

As Others See Us

(Freemasonry in the U.S.A.)

By W. Bro. Harry Carr, P.J.G.D.

W Bro. Harry Carr, Past Junior Grand Deacon of the United Grand Lodge of England, is perhaps best known to American Masonry as the former Secretary of Quator Coronati Lodge No 2076, and as Editor of the Transactions. He is also known throughout the Masonic World as an outstanding Masonic author, speaker, and as a prestigious Prestonian lecturer. We are deeply indebted to Wor Bro. Carr for permitting us to use this portion of one of his presentation. "Freemasonry in the U S." as a short Talk Bulletin. It is interesting to see ourselves as others see us.

America – fifty States and forty-nine separate Sovereign Grand Lodges!

On my first visit, in 1960, I traveled to New York, Boston, and Washington; then right across country to San Francisco, Fresno and Los Angeles. It was a seven-week Masonic tour and holiday combined, and I gave my Prestonian Lecture to enormous gatherings of Masons in all those cities, covering more than 7,000 miles within the American continent. When I returned to London, the D.C. of my Mother Lodge said, "Harry, you must tell us all about it after dinner; and we can give you ten minutes." Brethren, it cannot be done in ten minutes, but if you will stay with me a little longer, I shall try to keep you interested.

My principal equipment for the tour consisted of an insatiable curiosity, and a sufficient knowledge of English Masonic practices to enable me to ask the right sort of questions, so that I could make a reasonable assessment of our differences. I met and spoke to literally hundreds of Masons from Entered Apprentices to Grand Librarians, Grand Secretaries and Grand Masters. I saw many things that pleased me enormously, many that horrified me; and I never stopped asking questions!

(Grand Masters are amazingly plentiful in U.S.A., because most of them are elected for only one year. Sad, because a good man will only rarely see the fruits of his efforts!)

As a lecturer, it is probable that I was meeting the best types of American Masons, men with a real love for the Craft and a serious interest in its background. I can never forget that in Los

Angeles I addressed a large gathering of Masons in a huge Masonic center that they had built with their own hands, working voluntarily in their spare time under a hired architect and with a practical team of builders who ensured that the work was well and truly done; and I was proud to be associated with brethren of this caliber.

But of course the following impressions do not pretend to be a complete survey, nor can they possibly be true of the whole Craft in the U.S.A. I have simply tried to describe something of what I saw, emphasizing our differences in practice, with a critical eye for what seems strange to us, and with wholehearted praise where praise is due. American Masons are warm, friendly folk, good hosts, good company, and eager to be helpful; and if my words appear to accentuate certain peculiarities, I must plead that they were written without malicious intent, knowing full well that our brethren overseas can find much in our own system and practices that calls for criticism.

THE BACKGROUND

The first thing that is obvious to every English Mason who visits the U.S.A., is that their Freemasonry is unlike ours. In the first place, Masonry is not for father alone, but for the whole family. For father, there are the usual three "Blue" degrees, and then all the rest running right up to the 32^o. (the 33^o is by selection and invitation; in fact, and honor, rather than a degree.) For mother, there is the Order of the Eastern Star, the Order of Amaranth, and several others, less well known.

For boys, aged from 14 to 21, there is the Order of DeMolay, named after Jacques de Molai, the last Grand Master of the medieval Knights Templar. For girls, aged 13 to 20, there is an Order called Rainbow and another called Job's Daughters; and all these are, in a very special and peculiar sense, Masonic. This must be explained and I shall do so in a moment.

I have called these Orders Masonic, and it is difficult for us in England to appreciate the point. Perhaps the following illustration may help. In A.Q.C., Vol. 75, p. 119, we recently reviewed the sesqui-centennial History of the Grand Lodge of Louisiana, a regular and recognized Grand Lodge which is in amicable fraternal relationship with our own Grand Lodge of England. Chapter 20 in this History is entitled "Bodies Identified with Masonry in Louisiana," (my italics) and among those listed are:

The Order of the Eastern Star The Order of the Rainbow, for Girls The Order of DeMolay

