

# The Boomer-Hazel Dell Mutual Protective Association

By Robert A. "Bob" Christiansen, July 2014

Around 2000 my aunt, Ethel Torneten, gave me a rolled up photograph with the caption *Hazel Dell & Boomer Twp. Protective Association Picnic, Aug 19, 1922*. Recently I arranged for the mounting and copying of this remarkable photograph, which is 42 inches long and shows over 200 individuals. In July 2014 I gave this photograph to my cousins, Gary and Sandy Larson, with the request that they display the photo so that others can view it. I haven't identified a single person on this photo, and as of yet I don't know for sure where it was taken, but I suspect Parish Grove, a location less than two miles north of Gary and Sandy's farmstead and shop in Hazel Dell Township.

The Boomer-Hazel Dell Mutual Protective Association was organized in the 1870s, because of the problem of horse thievery from farmers. Later, it evolved into a social organization that continued to meet into the latter part of the 1900s. Herein I'll call this association the MPs, since that is what it was always called when I was a child.

The MPs succeeded in a number of areas, but I have never heard of the MPs apprehending a horse thief. The MPs once gave my grandfather, Jim Christiansen, a 25-cent reward for following chicken thieves in the middle of the night from central Boomer Township in a southwestward direction about 12 miles to a building on the north edge of Council Bluffs. Junior Rasmussen once showed me the building's location, a bit north of where Charlie Merriam's grocery store was later located on North Broadway. The Council Bluffs police refused to act on my grandfather's report, perhaps because the building was outside the city limits. However, authorities did later break up a gang that was using this building to process stolen livestock, the meat then being sold to Council Bluffs retailers.

Some years after my grandfather received his 25-cent reward in late 1890, the MPs gave out a much larger reward to the Pottawattamie County deputy sheriff who made an arrest for the assault of a female member of the Michelson family in northern Boomer Township.

During the period from 1889 to 1911, the monthly MP meetings took place at either the Parish School in north central Hazel Dell Township or at the brick township hall in central Boomer Township.

The MPs sponsored several varieties of social events:

- 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebrations.
- Reunions in late summer.
- Dances, either in a barn or at Sievert Rief's two-story hall at the Reels corner between Crescent and Honey Creek.

Social events generally seemed to involve a band made up of MP members and a keg of beer. For the 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebration, the MPs would buy a whole beef for around \$25. More often than not, the 4<sup>th</sup> of July and late summer events would be held in Parish Grove near the Parish School.

Although the Boomer-Hazel Dell Mutual Protective Association failed to catch any horse thieves and didn't seem to catch many other thieves, they provided a number of services besides organizing social events:

- A support system when a member was ill or injured and needed the help of others.
- A social setting where farmers speaking different languages (English, Danish, German) or of different religions (Latter Day Saints, Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, and other denominations) could meet and mingle.
- A system for resolving conflicts between two members. This system was used on a number of occasions, apparently with positive results. MP members may have been motivated to settle their disputes peacefully by recalling a dispute between two Hazel Dell Township farmers in 1878 over a piece of shared farm machinery that resulted in Jonathan Jones shooting and killing David Roberts.
- The Mutual Protective Association hearse was acquired in 1898. In pre-automobile days, carrying a deceased's coffin from home to the cemetery in a hearse was considerably more dignified than the usual practice of using a lumber wagon. All farmers owned a horse-drawn wagon and many owned a second vehicle, such as a surrey, but a coffin wouldn't fit into the fancier vehicles. MP members, their families, and others who rented the hearse for \$3 could thus travel in style to one of the local cemeteries, such as the Grange Cemetery, the Hazel Dell Cemetery, or St. Paul's Cemetery.

In the early 1940s the Reorganized Latter Day Saints Church in Hazel Dell Township closed and the building became the Hazel Dell Township Hall. I believe Mutual Protective Association meetings then were held at the Hazel Dell Township Hall. In the 1940s and 1950s, the MPs were meeting only a few times a year. I seem to remember an annual activity was an "oyster feed".

Incidentally, as of 2014 the old RLDS church/ township hall / MP meeting place still stands along county road L34, the building now owned by Rick and Sheryl Larson, Rick being the son of Gary and Sandy Larson.

### **Background:**

- Mutual Protective Societies arose in various locations in Iowa because the rural areas they served were distant from the county sheriff's office, which in Pottawattamie County was in Council Bluffs. It appears that societies such as this were authorized in Chapter 11, Title XXV of the Iowa Code of 1873. The official name of the Iowa umbrella organization was the *Grand Order of the Anti-Horse-Thief Association for the State of Iowa*. In 1886 a bill was introduced in the Iowa legislature to allow society members who were pursuing suspected culprits to make citizens arrests. Presumably a pursuing committee would generally be chosen from a group of Mutual Protective Association members called the *Minute Men*.
- Hazel Dell and Boomer Townships are in southwestern Iowa, in Pottawattamie County north of Council Bluffs. Boomer Township is just north of Hazel Dell Township.

- Other Mutual Protective Society chapters were organized in nearby rural areas. I know of one in Crescent Township, just to the west of Hazel Dell Township, and one in St John Township in Harrison County, just northwest of Boomer Township. At some social events, members from other chapters would be invited.

## Sources and Acknowledgments

### Primary Sources:

- A membership and minutes book for the Hazel Dell Mutual Protection Association purchased in 1881 by Elida Parish, the long-term secretary, but evidently not seriously used until 1889. This dilapidated book, which contains records from 1889 to 1911, is currently in my possession and will be donated to the Council Bluffs Public Library archival collection.

Page 14-24 consists of a list of 192 members begun around 1889.

Pages 27 – 411 contain minutes from 23 Dec 1889 to 30 Sep 1911 recorded by:

Jacob Hansen, 23 Dec 1889 – 31 Oct 1891.

Loveridge Hutton Axtell (son of Loveridge S. Axtell), 27 Nov 1891 – 29 Oct 1892.

James P. Christiansen (my grandfather), 25 Nov 1892 – 27 Oct 1894.

Thomas J. Smith, 17 Nov 1894 – 25 Sep 1897.

David Dexter Smith, 17 Nov 1897 – 29 Nov 1902.

Benjamin A. Smith, 31 Jan 1903 – 27 Oct 1905.

Hans Peter Hansen (my great-uncle), 25 Nov 1905 – 30 Sep 1911.

(Thomas, David and Benjamin Smith were brothers. David Smith built the Boomer Store. I believe Hans Peter Hansen remained secretary for many subsequent years.)

The remaining pages (413-446) contain, in reverse order, lists of officers and some accounting information from 1889 to 1910.

- Various articles in the *Omaha Bee* ([chroniclingamerica.loc.gov](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov) 2014)

### Secondary Sources:

- *History of the Boomer – Hazel Dell Mutual Protective Association*, 17 pages, by Cindy (Summy) Worth, 12 Dec 1976.
- *Pottawattamie County – Makers of Fire*, 1978 biographical history book, *The Boomer – Hazel Dell Mutual Protective Association* article on p. 8 by Ralph E. Spencer, President, 1977-1978.