

# Llife

INSIDE  
NEWSDAY HOMES  
G20  
EXPLORE LI  
WEEKEND  
G13



THE LODGE  
BROTHERS AND SISTERS  
PRESERVING 145 YEARS  
OF TRADITION G2

# Ways of the Elk

CHEAP EATS Where to get good food at good prices [exploreli.com/restaurants](http://exploreli.com/restaurants)

11

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"My husband, Rick, is a very proud Navy veteran," Jeannine Musselwhite, of Centereach, writes. "He served on a destroyer escort named the USS Connole. So when these veteran license plates became available, he eagerly put his order in so he could get a veteran license plate with his ship number, DE-1056, on it."

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**GARDEN DETECTIVE:** Dealing with non-native plants that have become invasive and difficult to eliminate. **G6**

## Inside

Cover story **G2**  
Anniversaries **G8**  
Celebrations **G9**  
Schools Notebook **G10**  
Weekly Planner **G13**  
Winners **G17**  
Police Beat **G18**  
Town Agenda **G18**  
Real Estate **G20**

# No. 1 lodge soldiers on

The nation's first Elks lodge embraces its past, while also facing change and new challenges

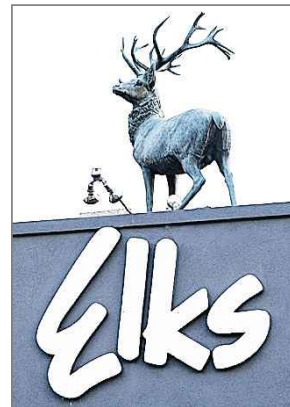


PHOTO BY HEATHER WALSH



**ON THE COVER.** Al Hoffman, former district deputy, and Amy Schneller, head of Elks Lodge No. 1.

BY ARIELLE BRECHSCI  
Special to Newsday

If you've ever wanted to go back in time, Elks Lodge No. 1 in Lynbrook can take you there, or at least as far back as 1868.

In the group's Heritage Room is the original charter to the nation's first Elks lodge, cases filled with gold medals and other memorabilia, a 100-year-old plate and dozens of framed 5x7 photos of each person who's led the lodge in the past 145 years. "The room represents a piece

of history; it's like a time capsule," said Amy Schneller, the lodge's exalted ruler and leader of its 530 members. "You could walk into that room and get a whole picture of what it was like to be an Elk years ago."

A lot of the credit for that goes to Al Hoffman, of Franklin Square, whose interest in memorabilia has made him the lodge's unofficial historian and Heritage Room curator. For 29 years, he has been a member of The Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, which was founded in Manhattan in 1867 by

Lodge No. 1 started out in New York City in 1868 and is now based in Lynbrook. Here, members gather for the local Memorial Day parade last May.





NEWSDAY PHOTO / J. CONRAD WILLIAMS JR.

Englishman Charles Vivian and chartered in 1868.

To become a member, candidates must be recommended by an existing member from any Elks lodge and have two co-sponsors. Elks-to-be must be at least 21, U.S. citizens, believe in God and be “of good moral character.” Annual dues vary among lodges, but at No. 1 they are \$75. There are about 2,000 Elks lodges, including in the Philippines, Guam and Puerto Rico.

Though the fraternal order is dedicated to honoring veterans and serving the community — the group also holds events honoring the police and fire departments and supporting children’s causes — its early beginnings were less noble.

The men who founded the group were devoted to entertaining and imbibing on Sundays when bars weren’t open

for business. Aptly named the Jolly Corks, after a bar trick, the group grew and split into two factions. The fracture resulted in the creation of Elks Lodge No. 1, whose 15 founders voted on the name. It was a close call — elk defeated buffalo by one.

#### The memorabilia search

The cases and walls of the Heritage Room also showcase bronze tablets memorializing deceased members, dance tickets from past functions, ribbons and medals from annual conventions, commemorative plates and statues.

“The original charter is priceless,” said Hoffman, who goes on daily eBay searches in his hunt for memorabilia. “I get a thrill out of looking for the stuff and saving it. Otherwise, it will end up disappearing.”

Hoffman said his searches

**Elks members Lawrence Contratti, Al Hoffman and Dennis Mescall, from left, enjoy a card game at the lodge near a wall of historical photos.**

focus on Lodge No. 1 memorabilia; he makes about one purchase a month when he finds something worthy of the room. His most rewarding find? A 100-year-old dinner plate from the lodge’s original Manhattan location.

New additions also find their way to the Heritage Room through donations and members’ personal collections. “People call us up and say they found pictures cleaning up their grandfather’s house,” said Hoffman, who has contributed items from his own personal collection.

See COVER STORY on G4



PHOTO BY HEATHER WALSH

Trays of medals are part of a large collection of memorabilia in the Heritage Room at Elks Lodge No. 1 in Lynbrook.

# Embracing past, future

## COVER STORY from G2

While the Heritage Room functions as a quasi museum and a room for playing cards on Tuesdays and Thursdays, the rest of the lodge is the venue for parties, community events and lodge activities throughout the year.

### Never forget the vets

The Elks celebrate November, marked by Veterans Day on Nov. 11, as Veterans Remembrance Month. Their pledge dictates: "So long as there are veterans, The Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks will never forget them." The lodge hosts many events at its 57 Hempstead Ave. location and off site to honor veterans' service and provide opportunities for them to socialize. Today, as it does the first Sunday in November, the lodge hosts a pancake breakfast fundraiser at the lodge from 9 to noon.

The lodge and others in its Southeast District — which includes New Hyde Park, Brooklyn/Queensboro and Staten Island — participate in annual fishing trips, picnics and visits to the local veterans hospitals.