In Eastern Star, and the majority of the others, a genuine Masonic relationship is an essential pre-requisite for joining, so that for Eastern Star, the lady candidate must be mother or wife, sister or daughter of a Freemason in good standing. (For Rainbow and DeMolay, relationship is preferable, but not essential.) There is no suggestion that these Orders are quasi-Masonic or that they attempt to copy Freemasonry. It is best to regard them as adjuncts to Freemasonry; and in the U.S.A., they are so regarded: the youth organizations as training-grounds for the future, while the women's Orders count it a duty and a privilege to serve Freemasonry in every possible

way. All this appears very strange to us in England, and although it may seem wrong for a Grand Officer to say so, I like it and I believe that it works and it has obvious advantages. In the first place, father knows where mother is on her night out, and vice versa; and both are able to take an interest in the children's organizations. Whether all these efforts have any marked effect on juvenile delinquency rates in the U.S.A., would be very hard to say, but I am firmly convinced that this "family approach" to the Craft can do nothing but good.

A nice example of this family spirit occurred in Massachusetts where I lectured to an assembly of some five-hundred brethren, and over four-hundred-and-sixty of us sat down to dinner afterwards. It was in an enormous hall, with a stage at one end, on which the Lodge Organist was playing light music throughout the dinner. The tables were arranged in sprigs (as in England), and everyone except the Officers were dressed in the utmost informality. But all the Officers were in meticulous dinner dress and throughout the evening we were served by waitresses immaculately dressed in white from head to foot. It was a pleasant, unpretentious meal, and all was going splendidly when suddenly the S.W., far away in the right-hand corner of the room, stood up and began to dance with one of the waitresses along the gangway between the sprigs! I was sitting at the right of the Master, and I leaned over to him and whispered, "Worshipful Master, I thought I had seen almost everything in the Craft, but this I have never seen. Does it happen very often?" He turned to me with a smile and said, "I hope it does: the lady he is dancing with is his wife. Tonight we are being waited on by our wives, Eastern Star." And there were 460 at dinner! (I was unable to find out if the husbands help with the "washing-up," but probably they do not, because kitchens are highly mechanized in the U.S.A.).

With this kind of background, the objectives in the Craft tend to take on a rather different aspect from ours. Generally, they do not go in strongly for the maintenance of large Masonic Institutions, as we do. There are, indeed, many splendid institutions, but the emphasis is mainly on the social side: parties, outings and celebrations of one kind or another. A great deal is done by way of homes and equipment for crippled children. Masonic 'blood banks' are a big feature, the blood being for ultimate use by Masons and non-Masons alike. There are some Masonic hospitals, and a number of homes for 'senior citizens'; but nobody grows old in the U.S.A. If they are lucky enough to live that long, they become 'senior citizens,' and in those jurisdictions that aspire to the maintenance of institutions, it is usually the 'senior citizens' who get first care.

Finally, I must not omit from this description of the background of the Craft the very obvious fact that almost everyone wears a badge, usually a 'lapel-badge', with all sorts of Masonic symbols ranging up to the 33rd and the so-called "High Degrees" predominating. All this might seem to be a piece of pardonable male vanity and in the vast majority of cases it is nothing more. But the badges tend to become a temptation, and the Masonic visitor to the U.S.A. will not need to look far before he realizes that they are all too often used for business.

Of all the things likely to shock an Englishman, this, I think, must be the most distasteful; and though I am sure that many Brethren in the U.S.A. find these practices as objectionable as we

do, one has the impression that they have grown accustomed to them, and that is a great pity. I have heard the situation stated in a somewhat different form. One of my American friends told me, "I wear the badge, to show that I'm proud of my Masonry. As long as I wear it, I'd never do anything to disgrace it; in fact, when I do business with a man whom I recognize to be a Brother, I always try to give him a bigger order than I would otherwise." All this is true, I am sure, but where is there a commercial traveler among my friend's suppliers who could resist wearing a badge under such conditions?

During a more recent visit to the U.S.A., at an informal Masonic party in Providence, Rhode Island, I teased my hosts about this custom of wearing Masonic badges for the wrong reasons, and when I had finished talking, one of the Brethren said, "It is all very well for you to talk about our using Masonry for business, but it is not always like that. Quite often, we have to try to take an order from a Roman Catholic, and then the badge is a liability – not an asset, " I had to agree with him, but privately, Brethren, I'm convinced that it is much easier to remove the badge than to change your customer's religion!

