The Know-Nothing Party
Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

The rise of the Native American Party, or Know-Nothings as they were called, ushered in an era of unparalleled bigotry in 19th Century America. They were violently anti-Catholic. Not only were "No Irish Need Apply" signs evident in major American cities, legislation, reminiscent of the penal laws in Ireland, was sought against the immigrant population. The Native American Party stated the Irish diluted American principles, and professed loyalty to a foreign prince - the Pope. The massive influx of Irish, fleeing starvation and disease in their native land, and professing the Roman faith, focused Know-Nothings bigotry on the Irish.

In 1844, they unleased a terror campaign against the Irish in Philadelphia. The party called for American-born citizens to arm themselves against the "bloody hand of the Pope," and formed a paramilitary arm – the Wide Awakes. At a huge rally in Kensington, Pennsylvania, where immigrant textile mill workers and factory hands lived, one speaker said the Irish were "scum unloaded on American wharves." The nativists stormed through Irish neighborhoods, burning St. Michael's Church, St. Charles Seminary and St. Augustine's Church. The mobs moved to Philadelphia proper, forcing the mayor to declare martial law. When a nun stood in the door of the Convent of the Sacred Heart, defying the rioters, she was hit in the head by a shower of rocks and fell unconscious. The nativists overran the Hibernian Hose Company, a station for Irish fireman, and burned it to the ground. They took 5,000 books from the library of an Augustinian priest and used them for fuel in a giant bonfire in the streets. Throughout the summer of 1844, rioting flared, with homes gutted, shop windows smashed, gunfire going both ways. More than thirty people were killed. As authorities tried to quell the violence, nativists leaders urged their followers to respond to questions from police with a single answer: "I know nothing"- giving rise to the party's new name.

By the end of 1855, the Know-Nothings were the second largest party in the nation, and the only one ever founded in opposition to a specific ethnic group. Handbills in New Orleans shouted for action at election time. "Americans! Shall we be ruled by the Irish?" Members promised to support only American-born Protestants and pledge never to marry a Catholic. In Congress, they pushed legislation that required an immigrant to live in the United States for twenty-five years before becoming eligible for citizenship. This at a time when life expectancy at birth was thirty-eight years.

But to those who took the country's founding principles to heart, the rise of the nativists was dispiriting. "As a nation, we began by declaring that 'all men are created equal,'" Abraham Lincoln wrote a friend in 1855. "We now practically read it 'all men are created equal except Negros.' When Know-Nothings get control, it will read 'all men are created equal except Negros, and foreigners, and Catholics."

After several attacks on Irish and Church property, the Irish immigrant resorted to a familiar tactic. Those, who had been members of the AOH in Ireland, banded together in this new land, and in 1836, formed an American branch of their Order. The early AOH assisted immigrants with getting jobs and served as guards to defend the Catholic church from attack.

In large measure due to the significant contributions of the Irish in defending the Union during America's Civil War, it became unfashionable to be anti-Irish, and the bigoted Know Nothings faded away, taking their No Irish Need Apply signs with them.