

Langlade County: A home of the Grange



The Grange Hall in Elcho is the only one in the county still standing. They were all built in a similar style although the one in Ackley was slightly grander.

By **JOE HERMOLIN**
Langlade County
Historical Society

A somewhat rundown building in Elcho is the only reminder of what was once a key part of a nationwide movement that was vital to many of the family farms in Langlade County. Langlade County was formed in 1880, just as the logging industry was declining in economic importance and farming was increasing. The number of farms in Langlade County increased from 97 in 1880 to 1,780 in 1920 as the population of the county grew from 685 to 21,471.

Farmers are known to be an independent but sometimes group efforts achieve results that individuals cannot. The National Grange of the Patrons of Animal Husbandry, commonly known as "the Grange," was formed in the years following the Civil War when the Department of Agriculture observed a lack of sound agricultural practices, particularly in the south. The Grange movement was

devoted to educational events and social gatherings of the society's members or "grangers." During the 1870s the Grange spread throughout the Midwest as farmers were plagued by low prices for their products and discriminatory policies by the railroads. The Grange evolved into a political force. After some successes, its political clout declined by the late 1870s. But the Grange regained its importance by refocusing on its original mission of education and creating social venues for farmers. It was important in establishing early forms of credit unions, cooperative grain elevators and purchasing cooperatives.

An important and progressive aspect of the Grange movement was its approach to women members. It advocated a strong role for women and equal pay for equal work. Women were often elected as officers and attended national conventions at a time when women's suffrage was more than 30 years in the future.

Wisconsin's first Grange was established in 1872 at Plainfield. In Langlade County the Grange started in 1912 and by 1916 there were 14 subordinate Granges making Langlade County the state leader in the movement.

In 1919 Antigo hosted the state convention of the Grange. At that meeting a resolution was passed endorsing the ratification of the Treaty of Versailles and supporting the League of Nations. So the Grange continued to voice opinions on international matters in addition to more immediate concerns for farmers. In 1922 Antigo again hosted a statewide convention of Grangers at the Elks Hall. The keynote speaker, Professor Francis Ingler, spoke about the benefits to farmers of increased cooperation with the business community.

An important result of the Langlade County Grange was the creation of the Grange cooperative store. In 1914 John Cleary in the town of Peck added a lean-to to his house, which he stocked with staples purchased in bulk on trips into Antigo. These were sold to local farmers who saved a considerable amount. The store did not have regular hours and Cleary did not receive payment for his efforts. Other farmers realized that those in Peck were saving a lot of money due to Cleary's efforts and his bulk purchases.

Cleary's example resulted in establishment of a cooperative in Antigo in 1919. It handled flour, feed, groceries, and farm machinery, as well as farm and forest products. The first store was at 922 Edison St., conveniently located next to the railroad switch yard. Clerks took orders and bought products by the carload. Farmers were told when a carload was scheduled to arrive and came to claim their purchases. The store also purchased surplus eggs and butter from Grangers which they sold to other members. The Grange coop was thus able to save farmers money on their purchases and provided a place to sell surpluses.

The venture was so successful that within two years they expanded into a new facility, taking over the site of the Citizen's Brewery in the 500 block of Superior Street, which closed because of prohibition. It changed its name several times, and by 1945 became known as the Langlade Farmer's Cooperative. It closed its doors in 1989. Today Three Jokers occupies the site.

The success of the Grange store inspired other cooperative ventures throughout the county. In Kempster a Potato Shipping Association was formed which, in 1918, allowed farmers to earn 15 cents more per bushel than they would have otherwise received. Local dairy farmers created Antigo Milk Products Inc.

A major mission of the Grange movement was also to provide educational and social venues for farmers who, by the nature of their work, led fairly isolated lives.

See Our History Page 19



Provided by the
Langlade County Historical Society.
To donate, volunteer or become a
member, call 715-627-4464.
Visit the museum complex at
Superior Street and Seventh Avenue
or check out the Website
at www.langladehistory.com.

Our History



The masthead of the state newsletter for Grangers, dated 1975, was one of the last efforts of the movement.

Continued

Our History

These centered on the Grange Halls which were all built in a similar style. The one in East Ackley was the grandest: 36 by 86 feet with a basement kitchen. The main floor had a stage and it was the only county hall lit by electricity. Events were held at Grange Halls throughout summer but the halls were closed in winter due to inadequate heating. Members might travel to other halls for an event and stay overnight at a fellow Granger's home.

