

History of AMERICAN WOODMEN - THE SUPREME CAMP OF THE AMERICAN WOODMEN (AWSC)

Incorporated in the state of Colorado on April 4, 1901, this organization was formed by white men. In August 1910, the society was taken over by black men. Cassius M. White and Granville W. Norman, both of Austin, Texas, were the key black men in the organizational transition. Soon after the organization's new management in 1910, it prospered and grew. By the 1950s the society had some 50,000 members.

Mr. Lawrence H. Lightner

Lawrence H. Lightner was appointed by First Supreme Commander Cassius M. White to the office of Supreme Clerk, a position he held for 20 years. He was elected Supreme Commander in 1933 and remained in that position until his death in 1968. During his tenure, he outlined the entire system of technical operations for the Association.

Under his auspices, the holdings of the American Woodmen grew from \$9,000 in 1910 to almost \$10 million in 1967.



The Board of Directors of the Supreme Camp of American Woodmen (circa 1910)

"We desire to form an Association not for pecuniary profit to promote social and fraternal intercourse among ourselves and our associates; to secure pecuniary aid to widows, orphans, heirs and demisees of deceased members of said Association; to assist members of

said Association who may be in need or distress; to hold or convey in its corporate name such real estate and other property as may be necessary to conduct the affairs of the Association; to authorize and establish Camps and prescribe the ritual and secret works, laws and rules to govern the same.

The Spirit of Fraternalism:

Community Service & Family Values

Throughout its century long history, the American Woodmen camps have emphasized strong family values and community service.



In Chicago, Camp 2 members held an annual tea to raise funds for the less fortunate.

For years, Yoakum Texas Camp 83 carried flowers and fellowship to the elderly in rest homes. Their motto was, "If you love them, tell them while they live."

From Washington, D.C., to Austin, Texas, from Philadelphia to St. Louis, camps enjoyed the fun and fraternal challenge of bettering the community and making life happier for those around them.



Progressive Women: Making History in Changing Times

In addition to their strong family and homemaking commitments, many of the active women of American Woodmen camps excelled as leaders, teachers and professionals.

Many, through hard work, dedication and determination, made names for themselves as pioneers of both women's and civil rights.

Honoring Good Works and Special People

From its inception, the American Woodmen organization encouraged good works, and respect for those who shared their time and talents to help others. Throughout both World Wars and the Great Depression, members volunteered unselfishly for many causes, and Supreme Commander Lightner frequently encouraged them to aim ever higher in their goals of philanthropy and neighborly goodness.

“Aim high,” he told readers of the quarterly *American Woodmen Informer* as the organization entered its 60th year. “Not failure, but low aim is the crime.”

In 1966 the delegates of the Supreme Camp of the American Woodmen voted to accept the recommendation of a consulting firm to form the American Woodmen Life insurance Company, a stock life insurance company. This vote meant giving away \$10,000,000 in assets and additional millions in revenue that would have been realized as income. A couple of years later the AWSC lost control of the American Woodmen Life insurance Company when it merged with the Crusaders Life insurance Company. Between 1972 and 1974 the AWSC was trying to overcome lawsuits that tried to wrest additional assets from its domain. On May 19, 1978, however, the AWSC and the American Woodmen Life insurance Company signed an agreement to work in fraternal harmony.

Although the American Woodmen Life Insurance Company changed some of the AWSC's functions as a fraternal benefit society at that time, the AWSC was still permitted to write insurance certificates in California, Texas, and Colorado. In twenty-one other states the AWSC no longer issued insurance certificates. Fraternal members from the sixteen states (Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, District of Columbia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, North

Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Tennessee), however, participated in the activities of the Supreme Camp.

Membership of the AWSC was and is composed entirely of black citizens. In typical Woodmen fashion, like the white organizations (e.g., Modern Woodmen of America and Woodmen of the World Life Insurance Society), the AWSC employed some of the same terminology. Members were called "Neighbors," a local unit was a "Campus," and most officers bore the same titles as in the older Woodmen societies.

The AWSC had a ritual that also conformed quite closely to the other Woodmen societies. Although the ritual was intended to be kept secret, the AWSC took the secrecy somewhat less seriously than many other fraternal groups. The emblem of the organization consisted of two rings. The smaller or inner circle displayed the words "Brotherhood of Man, 1901," over a view of the rising sun. Below the rising sun stood the inscription, "Protection of the Home." Between the inner and outer circles was the name of the society: Supreme Camp of the American Woodmen.

Administratively, the AWSC had its local units, called "Subordinate Camps." On the national level, the society referred to its structure as the "Supreme Camp." This entity met in convention quadrennially. In the time interval between conventions a board of directors expedited given business matters. The Headquarters of the AWSC were located in Denver, Colorado. Sources on the AWSC were meager. The society's official periodical, *The American Woodmen Informer*, has not been published since 1970.

It was in 1970 that Woodmen of the World entered the lifeblood of the Supreme Camp of the American Woodmen by providing benefit and certificate administration services to the AWSC certificate holders. AWSC continued its own fraternal activities, however. This arrangement continued for some time, until a change in computer systems made it expensive for AWSC to continue the services of Woodmen. The AWSC struggled at this point, and was asked to vacate their home office occupancy at 2100 Downing in Denver and to find someone to handle the affairs of the benefit certificate holders. Working with the staff of the Colorado Insurance Commissioner, the AWSC finally merged with Woodmen of the World and/or Assured Life Association on April 21, 1994.

A permanent scholarship under the name of "The Supreme Camp of the American Woodmen Scholarship" was endowed at the time of the merger to recognize the educational values and goals that had long been supported by their Society. Members of AWSC enjoy all the fraternal benefits offered through Woodmen of the World/Assured Life Association, including the host of college financial support and preparatory programs.

Note: Keith Yates, Historian for the National Fraternal Congress, provided much of the above history. The history is as it was written by Alvin J. Schmidt in his book "*Fraternal Organizations*." Additional information for this write-up was taken from a letter written by Dr. Elbert E. Allen, then Supreme Commander of AWSC to then President of Woodmen of the World, Jim Wiederstein on March 7, 1994. There seems to be some discrepancy in dates according to Mr. Schmidt's book and Dr. Allen's letter, but for the most part agree on the events.