Fraternal organizations have existed in this country for hundreds of years. Many people who compose the elder generation either belong or had belonged to one. However, the younger generations don’t seem to be attracted. As the membership erodes, these groups sit by year after year hoping for new members, but few join. If they do not see a turn-around soon, many will close their doors forever, taking away their benefit to society. Awareness needs to be brought to this situation, and people need to understand the impact these groups have on the well-being of everyone. One group in particular, the Independent Order of Odd Fellows (I.O.O.F), continues its elevated level of care even though its membership steadily declines. Its values, beliefs and history are in danger of being lost due to lack of new membership, loss of older members and the lack of continuously passes on beliefs and traditions. The main purpose of this research is to explore the I.O.O.F.s’ value to society by explaining its beliefs and the principles that it works under.

The Independent Order of Odd Fellows, also known as “Odd Fellows” and the “Lodge”, is an organization of men and women with high moral values and of honorable, dedicated character. People join for the purpose of doing good wherever they can, particularly in the support of the less fortunate. Its mission, as listed on the web site (Independent) for the Sovereign Grand Lodge, is to “visit the sick, relieve the distressed, bury the dead and educate the orphan.” It has an obligation to stand by one another in all situations of life and to assist others when they are in need. With every member taking this obligation, all the lodges of the order are united. Each member stands by the other to help and promote the members’ interests wherever they can. If a member becomes sick, they receive assistance, if needed, to pay for care and medications. The other members will visit them to give them comfort so they know that there
are people who care and wish them the very best. When a member becomes elderly and cannot live on their own, they have assisted living institutions available where that member can go to spend the rest of their days. When a member passes, Odd Fellows perform a memorial service and help the surviving family with the funeral expenses. If a member becomes in need, other members pull their resources together from across all lodges to assist with the crisis. When the organization was founded, educating the orphan was a staple in the developed principles. However, as the United States government grew, the lodge was stripped of that function to programs that tax payers fund. Nonetheless, still part of its creed, the I.O.O.F. actively finds other ways to support children.

Further, the Lodge actively promotes uniting all hearts in Friendship, Love and Truth to encourage harmony and peace. In sum, the Lodge is an organization of kindness. It “spends over $775 million in relief projects annually” as reported from a pamphlet that it distributes. That same pamphlet also lists other areas that the I.O.O.F. provides for such as an educational foundation to provide loans and grants to students, a children’s village in Cambodia for orphans, a program called “Living Legacy” that plants trees and enhances the environment, adult and juvenile arthritis research, and visual research through the Wilmer Eye Institute at John Hopkins University. With the strength in numbers, Odd Fellows are moving mountains to advance medical research. Locally, it donates to local charities such as Hosanna Industries, The Lighthouse, North Hills Community Outreach and the Women’s Center of Allegheny County, and many others. As the organization grew in numbers and resources, it expanded its target from not just providing benefits to members but to society as a whole.

Generally speaking, the term ‘Odd Fellows’ is synonymous with men gathering for fellowship. Within the last few years, women have become permitted to be a member of the
men’s branch. Previously, a women’s branch called the “Rebekahs” was established. With principles being very similar to that of the men, it provided a place where the women could gather to do good throughout the community. Also, there are lodges for young boys and girls called “Junior Odd Fellow Lodge” and “Theta Rho” respectively. These lodges give young people the opportunity to learn the principles of Odd Fellowship. For members who want to continue past the traditional lodge, a branch called the “Encampment” is available that is based on the motto of “Faith, Hope and Charity” (Beharrell, 82). Lastly, the “Patriarchs Militant” branch is a uniformed lodge that offers the highest degree of Odd Fellowship, the “Chevalier degree”. This branch of the order is as close to the Masonic organization as it gets.

Obviously, an organization of this size needs to have a chain of command. (Reference Appendix A for the organizational chart.) The Sovereign Grand Lodge (SGL) is the supreme leader of the organization nationwide. It has complete control and final say on what happens to the organization. Underneath the SGL is the Grand Lodge for each state. Each Grand Lodge oversees the happenings of its respective state and enforces the decisions from above. District Deputies are representatives to Grand Lodge, and they manage all the lodges in their region. Each lodge is like a subsidiary; a small company in itself that has a person in charge called the “Noble Grand”. It manages the lodge’s affairs and its members, the meetings and has final say over decisions. Each individual lodge has elected offices such as a Vice Grand, Secretary, Treasurer and sometimes a Financial Secretary. The Noble Grand also appoints supporting officers to assist in the activities during the meetings.

