds” representing the four cardinal directions assembled the ceremonial altar, each altar piece symbolizing one of the order’s “Mystic Seven” principles—purity, friendship, love, truth, faith, hope and charity.

For the next three-and-a-half decades this temple was the hub of local Odd Fellows activity. Yet by the mid-1930s it became increasingly apparent that State Farm Insurance executives, desperately looking to expand downtown, had their eyes on the building.
The rapidly growing insurance company was quite familiar with the 1901 IOOF hall, having leased much of the first two floors in the 1920s for office space. And beginning in 1929 the two were neighbors, separated only by an alley, when State Farm built the first stage of its Art Deco downtown office building at the corner of East and Washington streets.

Although it’s difficult to tell today from a quick drive-by, the State Farm “skyscraper” was built in four major stages over some sixteen years. The southern half (the side closest to Washington Street) is older, with the first eight floors going up in 1929 and four more floors and a rooftop auditorium finished in 1933-1934.

State Farm then purchased the Odd Fellows temple on September 9, 1937, and began tearing it down in mid-July the following year. The cleared lot opened up an area for the insurance high-rise to expand toward Jefferson Street. Consequently, the first eight floors of the northern half of the State Farm building went up in 1939-1940, with five more floors added in 1945.

Remembrance Lodge No. 77 didn’t look back but instead built its third temple in less than four decades. Located at 303 E. Monroe St. on the eastern edge of downtown, the newest IOOF building was the work of Edgar Lundeen, yet another talented Bloomington architect. Dedicated July 26, 1938, this handsome temple was appreciably smaller than the previous two lodge halls, a sign perhaps of the precipitous decline to come in the strength and influence of fraternal societies after World War II.

And indeed, in 1987 the Odd Fellows temple was sold to Seventh-day Adventists, and since that time the old lodge hall has mostly served as a church for various denominations and congregations.