

The Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor

by Jim Steinberg



The K of L was founded on December 9, 1869 in Philadelphia by 9 tailors. The leader of these men was Uriah Stephens, who also being a Mason, was instrumental in creating the elaborate rituals and secrecy of the K of L. So secret was the organization that rituals were passed along by word of mouth, and in published announcements the name of the K of L was shown only as 5 asterisks ***** (something to look for in old papers).

In 1878, when the K of L became national, Uriah Stephens was elected its first Grand Master Workman. These men created an organization whose intent was not to oppose industry, but instead to improve the lot of the working man through education and self help. The K of L was meant to be an organization for both tradesmen and workers in industry. It was set up as follows:



- Grand Master Workman head of the General Assembly (the National Body)
- District Master Workman head of the District Assembly
- Master Workman head of the Local Assembly (5 or more to a district)

Initial growth of the order was slow. Religious aspects of the rituals kept some workers away. The secrecy of the Knights was opposed by the Catholic church which prohibited membership in the K of L. Furthermore, the unmasking of the Molly McGuires had created in the public mind a perception that secret organizations were inherently criminal.

Initiation in the coal mines reflected the secret and ritualistic nature of the K of L. It might start with a candidate walking to an abandoned coal mine. Men in black hoods and gowns would conduct the miner further into the tunnels where another hooded man would lecture upon the purpose of the K of L. Next, the hooded man would administer the oaths of secrecy, obedience, and mutual assistance. Ultimately, the frightened candidate would be led deeper into the mine to the Chamber of the 5 Stars where he would be announced as a new member of the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor.



The religious aspects of the rituals were reduced a bit in 1879 and objecting, Uriah Stephens quit. He would die in 1882 without seeing the K of L rise dramatically to power. The new Grand Master Workman was Terrance V. Powderly. In 1881 he had the remains of the religious aspects of the rituals removed and put an end to the secrecy of the Knights. None the less, a Vatican lift of the ban of the K or L did not arrive until 1887.

The 1880s were turbulent years for labor in America. With a depression following the Civil War and the host of strikes and failures of labor unions, industrial workers had few places to turn. Upon the collapse of the American Miners Association, subsequent small unions had difficulty building clout. It became apparent to miners that the K of L must be the wave of the future. In 1877, miners from Pennsylvania and Ohio were joining the Knights of Labor and held a state miners convention in 1880. In the 1870s Mary Harris herself, aka Mother Jones, joined the K of L while still a seamstress, and got her first taste of the labor movement.

Unfortunately for the miners, the K of L preferred arbitration of strikes (though K of L got deeply involved in many). So, impatient with the Knights, the miners formed the Amalgamated Association of Miners of the United States on May 15, 1883 under John McBride. The Amalgamated went down to bitter defeat in a strike in the Hocking Valley of Ohio in March of 1885. In September of 1885, the miners formed another union: The National Federation of Miners and Mine Laborers. Main officers were executive secretary Chris Evans

and treasurer Daniel McLaughlin. On February 24, 1886, the National Federation signed with operators, history's first wage contract.

The Knights of Labor were not pleased with the creation of these rival unions. A National Trade Assembly was formed for miner's Number 135, and the K of L demanded participation in Miner/Operator meetings. The Knights, National Trade Assembly and the National Federation held several joint conventions, but it was not to last. In December 1888, the K of L separated from the National Federation in disagreement. The National Federation renamed itself The National Progressive Union of Miners and Mine Laborers and joined with Samuel Gompers's new American Federation of Labor (AFL). The AFL couldn't have been more different from the K of L. Whereas the K of L promoted industrial unionism, which chafed the tradesmen within its ranks, the AFL single mindedly supported unionism strictly by trade. Ultimately, the K of L would fail to survive the difference.

It was in September of 1899 that the National Trade Assembly No. 135 of the K of L and the National Progressive Union decided to bury the hatchet. The National Progressive Union with 10,000 members and the K of L with 15,000 members bargained their way to reunion. On January 25, 1890, they formed a new organization that exists to this day -- the United Mine Workers of America.

The Knights of Labor lingered a few years more. In 1881, they had 19,000 members; by 1885, 111,000 and in 1886 membership exceeded 700,000 with many new members from Colorado and states further west. In 1886 the K of L appeared to have total control of the American labor movement, but after massive failure in a strike against the Gould Southwest System (a railroad), membership began to fall rapidly. In 1888 membership was 200,000 and by the time Terence Powderly was ousted in 1893, there were only 70,000 members in the K of L. The new Grand Master Workman, James R. Sovereign redirected the Knights toward political action, but with the dwindling membership, no longer possessed the power to translate words into action.

Years after leaving the K of L, Terence Powderly remarked of the miners: "In strikes, coal miners have always shown the most sublime fortitude and greatest endurance. From all I have witnessed, and from my study of strikes, I am impelled to say that the miner can endure hunger and privation until the front wall of stomach and his spinal column are about ready to lean on each other for support. The reason for this is that it requires the most heroic type of manhood to seek a living in the mine, and he who has the courage to make that step in the dark each day, which every miner does, must be made of the good stuff, must be endowed with great patience and capable of enduring privation and want."