Social events included the formation of basketball teams that practiced and played in the Grange Hall and played in tournaments against other halls. East Ackley's hall had baskets that were only 8.5 feet high while other halls had baskets 10 feet high. They were also the only grange team that had official uniforms.

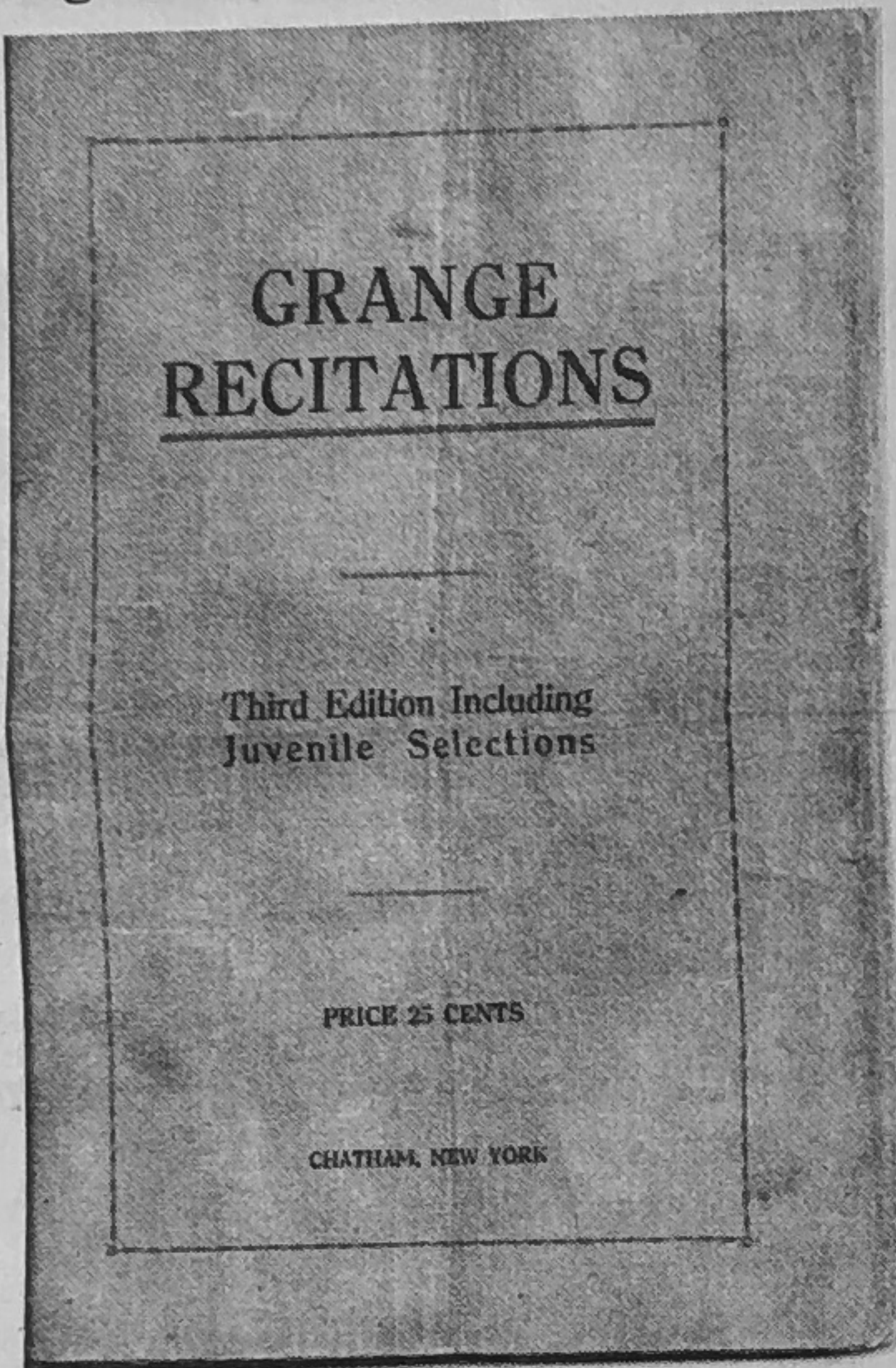
Halls also hosted weekly dances with local bands providing the music. Again East Ackley led the way. They had a twelve-piece band that played not only at its dances but also at other halls. Members were expected to occasionally put on a play, concert, or poetry reading for the membership. Other local groups would also use the halls for their theater productions.