LODGE MEMBERSHIP

Judging by our standards in England, where average membership is around 80 per Lodge, American lodge memberships are extraordinarily high. Consider, as an example, Washington, D.C., the capital and the center of government; it is virtually a city without industry. It has about 50 lodges in all, four of them with memberships of 1,100, 1,200, 1,400, and 1,500 respectively! And these enormous memberships are to be found in all the large cities in the U.S.A. It is, of course, impossible to strike "average figures" as between lodges in the small villages and those in the large towns, because they would be misleading. But in any of the cities, one might expect the general run of lodges to range from 400 to 800 members, with several others running into four figures.

At the time of my visit to the U.S.A., I was already Secretary of two lodges and I was naturally puzzled as to the reasons for these (to us) fantastic numbers. There appear to be several reasons, and I dare not commit myself as to their order of importance. The first two reasons are almost national characteristics: (a) The Americans are great "joiners," they like to be in on everything. (b) They admire big numbers and mass production. (c) Most U.S.A. jurisdictions have curious regulations relating to what they call single, dual or plural membership. Some Grand Lodges allow only single membership, i.e., a Brother may belong to only one Craft Lodge and no more. Others allow dual membership, usually permitting their members to belong to one Lodge inside the State and one outside. Only very few Grand Lodges permit their members the same privileges as we enjoy here, of plural membership, i.e., of joining as many Lodges as we please. It seems possible that, in some indirect way, these regulations have the effect of channeling vast numbers of Masons into a comparatively small number of Lodges, and that leads to large memberships.

I realize that this may be faulty reasoning, but there is no doubt as to the facts, i.e., that in many jurisdictions, if Lodge memberships are to be kept reasonably low, there are simply not enough Lodges to take the vast numbers of men who want to join. The reasons are purely economic .

(d) Maintenance costs are very high for Lodges and lodge buildings in the U.S.A., and this leads to some curious results. In some cities, when a new Lodge is to be founded, it is not uncommon to find that the existing Lodges raise objections, because they regard all future Masons in their territory as their own "reserve pool," which will help swell their own membership in due course, and thus help them with their maintenance charges and their balance-sheets. In effect, the Masons themselves are opposing the formation of new lodges. (See the note 011 this subject in "Whither Are We Traveling?", by M.W. Bro. Dwight L. Smith, P.G.M. and Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Indiana.)

But is it possible that there is still another reason for the large numbers? I found that in many jurisdictions it is customary for the Secretary to receive 1 1/2 dollars annually per head for every member! (As a former Secretary of the Q. C. Lodge, with over 12,000 members, I must say that this idea appeals to me enormously!) In certain jurisdictions the Lodge Secretaries receive a fixed honorarium, instead. I do not for one moment suggest that Secretaries are tempted to tout for members; I merely record the differences in our respective practices.

Of course I was anxious to know how the American Lodges achieve these memberships, and the opportunity came when I visited the Grand Secretary's office in Boston, Mass. Among many interesting papers that were given to me was their Year Book, containing all the statistics for the preceding year, and thumbing through the pages casually, I came to the section which summarized their Annual Returns. There were many pages of figures but, at the very end of the list, there were the details for the very last Lodge that was consecrated just before the book was printed, and at the time of this Return the Lodge was only eleven months old. At that age, (eleven months), this infant Lodge had a membership of 174; during the eleven months it had initiated 54 Brethren, it had passed 49, and raised 45 brethren. Mass production in a really big way!

The Lodges usually meet once a month (for ten or eleven months in the year) for their "stated" or regular meetings, and every week, or fortnight, for "emergent," "special" or "work" meetings. Attendances, I am told, are proportionately low. In a Lodge of 1,000 members, an attendance of 100 at a 'Stated' meeting would be counted good. There might be only 20 or 30 at the "work" meetings, and these "work" meetings are, in effect, the factories where Masons are turned out by mass production. This may sound cynical, but I believe it is a fair statement of the situation that exists in the larger Masonic centers in the U.S.A.

