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## Hibernians keep heritage alive

Friendship, banter mark organization for Irish Catholics

ELMIRA — Tom Dean sat at a table in the hall of the Msgr. John J. Lee Division No. 1 of the Ancient Order of Hibernians and explained his reasons for belonging to the order.

"I work in the investment field, and it's a great place to stop after work in this market," he said of the hall, which features a bar.

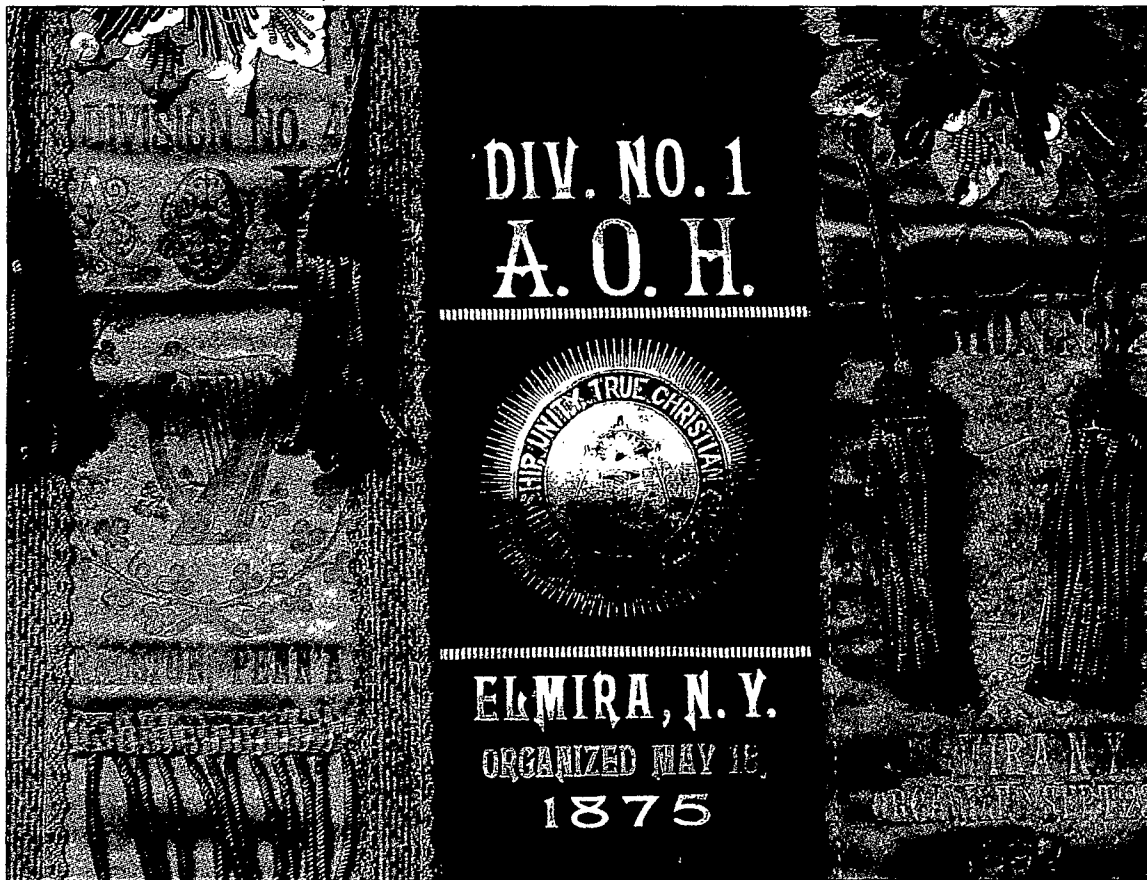
Everyone around him laughed loudly. Smiles creased the faces of such men as Jack Crowley, a charter member and the oldest "brother" present. In fact, it seemed that being able to dish out and take a fair amount of good-natured ribbing is a membership requirement.

When asked why he had joined the Hibernians, Dick Dalton, who oversees the division's publicity, said with a straight face: "I admired the fact that they were looking for quality, not quantity." His comment was greeted with howling laughter.

As F. Skilly O'Connor, director of the AOH choir, tried to explain his involvement in the organization, another member interrupted to say, "His wife doesn't let him sing at home."

More laughter erupted, then the members seriously tried to explain their attachment to the AOH. Several noted that diversity of members' occupations, from prison guards and policemen to lawyers and doctors, made for a solid network of helpful connections.

"If you have troubles, or you need help in any direction, there's a member here who's able to help you," said Mike



The Msgr. John J. Lee Division No. 1 of the Ancient Order of Hibernians in Elmira celebrates its 50th anniversary this year. The organization keeps an archive of historical artifacts, including the delegate tags, above, from the late 1800s, which were worn by members during conventions.

Dooley, a past president. The division's current president is Merc Morris.

"I think everyone respects everyone, everyone cares about everyone and everyone likes everyone," Dean said.

"My extended family is here," said Tom Corcoran, a member since 1973. "The guys I play golf with are here, the guys I go on vacation with are here."

He added that being a member of the Hibernians also has deepened his appreciation for his Irish heritage.

"It was a St. Patrick's (Day) thing that you were Irish," he said of the period before he joined. "Now it's a 365-day thing."

### FAITHFUL DEFENDERS

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Chemung County Hibernians, although previous groups of Hibernians have existed in Elmira since the 1800s. The division celebrated its 50th anniversary with a Mass at Ss. Peter and Paul Church in Elmira on Feb. 15, 50 years to the date of its founding.

The Elmira AOH has about 400 members and is part of a larger national body, which is the oldest Catholic lay organization in North America. The national AOH maintains a Web site at [www.aoh.com](http://www.aoh.com). Officially formed in New York City in 1836, the AOH has di-

visions in 49 states where members are involved in countless charitable activities and social events each year. The organization also has assisted countless Irish immigrants in settling in America, and sponsors dance, music and cultural events.

The AOH had an antecedent in Ireland itself, an organization of the same name that worked to aid and comfort people during Ireland's Penal Era, when Irish Catholics were persecuted by Protestant rulers from England. Anti-Catholicism played a role in the AOH's formation here, according to the organization's history.

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Story by Rob Cullivan • Photo by Karin von Voigtlander