Continuing education was not ignored. In the 1930s Emery Owen, agricultural instructor from Antigo High School, gave a series of lectures on feed and cattle feeding and then on soil surveying and testing at the East Ackley Hall. Langlade County Agent E.G. Swoboda spoke at many halls on farming techniques as well as tax saving, agricultural law, conservation, and reforestation. Swoboda's talks were well received. When his position as a county agent was faced with elimination due to a lack of funds the Grange con-

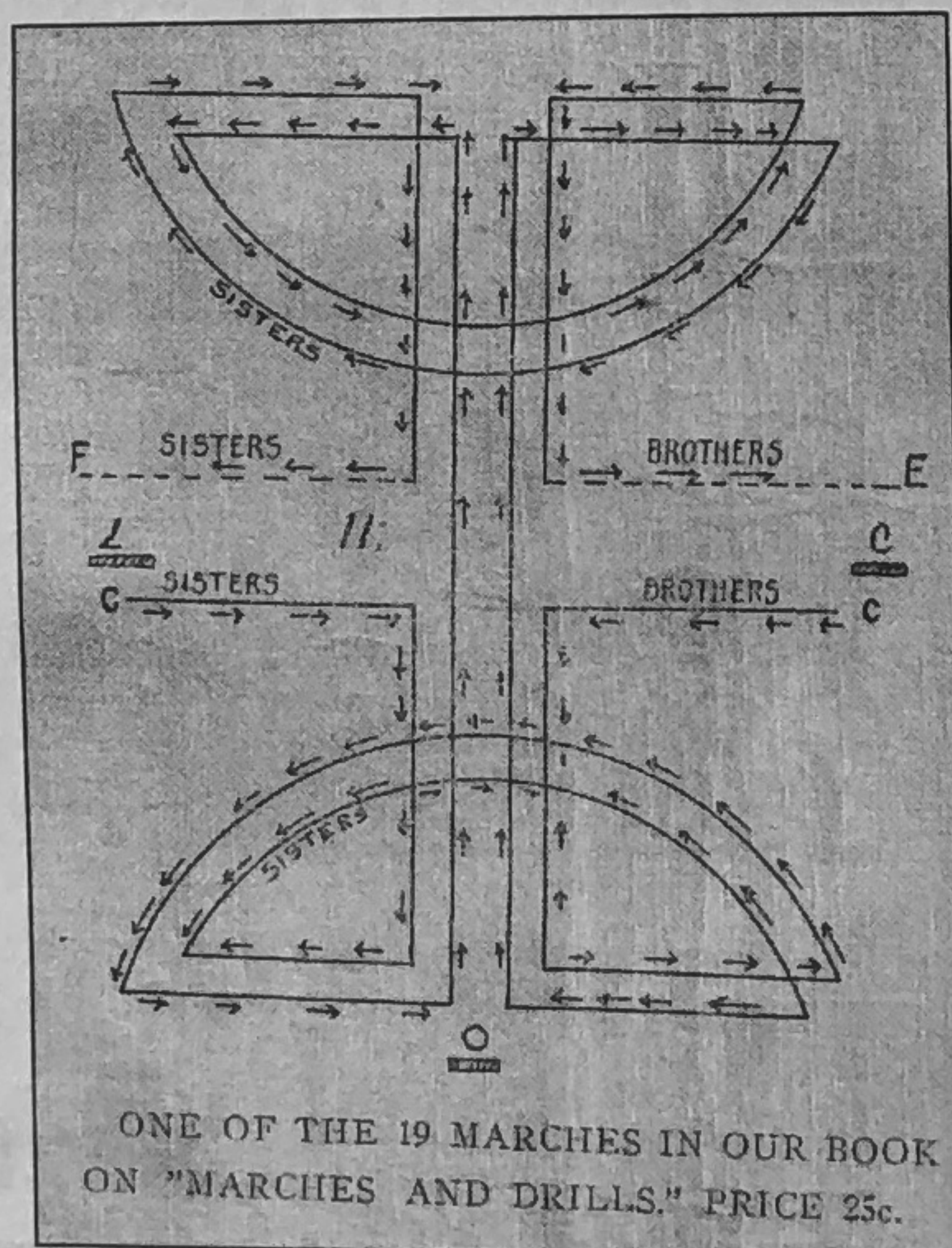
tributed to his salary.