Arising from all this, perhaps the most frequent question I have been asked in England is "With memberships of 800 to 1,500, how can a Mason ever become Master of a Lodge? Surely he could never live long enough." The answer is that it is easy. All he needs to do, is to express a

desire to "go on," or to "get in line" as the Americans say, and the path is wide open for him. It is the great tragedy of Craft Masonry in the U.S.A. that vast numbers of those who join simply use the Craft as a springboard to the 32ø. To be Master of a "Blue" Lodge may be very pleasant, but it is not nearly so important as to become a 32ø Mason and a "Shriner," with all its attendant advantages (mainly social). As a result men become Freemasons for the wrong reasons, and the Craft is neglected in favor of side degrees.

Among the Grand Officers who see and deplore what is happening, this is a source of constant anxiety, frequently expressed in forthright statements. It is a disease the presence of which is known and understood, but the remedy, unfortunately, is still to be found. Talk to any American Mason for five minutes, and the chances are that he will show you his wallet containing a whole "concertinafull" of Dues Cards, witnessing the number of "Masonic" organizations to which he belongs. There will seldom be more than one (or two) Craft Lodges among them; the rest are all side degrees, that are helping, unintentionally to sap the Craft of its vitality!

CRAFT RITUAL

There are several different Craft rituals in use in the U.S.A., generally exhibiting only minor variations and, broadly speaking, they are very similar to ours in England. Yet, in a very curious way, the visitor who knows his ritual will find that the American versions sound strangely old-fashioned, repetitive, and somehow older than ours. Surprisingly, this is true; although the Americans got their ritual from Britain, their ritual is, in fact, older than ours, and that makes an interesting story.

As you probably know, our present ritual was virtually standardized at the time of the union of the rival Grand Lodges, in 1813,, when the 'Antients' and the 'Moderns' ultimately came together to form the United Grand Lodge. For several years before that date, committees of learned Brethren had been sitting, trying to evolve a revised form of the ritual that would be acceptable to both sides.

The results of their labors, very satisfying to us nowadays, did not meet with wholehearted approval at that time. Many changes had been made and a great deal of symbolical material had been discarded. Indeed, it might almost be fair to say that in cleaning up the ritual, the baby had been thrown away with the bath-water .

American Masonic workings owe their origins, unquestionably, to England, Scotland, Ireland, but the stabilization of their ritual was done by an American, Thomas Smith Webb, who, although he wrote very little of it himself, may well be described as the father of American ritual.

In 1792, Webb, a printer by trade, settled in Albany, N.Y., and soon afterwards he made the acquaintance of John Hanmer, an English Freemason who was a keen ritualist and apparently very knowledgeable about the Preston system. Webb, was then barely twenty-two years old and their mutual interests drew them together. This was the period when the English Masonic ritual

was at its highest stage of development. Hutchinson and Calcott had published their works; Preston was in his prime, and the 1792 edition of his *Illustrations of Masonry* had just appeared. This was the 8th edition, as popular and successful as its predecessors, and it was almost a bible to the English Craft. Webb took the book, retained sixty-four pages of Preston's work intact, word for word, cut out a few minor items, and rearranged others, and published it in 1797, under the title *Freemasons' Monitor or Illustrations of Freemasonry*. Within twenty years, the ritual in England had been altered, curtailed and polished up, (some said, almost beyond recognition), but not so in the U.S.A.; they preserved it.

Look at some of our oldest Tracing Boards and you will find pictures of the Scythe, Hour-glass, Beehive, Anchor, etc., which once had their proper places as symbolic portions of our ritual. They have disappeared from our tracing Boards and from the ritual; but in America, they are still in use to this day, depicted on the Boards and explained in their 'Monitors.' And so it is fair to say that their ritual, though it came from us, is actually older than ours, and it is not merely 'old-fashioned,' but also more discursive, and by reason of their Lectures much more explanatory than ours, especially of the symbolical meaning of their procedures.

But apart from the things we have lost, their ritual material is essentially the same as ours, and easily recognizable. Their signs and secrets are virtually the same as ours, except that they use the Scottish sign for the Entered Apprentices. Their second degree is more elaborate than ours. Their third is basically the same as ours, but because they perform the drama as if it were a play, treating the Candidate as though he were really H.A., the result is occasionally rather rough and frightening, especially in those lodges that pride themselves on the realism of their performance.

