

Elks Club steps into the spotlight

One of the oldest and most substantial fraternal lodges in the area, the Santa Cruz Elks, established here 77 years ago.

The lodge has maintained a low profile, but a recent decision was made to spend a bit of time in the public eye to enhance its membership and broadcast its projects.

According to Exalted Ruler William Simas, the national Order of Elks, founded in 1868, has built itself into the nation's largest fraternal and charitable organization. Locally, membership is 1,200. Nationally, membership is 1.8 million.

The Elks built the first veterans hospital in the U.S. and sponsors the second largest scholarship program in the U.S., second only to the U.S. government, he said.

Locally, some \$750 is distributed annually for scholarships.

The Order of Elks is limited to American citizens "who love their country and desire to preserve its cherished institutions; who love their fellow man and seek to promote his well being."

Simas said there is no color barrier. "We just want red blooded Americans who are good upstanding citizens." The local lodge headquarters is at 150 Jewel St.

In the early days, the initiation fee was 50 cents. Now, larger lodges charge \$300, but in Santa Cruz it is \$100.

Helping is a theme of the Elks. Nationally, money was raised for the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake victims, money was sent for the 1908 Italian Earthquake relief and to ease the financial burden of those caught in the 1965 Alaska quake.

Other projects range from raising funds for cerebral palsy and retarded children programs, for hospitals, cancer research, eye and blood banks and for nurse training.

In California, some \$2 million is raised each year for handicapped children programs.

The Elks were the first to honor the U.S. flag on June 14th of each year, said Simas. The tradition started in 1907. Later this evolved into National Flag Day.

The Santa Cruz Lodge provides the manpower to help erect some 300 full sized U.S. Flags four times a year for the Avenue of Flags program.

When the Boy Scouts of America was founded in 1910, 14 lodges sponsored troops immediately. The local lodge has

sponsored Troop 674 for 56 consecutive years, the longest single sponsorship of a troop in the United States.

On Sept. 9, the lodge will honor Michael Dunn, an Eagle Scout of Troop 674 who save the life of a friend in a boating accident.

In 1927, the Elks were the main source of the half million dollars needed for the restoration of the frigate Constitution.

During World War II, Elks were "highly successful in recruiting young men for the forces and created 151 USO type programs for servicemen."

Simas said that "two of the most impressive ceremonies are services honoring mothers in May and tribute to fallen Brothers each December."

The order, he said, questions no man's religion or politics nor bars him on account of his creed. And it does not permit either religion or politics to be injected into its fraternal deliberations, national or local. "

Membership is drawn usually by other members and word of mouth.

"One of the benefits is that when you join, you are not obligated to attend any of the meetings or participate in any projects."

"But when we go into a project, we try to give as much money to it as possible. Almost 97 cents out of the dollar collected goes to the charity to which it is intended," he said.

The lodge seeks to draw into its fraternal circle only those who "delight in wholesome associations with congenial companions; those who are imbued with the spirit of patriotic loyalty and devotion and those who recognize the obligations of human brotherhood, and who desire, without the fanfare of publicity, to help feed the hungry, to shelter the homeless and relieve those in distress."

Current lodge officers, besides Simas, are: leading knight, Bill Sarow; loyal knight, Ken Reaves; lecturing knight, Charles Olivas; esquire, John Wilson; chaplain, Elmer Brown; inner guard, Al Keith; tiler, Bill Gray; organizer, Dave Frankel; secretary, Cy Williams, and treasurer, Truman Wildman.

Members of the Board of Trustees, include Bernie Bourriague, chairman; John Amin, Bill Kelsey, Mario Esposito and Alvin Gregory.