The Granges did have their problems. During Prohibition people bringing moonshine to dances became a disruptive force and some people stayed away as a result. One hall burned down and rumor has it that the fire was caused by someone who was denied admittance to dances because he sold moonshine.

After World War II many aspects of rural life changed. Home entertainment became more popular with the growth of radio and, later, television. Attendance at hall entertainments declined. Also an improved network of roads meant that people could more easily travel farther afield for business or pleasure. New farm organizations such as the Farm Bureau and the National Farm Organization served the educational purpose that many had sought in the Grange.



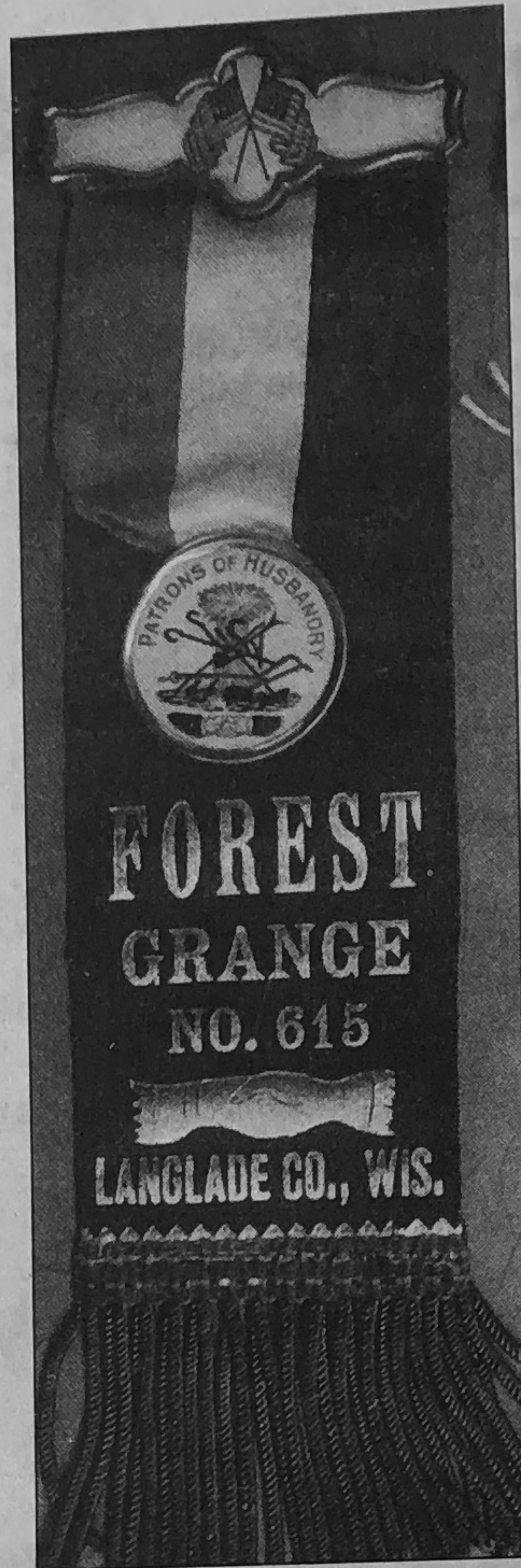
Books were printed with suggested poems for poetry readings at Grange events.



Other publications included drill patterns for marches at events.



The detail from a delegate's badge gives a sense of the importance of cooperation and the emphasis on improving farming practices to the Grange movement.



At left, The Grangers were unusual in that they also sent women as delegates to meetings, even before women had the right to vote in the U.S., as seen in this badge. At right, Langlade County was a leader in the Wisconsin Grange movement and hosted state conventions.

There were attempts to recruit younger members to the Grange movement but these had only moderate success and by 1954 most of Langlade County's Granges had folded. By 1975 only one, in Elcho, remained active however it too closed. But in its day the Grange Movement provided people of rural Langlade County a means of extending their buying power through coops, a

venue for educational, social and sporting activities, and an opportunity to meet and work with others.

Most of the material on the Grange movement in Langlade County is taken from a thesis entitled "Langlade County Grange Movement" by Ronald Nye in 1978. It is in the archives of the Langlade County Historical Society in Antigo.

Thinking of building?

City Gas reminds you to always call before you dig:

Diggers Hotline
1-800-242-8511 or 811

811

City Gas Co.
 809 Fifth Avenue
 Antigo • 715-627-4351