The manner in which the Americans safeguard their ritual is also interesting. In England, our Grand Lodge views the ritual as a 'domestic matter,' i.e., a majority of the Brethren in any lodge may decide what form of ritual shall be worked, and unless the Lodge was guilty of some serious breach, the Grand Lodge would not interfere. In the U.S.A., the very reverse is the case. Each Grand Lodge prescribes the ritual that its Lodges shall work, and usually the Grand Lodge prints and publishes the "monitorial" or explanatory portions of the rituals too. Ten out of the forty-nine Grand Lodges also publish the esoteric ritual, in code or cipher, but this is forbidden in the others. Moreover, to prevent innovations, the Grand Lodges protect their forms of working by the appointment of officers, called Grand Lecturers, whose duty is not to lecture, but to ensure that the groups of lodges under their care adhere to the official workings. They do this by means of official demonstrations, called 'Exemplifications,' and during my first visit, I was lucky enough to see both first and second degrees rehearsed in this way.

The exemplifications I saw in Boston required a necessary period of adjustment to Bostonian English, but after that I would gladly give them full marks; the work is splendid. It is proper, perhaps, to add a little tailpiece to this chapter, which gives an insight to the American approach

to their Masonry. I am told that in several, if not most, of the U.S.A. jurisdictions, the Grand Lecturers are paid for their services!

RITUALS and MONITORS

Grand Lodge practices, in regard to books of the ritual, differ from State to State. In Pennsylvania, and California, for example, no written or printed ritual is permitted. All tuition is, as they say, "from mouth to ear," i.e., the Officers and Candidates must attend at rehearsals or "work-meetings" until they have memorized their work simply by listening to it over and over again. In some jurisdictions each officer is responsible for training his successor, privately, not at rehearsals. The Ritual material is usually divided up into two categories,

- (1) "Monitors" which print non-secret portions of ritual and procedure, symbolic Lectures, etc., all in plain language .
- (2) The "Rituals" proper, which are printed (in ten States) in some sort of cipher with... dots... in the usual places.

Books, in both categories, are supposed to be rather difficult to obtain, but one has the impression that this is merely a case of knowing where to look. The Monitors need not concern us here, but the Rituals are interesting. There appear to be four different ciphers that are mainly used. One of the most popular is a kind of "geometrical" code, made Up of straight lines, curves, angles and symbols, which look vary difficult but are, in fact, fairly easy to break down.

In many jurisdictions, a two-letter code is used; usually the first and last letters of each word, but occasionally the first two letters of each word. These two codes are fairly difficult to read until one begins to have a fair knowledge of the "expected word"; but as soon as the phrases become familiar, the two-letter codes arc quite easy to read.

Most difficult of all is the one-letter code, in which only the first letter of each word is used, and this is absolutely terrifying, almost impossible to read until one has acquired a real knowledge of the ritual.

From the Officers' point of view, all this is simply a matter of patience and regular attendance, but for the candidates it is another story. Here, in England, the Candidate for passing has to learn the answers to perhaps eight or nine questions, usually printed on cards in plain language, with perhaps one or two words omitted. For raising he learns another seven or eight answers, and he is through.

In the U.S.A. jurisdictions, these examinations are called "Proficiency Tests," and they must be a really worrying experience. For example, the E. A. passing to the F. C. has to answer about seventy-seven questions, and recite the Obligation by heart, before he can pass his test; the F. C. must answer some forty questions and the Obligation from memory, and the M. M., after he has taken his third degree, another forty or so, again with the Obligation by heart. Then, and not

until then does he become a real member of the Lodge. Then he is allowed to sign the Register, and enjoy the privileges of membership, including a Masonic Funeral if he wants it.

All this would be difficult enough if the Q. & A. were printed in plain language, but they are not. In those jurisdictions where no printed rituals are permitted, the candidates must attend "Classes of Instruction," usually under the care of the J. D., or S. D., until they have learned their work "from mouth to ear." Elsewhere, they learn their work from the cipher books. I have a set of the "Proficiency Tests" as used in Rhode Island, in their one-letter code and they are simply terrifying. I have been a Preceptor for many years, and I find them difficult to read. Heaven knows how the candidates manage – but they do.

Here, I believe it is fair to say that American Masons, in the course of passing their "Proficiency Tests" in all three degrees, acquire a much wider knowledge of the ceremonies and especially of their symbolical meaning, than our candidates get in England. Their patience and industry are more than justified.

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