To summarize, Ross explains The Order of Odd Fellows started in England in the 18th century. The earliest records date back to 1748 showing Aristarchus Lodge No. 9 was meeting in a tavern in London. Since lodges were usually numbered in consecutive order, that implies
there were eight lodges prior. However, no records are available to prove they existed. A gentlemen’s magazine in 1745 wrote the Odd Fellows Lodge as “a place where very pleasant and recreative evenings are spent” (Ross, 10). In the early days, after the formal business of the meeting was conducted, the brothers gathered for good fellowship. During this time period, the lodge was only open to men. In England, the organization was operated under a management body called the “Manchester Unity”. American Odd Fellowship started April 28, 1819 by Thomas Wildey, an immigrant from London. On receiving a charter from the Manchester Unity in England on October 23, the first official lodge, Washington Lodge No. 1, was established. It was also granted the position of Supreme Mother Lodge. In February 1821, the Past Grands held a meet to discuss the need for a Grand Lodge and to remove the legislative capacity from that of the working lodges. The proposal unanimously passed, and the Grand Lodge of Maryland was formed with Wildey as Grand Master. “In 1843 the American order declared itself independent” (The New International Encyclopedia, 364) from that of the Manchester Unity, and the term Independent was added to the name of the order. Throughout the 1800s, membership continued to grow (Ross, 12-16). In 1829, the membership totaled 3,036 (Ross, 36), and in 1914, the total grew to 1,508,791 (The New International Encyclopedia, 364).

The Odd Fellows has had some influential members and has been involved in many special events. For instance, four United States presidents were Odd Fellows: Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, William McKinley and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Grant’s vice president, Schuyler Colfax was an Odd Fellow and founded the Rebekahs in 1851 (Ellis). In 1934, as reported by the Sovereign Grand Lodge (Independent), President Roosevelt granted a privilege to the Odd Fellows to take part in the ceremony of the Tomb of Unknown Soldier. Additionally, no other civilian organization holds this honor. The Los Angeles Past District Deputies
Association is involved as the representatives to the Rose Bowl Parade. According to their website (IOOF Rose Parade), the Odd Fellows has participated in the Rose Bowl Parade starting in 1908. Although not participating every year, it has been continuously represented since 1955.

According to The Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania internet site (Independent), there are 92 Odd Fellows lodges, 21 Encampment lodges, 6 Canton lodges, 42 Rebekah lodges, 1 Ladies Encampment Auxiliary and 6 Ladies Auxiliary Patriarchs Militant in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. At one time, there were eight Odd Fellows Homes in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The first Odd Fellows Home in the country was located in Meadville, PA and was established in April 1872 (Wolfe, 12). Currently, there are two left: One in Grove City, PA and the other in Middletown, PA. The Odd Fellows, like most other civic organizations, is hitting tough times. Membership is down, lodges are closing their doors and money is dwindling. Interests and focus from society are not being directed towards groups like this. Nonetheless, William Ehmann, a member of Hampton Lodge #1004, is keeping a positive outlook. When asked if the order could flourish again, Ehmann convincingly said: “Yes, but the members will have to work at it.” When asked about the trends of membership, Ehmann is quoted as saying “When times are bad, fraternal organizations flourish but when times are good, they seem to go by the wayside.”

To become an Odd Fellows member is a unique and interesting process. When someone submits an application for membership, that person is interviewed and voted on by the members of the lodge. Before a new candidate can learn the teachings of the order, they must be initiated into the lodge. The initiatory degree is where a candidate learns about the structure and principles of the lodge, as well as the meeting and the conduct that a member should follow. This is where he or she gets exposed to the mission and creed of the Odd Fellows:
I believe in the Fatherhood of God, and the Brotherhood of man. I believe in Friendship, Love, and Truth as basic guides to the ultimate destiny of all mankind. I believe my home, my church or temple, my lodge, and my community deserve my best work, my modest pride, my earnest faith, and my deepest loyalty, as I perform my duty to visit the sick, relieve the distressed, bury the dead, and educate the orphan, and as I work with others to build a better world, because, in spirit and in truth, I am and must always be, grateful to my Creator, faithful to my country, and fraternal to my fellow man; I am an Odd Fellow! (Sovereign Grand Lodge, “Charge Book”).

At this point, the new member obtains just enough information to work their way into a lodge meeting. They are allowed to hold appointed but not elected offices. Recently, Sovereign Grand Lodge passed legislation that requires all lodges to open in the initiatory degree. This allows new members to participate before acquiring any of the other degrees. It is at the lodge’s discretion to change to another degree during the meeting. If a member does not obtain that particular degree, they must exit the meeting room and wait in the anteroom.

The three links is the most recognized symbol of the organization represents the three teaching degrees (Reference the Appendix A for a picture). Sometimes the lodge is called the “Three Link Fraternity” because of this symbol. In the valediction that the members recite during the closing of a meeting, they restate the elements of the links by saying the words Friendship, Love and Truth. The links intertwined to form a chain. However, if any one is not followed, the chain is broken. The three degrees work together to help “build a better world and to live a more rewarding life” (Sovereign Grand Lodge, “Charge Book”).