In April, Elks and their families put on a themed show and perform for area veterans. "We bus them in, give them a roast beef dinner and put the show on," said Hoffman, 66, who works on telephone systems at Mercy Medical Center in Rockville Centre. "Last year, it was a tribute to the Beach Boys."

The lodge's community involvement spans many causes, among them cerebral palsy charity, drug awareness, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts programs and higher education. The Elks National Foundation provides more than \$3.74 million in college scholarships each year, according to its website.

As a patriotic organization, founders chose the elk as a symbol because it is a distinctly American animal. In 1907, the Elks began the tradition of Flag Day, decades before the U.S. government officially established it in 1949.

In 1995, the male-only organization set aside a tradition it had upheld since its origin and began admitting women. Before



Elks members and their families perform Beach Boys medleys during a show last year for veterans.



The Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks was founded in Manhattan in 1867 by Charles Vivian, above. At left, the first members.

settling a lawsuit that allowed them to join, women could only participate in an auxiliary unit of the Elks known as the Does. Of Lodge No. 1's 530 members, Schneller estimates less than

one-third are women. "Since females can join the Elks as members, it puts a damper on the Does," who number about 30, said Schneller. She joined the Elks seven years ago

as a full member rather than a Doe, she said, because members are entitled to more participation in activities and privileges, including voting rights, officership and the ability to visit any

lodge in the country. Schneller, 54, of Lynbrook, was elected exalted ruler in April for a one-year term, and is the seventh woman to hold the top position in Lodge No. 1



Actor Ben Affleck is among those claiming Elk membership.

## Elk brethren

**B**abe Ruth, Ben Affleck, Buffalo Bill and Clint Eastwood are famous for different reasons, but they can all claim membership in The Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks.

At Lodge No. 1, formerly located in Manhattan until the 1960s but now based in Lynbrook, well-known members included Harry Houdini, Irving Berlin, Cardinal Francis Joseph Spellman and New York City Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia.

To become an Elk, candidates must be recommended by an existing member from any Elks Lodge, and have two co-sponsors. When Ruth applied, his sponsors were New York City Mayor Jimmy Walker and Gov. Al Smith. Ruth's application is on display in the Lynbrook lodge's Heritage Room.

"It gives us pride that we've had so many prominent members over the years," said Al Hoffman, a Franklin Square resident who has been an Elk for 29 years and is the lodge's unofficial historian. "Back then, anybody who was anybody at one time was trying to get in as a member."

Members of other Elks lodges included Mickey Mantle, Whitney Ford and five former presidents, among them John F. Kennedy.

According to Hoffman, every Elk gets treated the same, regardless of fame or social status.

"When you're a member, you could be the CEO of the company or you could be some guy working in a supermarket stocking shelves, and you have the same rights." — **ARIELLE BRECHISCI**

### Connect with the Elks

Elks Lodge No. 1  
57 Hempstead Ave.  
Lynbrook, NY 11563-1639  
516-599-1515  
nyelks1.org



In the Heritage Room, members look at memorabilia. From left, exalted ruler Amy Schneller; her husband, Paul; nephew Philip Neidecker, a past exalted ruler; Mark Stuparich, the lodge's organist and past state vice president, and Lou Mohr, secretary.

overseeing events. She says her managerial and communications skills as the director of nursing at a health care agency help her excel in her role. Schneller and her husband, Paul, are both Elks.

"It helped us connect with the community, and it's convenient because it's right in the neighborhood," she said of her membership.

### A showcase in the city

In its heyday before the Great Depression, Elks Lodge No. 1 was headquartered on West 43rd Street in Manhattan. The 14-story building included hundreds of rooms for visiting Elks from around the country.

"It was pretty much the showcase of all the Elks lodges," said Hoffman, a former Elks district deputy.

But the Depression swept the country in 1929, and by 1934 the Elks lost the building to foreclosure. In the 1960s, the lodge

moved from Manhattan to Whitestone, Queens, and the move to Lynbrook followed in 2005, according to Hoffman. No. 1 has since absorbed the Valley Stream, Hempstead and Franklin Square lodges, the last of which Hoffman formed in 1984 with friends and neighbors.

Like other benevolent associations, the Elks face new challenges as membership declines and costs rise. The Elks lodges in New York do not get a reduction on property taxes, "not 10 cents," said Hoffman. And they struggle to maintain and increase membership numbers, especially among younger generations.

"It's hard getting young people with families to join," said Hoffman, who noted he hears about the same issue at the Veterans of Foreign Wars, where he is also a member. "They all have the same problems."

Hoffman said there were 1.6

million Elks in the 1980s, but now there are less than 1 million. He estimates the average age among lodge members is 65. They recruit new and younger members by encouraging existing members to bring their adult children and younger relatives. Schneller's nephew, Philip Neidecker, 39, joined one year after his aunt became a member. He has since brought in several other friends to join who are around his age.

"They're very community-minded and very family-oriented," Neidecker, a street sweeper for the village of Lynbrook, said of the Elks.

Since joining six years ago, he has been exalted ruler twice. "You get to go down and enjoy yourself at the events and also have the opportunity to give back to the community," said Neidecker, a married father of two who lives in Lynbrook. He added that the Elks' participation in Scouts and scholarships is one

of the reasons he joined.

The prestige of being the first Elks lodge in the country helps retain members, even ones who move far from Lynbrook. "People all over the country still belong to our lodge, but they live in Florida and all over the place," said Hoffman.

Regardless of the changes and challenges, Hoffman believes the Elks will endure.

"There might be fewer buildings and councils, but I think this organization is going to be around for quite a while," he said. "It's survived all these years. It's a different organization than it was back in the '20s and '30s as far as the opulence of the buildings goes, but the basic core values are still the same."

For now, members who visit Lodge No. 1 can experience the history and pride of the Elks through the Heritage Room.

"Being there makes you happy to be an Elk," said Schneller.