“No, Mister Brown, it is not an order,” Ms. Monika Ramoser, who is associated with the foundation, corrected me, “It is a foundation.” Hence, she articulated the nature of the Matrikelzeichen, or, in English, the Foundation of the Registry of Tirolian Nobility. The fact that it is not an order takes nothing away from this ancient institution with a checkered history, as the Tirol itself has had a checkered history that goes back to the Middle Ages. It is unknown who exactly founded the organization, but we do know names of some of those who were involved from the earliest of times. Andreas Lubbecke’s splendid article traces the evolution of the foundation, takes us through the days of the ancient nobility, past the abolition of the aristocracy after World War I, to the end of the Twentieth Century.¹

I begin this article with some fundamentals: Where is Tirol? What is its history? Where does it fit in the political landscape of Austria today? I start with “where is Tirol” for a specific reason: though the name is reasonably well known, there is a general lack of knowledge in the United States of exactly where it is and where it fits in the Austrian political landscape. I took an impromptu poll of people on the floor of my office building. They are primarily medically oriented people, doctors, psychologists, nurses and the like. “Where is Tirol?” I would ask them. Half would get a glazed look and the other half answered with something like, “who cares?” So, I explained that Tirol is a state or province (similar to states in the United States and provinces in Canada) and a part of the Republic of Austria. There are nine of these political subdivisions. From the east to the west, they are Burgenland, Lower Austria, Vienna (yes, the city is, in addition to being the capital of Austria, a state in its own right), Upper Austria, Salzburg, Styria, Carinthia, Tirol, and Carinthia (Figure 1).

Innsbruck is the capital of Tirol. And a significant place it was, indeed, for Innsbruck, the Emperor Maximilian (1453-1519) established his capital under the “Golden Roof,” the seat of his empire, during his reign. As an aside, the Golden Roof (Figure 2) was not actually gold, but rather burnished copper.

With apologies to Salzburg, where the movie, “Sound of Music” was actually filmed, I always think of Tirol when I see scenes of that movie with magnificent mountains, bubbling streams of crystal-clear water and lush meadows. So, that sets the stage of extraordinary beauty and a fascinating history of princes who desired the advice and counsel of their nobles on important matters.

**History of Tirol**

Tirol is an ancient land with a checkered history. It was constantly caught between warring and political factions even to the end and after World War I. At one time the Emperor Conrad made it a part of the stem duchy of Bavaria (year 1027). Then Tirol became separated from Bavaria in the Twelfth Century and the counts of Tirol took full advantage of it by asserting the land’s independence.

In 1253, the Tirolese lands were acquired by Count Meinhard of Gorizia by virtue of his marriage to the
countess of the Tirol. When his sons divided his estate in 1271, the oldest son took Tirol. This was the period when Rudolf of Habsburg was contesting Ottokar II of Bohemia for the Austrian lands, which Rudolf ultimately won, cementing the Habsburg rule until 1919. The politically astute Tirolean counts supported Rudolf. An upward climber, the count of Tirol was elected King of Bohemia and at his death, his only daughter, Margareth the Maultasch, survived to take the title of Countess of Tirol.

In 1342 Margareth married Louis V of Wittelsbach, who was the Margrave of Brandenburg. Note the coat of arms with the red eagle: some believe that the red eagle in the Tirolean coat of arms was derived from the Brandenburg eagle when Margareth and Louis ruled Tirol. However, others disagree, pointing out that the Tirolean eagle had already appeared in the Thirteenth Century. Be that as it may, Margareth died in 1363. Having no heirs, she bequeathed Tirol to Rudolf IV of Habsburg, Duke of Austria. Interestingly, the Wittelsbachs in Bavaria delayed until 1369 to recognize Rudolf’s inheritance. But, from that time on, Tirol was ruled by the Habsburgs, who held the title Count of Tirol.

Various Habsburg dukes ruled Tirol for about the next 130 years until 1490, when the Emperor Maximilian united all the Habsburg lands, ruling from Innsbruck. But actual governance degenerated after Maximilian until Emperor Leopold I again reunified the country in the Seventeenth Century. From then on, except for a brief interlude during the Napoleonic Wars, Tirol was governed by the central government of the Habsburg monarchy in Vienna.

In the meanwhile, during the period of decentralization, the Counts of Tirol would periodically gather the nobles of the country for advice and counsel. Hence, it was believed that at this early period, a desire to register the nobility began. Austria did not fare well in the wars against Napoleon. In the loss to Napoleon in 1805, Tirol was ceded to the Kingdom of Bavaria. However, before that occurred Emperor Franz I approved statutes authorizing the registry. In November, 1882 new statutes were approved reconstituting the “matriculation cooperative of Tirolean nobility.” These statutes lasted until the end of the monarchy in 1919. Uncertainty arose in 1919, when titles and the aristocracy were abolished in the first Republic of Austria. Nevertheless, the cooperative survived due to being converted into a foundation. To implement the survival, new statutes were approved (and amended in 1950) that gave ratification to the foundation as a legal entity under the oversight of the Tirolean state government.

Consequently, it was at the end of World War I when the Tirolean Adelsmatrikel was changed to and became a foundation, Tiroler Matrikelstiftung. Actually, this change occurred in 1918. Then, administration of the foundation was transferred to the State of Tirol. As of today, there are 142 members of the foundation, the last being admitted in 2005.

Criteria for Membership

The criteria for becoming a member have always been simple and straightforward. One must demonstrate his/her connection to a noble birth, be upstanding, own real estate in Tirol, and pay predetermined recording fees. A revision of the fee is currently being considered.

The required connection to noble ancestors prior to 1919 suggests that the future of the foundation is not bright, due to the passage of time. Since the aristocracy was abolished over 90 years ago, it will become harder and harder to make that ancestral link to the past. Nevertheless, no changes to the criteria are anticipated at this time. There is an opportunity for another route to membership without meeting the ancestor criterion. The foundation can grant admission to those who have rendered outstanding services to the foundation.

The Badge

As members of the Orders and Medals Society, our
interest is the badge of the foundation. It is striking and beautiful. The obverse of the badge is a red enameled, crowned eagle with outstretched wings (Figure 3). A white “sprig” arcs from one wing to the other. Centered on the chest of the eagle is a white enameled shield with the gold initials FI (Emperor Franz I) (Figure 4). This commemorates the emperor’s approval of the statutes in 1805. The crowned eagle’s head is surrounded by a green enameled wreath. Attached to the wreath, as a suspender, is a black knight’s helmet. Each of the eagle’s claws are gold and out-stretched as if intent on grasping an object. From the fastener of the helmet to the bottom feather in the eagle’s tail, the badge measures 85 mm. The width is 36 mm.

The reverse of the badge (Figure 5) is similar to the obverse, with minor differences. First, although the shield on the eagle’s chest is also white enamel, it has the gold initials MT, standing for Matricula Tyroliensis, not Maria Theresa! In fact, Matricula Tyroliensis is Latin for Tiroler Adelsmatrikel. This translates into English as “inscribed nobles of the Tirol,” that is, matriculated from the list of nobles. The second difference is that the reverse side of the knight’s helmet is smooth gold without any relief. Traditionally, the badge was gold with enamel as described. However, other metals have been observed over time, though the enameled parts obscure the nature of the metal used. The badge is suspended from a dark green 35 mm. ribbon, which is worn around the neck. Inset 2