The first teaching degree is the degree of Friendship. The color of the regalia for this degree is pink. The principle of this degree is Fraternity. The teachings are from the Old Testament of the Bible: 1 Samuel 18 which is the story of the friendship between David and Jonathan. When David was sought to be killed by Saul, Jonathan went to his father, The King, to plead for David. This angered the King who, in turn, attempted to kill Jonathan, his son. It was then when Jonathan and David “solemnly pledged eternal friendship” (Sovereign Grand Lodge,
“Charge Book”). This degree represents the members being part of an overall fellowship. When a member is in distress, he or she is entitled to aid, council and protection from fellow members. However, the member is to return the gesture when a fellow member requires need or support. Two groups of symbols represent this degree (Reference the Appendix A for a picture of the banner of the first degree). First, the bow, arrows and quiver signify the friendship between Jonathan and David and serve as a reminder to aid other members when in need. Second, a bundle of sticks represents strength. Each stick alone is easily broken; however, as a group the bundle is strong.

The second teaching degree is the degree of Brotherly Love. It is the middle link in the chain and is represented as the color blue. Without the middle link, the first and last will have no value. This teaching is also from the Bible: Luke 10:30-34 which is of the Good Samaritan. In the story, a man was robbed and wounded, left on the side of the road to perish. A Priest and a Levite came upon the man but passed to leave him suffer. However, an adversary came to his aid. The charge book used by the order declares that “through love, a member extends their helping hand to all; regardless of race, nationality or background” (Sovereign Grand Lodge, “Charge Book”). The symbols for the second degree are the ax, the heart and hand, the globe, the Ark and a serpent (Reference the Appendix A for a picture of the banner of the second degree). The Ax is the sign of progress symbolizing the trees of the forest need to fall to clear the way. The Heart and Hand imply that when greeting a fellow member, it should be with honesty and affection from the heart. The Globe signifies the endless limit of scope; that no member should be turned away no matter where they are from. The Ark is a reminder of the receptacle for the two stones that the Ten Commandments were written on. The Serpent is a
symbol of wisdom which serves as a reminder to proceed with caution to keep the mysteries of
the order concealed.

Lastly, the third and teaching degree is the degree of Truth. It is the basis of all other
principles. Explaining that the Bible is the fundamental example of truth, members are taught
that this is the guide by which they conduct themselves. The symbols of the third degree are
scales and sword, an hourglass, a coffin and the Bible (Reference the Appendix A for a picture of
the banner of the third degree). The scales and sword are synonymous with justice and are
reminders to promote kindness and truth. The Bible is a reminder to be truthful. The hourglass
is a figure of time that keeps moving, showing that human life has an end. Finally, the coffin is
the last resting place of man and the certainty of death. In the end, wealth or social status does
not save one from the ultimate ending.

The workings of the Lodge do contain secret work, passwords and gestures. Because of
this, many outsiders believe the members have something to hide. One common misconception
the members hear about is the name. They get asked if their organization has to do with sexual
preference. Sexual preference is not the meaning behind the word ‘Odd’. Although no recorded
factual information exists, it has been passed down through the generations that ‘Odd’ is part of
the name because of the service that the organization provides. In the 18th century, it was ‘odd’
for people to share what they had, especially with total strangers. Another inquiry is about the
Catholic Church ban that was placed on the Odd Fellows in September of 1893. The New York
Times is quoted as stating: “No Catholic can join the interdicted orders now under pain of
excommunication, and Priests are exhorted to do all in their power to induce those already
affiliated to resign” (New York Times, “Church’s Ban”). The ban is still in place with the
Catholic Church although, it is seldom enforced. Many people of the Catholic religion are members, and they have been for many years.

It is easy to state false claims or ideas about something without researching the facts. It seems that people have been taking aim at fraternal organizations for unknown reasons. It is hard to pinpoint why this is happening, however, it is destroying a beneficial part of society. By educating people, maybe the bullets directed towards these groups will eventually stop. The Independent Order of Odd Fellows exists to provide aid and support to as many people as physically and financially possible, not just to members. We need these organizations around to keep a balance in society. They provide the foundation that, if everyone would live by, would make this world a better place. Take an interest to learn more about the Odd Fellows and consider the impact if they no longer existed.
Works Cited

Beharrell, Rev. T.G. Odd Fellows Monitor and Guide.
    Indianapolis: Robert Douglass 1892


The Independent Order of Odd Fellows and Rebekahs. The Sovereign Grand Lodge of the

    <http://www.caioof.org/Floats/Floats.html>.

“Odd Fellows.” The New International Encyclopedia. 2nd ed. 1916

    New York: M. W. Hazen 1905

The Sovereign Grand Lodge, Independent Order of Odd Fellows Charge Book of a
