

The Grange is alive and well

The 138th National Grange Convention recently concluded in Rochester, New York. During the course of the weeklong convention, more than 3,000 people traveled to the "Flower City" from 40 states, including Alaska, New Mexico and Wyoming. Across the nation, the Grange represents the issues of more than 300,000 members by forming policies on a variety of issues including Medicare reform, same sex marriage, stem cell research, and Federal student loan initiatives.

Although the organization has expanded its focus, it has not forgotten its agricultural roots. The Grange also advocates for the small, family farmer and has worked to promote important agricultural programs including animal identification, crop insurance, and farm credit.

"This is a critical time for agriculture, and the Grange wants to help farmers secure better futures, as well as advocate for all Americans," National Grange President William Steel said. "There are many issues that we need to address, and we are working to address those issues by demanding that our voice is heard."

The Grange realizes that many people have not heard about its activities, or have forgotten about its legislative power, but its members believe that the Grange voice has always been strong, and it will continue to get stronger in the future.

The Grange understands that its past is rich, but its future must be richer. From time to time, the organization reaches back into its history to show others that they know how to fight for what's important.

Seven farmers founded the National Grange in 1867 to unite Southern and Northern farmers after the Civil War. In the 20th century, the Grange helped develop federal farm programs, organized farm cooperatives, credit unions, mutual insurance companies and other consumer-owned enterprises and extended the benefits of electrification, telephone service and federal highway projects to all Americans. In the 19th century, the Grange's political advocacy established the government's authority to regulate railroads, utilities and monopolies, elevated the U.S. De-

partment of Agriculture to cabinet status and secured Rural Free Delivery mail service.

The Grange also realizes that it exists in a "here and now" society, and people want to hear about what the Grange is doing today. In 2004, the Grange developed a program to educate seniors about the changes in Medicare legislation. Since May, the Grange has taught more than 100,000 rural and suburban citizens how to apply for a Medicare-approved prescription drug discount card. The organization has also taken an aggressive stance on Congress's inability to pass renewable energy legislation. In addition, the Grange has been outspoken about Congress's snail-like pace in reforming the Endangered Species Act.

In 2005, the Grange will become more vocal about the state of healthcare in the United States. It will team up with other organizations to educate the uninsured about their options. In addition, it will work to change election policies and reconstruct immigration laws.

Although the Grange is a strong legislative force, it does not simply live on the national level. It is also concerned with building stronger communities and enriching the lives of people in towns and cities everywhere. "The Grange lives in the community," Steel said. "It is about people helping people."

The Grange is still the place for local communities to come together to change things in their communities. Granges help communities place stop signs at busy intersections or get cities or counties to build playgrounds for area children to safely play and for families to visit.

When people need a helping hand, the Grange is still the place to go. The organization distributes dictionaries to elementary school children in school districts that cannot afford new books. It raises money for disadvantaged individuals who cannot afford their medical bills or school tuition. And, it is still the place to get a hot, home cooked meal or to learn how to knit or sew.

The Grange is alive and well, and it is ready to gear up for its next fight.