

Daylight Masonry An Old Idea Renewed

By Coe Tug Morgan

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Historical references suggest that Medieval Masonic Guilds often met on Saturday for such business as proving their apprentices. Logic would tell us that, just as the first walls were erected on the north side in order to keep the building area shaded for less time, so would the meeting be during the day because few except the nobility and clergy could afford the luxury of candles or lamp oil.

It was when the Masonic craft became an urban, upper and middle-class speculative fraternity and meetings moved into the tavern that evening meetings started. While some English lodges often do meet early in the afternoon for the purpose of degree work, it might be said that since the 17th century, the Junior Warden generally has not really called the "Craft from labor to refreshment..." at High Twelve.

But not always and in North America lodges meeting only during the daytime have been a small but recorded fact since the United States became a nation. A history of St. Paul Lodge A.F. & A.M. in Ayer, Massachusetts, once a daytime lodge, suggests that the Revolutionary War, a Tory prisoner, a girl and romance may have had a hand in its formation. And some sixty years later the Civil War's "Field and Sea Lodges," brought forth another. These lodges are examples of the Masonic Craft adapting to the needs of its' members.

As a rural lodge, St. Paul chose not to follow the usual custom of meeting by the light of the moon, but rather to meet by the light of day, which may not have been as unique as it now seems for D. Burleigh Smalley, Jr., when Grand Secretary of Vermont reported that, "... in connection with providing a facsimile of an original charter (lost by fire) for Seventy-Six Lodge No. 14 in Swanton, Vermont we came across mention of meetings held regularly in 1828 at 2 and 3 pm. Apparently, at least some of the lodges may have met during the daytime hours..."

That other lodges may or may not have met during the day does not detract from the fact that St. Paul Lodge had a long history of daylight meetings and though time, fire and handling have not been kind to many early lodge records, a lodge history published early in this century found enough remaining to attach a bit of historical romance to its beginning.

When news of Paul Revere's ride and the events at Concord and Lexington reached the Ayer area northwest of Concord, the local militia immediately left to aid their brothers in arms and the home guard duties were taken up by their wives disguised in men's attire. They captured Captain Leonard Whiting of Hollis, New Hampshire, a well known Tory who was carrying correspondence from British commanders in Canada to the British Governor General in Boston, Thomas Gage.

He was taken to Groton, Mass., a town four or five miles away where he was held prisoner in the home of Oliver Prescott, brother of the leader of the local militia. It must have been a fairly easy confinement and it grew into a lasting friendship. A friendship which would later find the jailer's son, Oliver Prescott, Jr. marrying Captain Whiting's daughter Nancy.

Twenty years later on January 26, 1797, St. Paul Lodge received its charter from the patriot who carried the alarm from the Old North Church in Boston, Grand Master Paul Revere. The first Senior Warden was Oliver Prescott, Jr. and lodge records, etc., led 19th century historians to surmise that if ex-prisoner Whiting was not himself responsible for the inception of the lodge, his influence was most likely felt. Years later Grand Master John Abbott, a Past Master of St. Paul Lodge laid the cornerstone for the Bunker Hill Monument.

Nearly seven decades later, St. Cecile Lodge No. 568 in New York City, the first of the "entertainer's daytime lodges" was chartered. (St. Cecile Lodge No. 568 still meets on the 1st and 4th Tuesdays at 1:00 pm in New York City on the same days and hours as it has for over 124 years.) During the "War Between the States," several Grand Lodges chartered "Field and Sea Lodges," many in regimental bands. Many of those band members after their enlistments returned to New York City to work in orchestras and entertainment and they found they could not continue their Masonry because of their night professions.

St. Cecile's own printed history tells how some of them drifted together during the day to a restaurant operated by a former musician. They discussed their mutual problem and led by Frederick Widdows, several brothers met with RW Robert Holmes, the New York Deputy Grand Master and explained their idea of a daytime lodge. He promised his support.

In no time at all, as required by New York Masonic law, twelve Masons signed a formal request for a lodge to be "... held in the daytime between the hours of 12 noon and 8 o'clock in the evening." Kane Lodge No. 454 on January 10, 1865 agreed to the request, other lodges quickly followed and a short fifteen days later a dispensation was granted by RW Brother Holmes.

Being mostly musicians, several different names relating to the trade were suggested such as "Harmony," "Melody" and of course "Daylight," but in the end St. Cecile was chosen. The

French form of the patron saint of music and musicians was selected over the more commonly used Latin "St. Cecilia," in recognition of the aid given by the Deputy Grand Master and whose wife, Mrs. Cecile Robin Holmes was French born.

During the next half century St. Cecile Lodge No. 568 was the inspiration for many other daytime lodges across North America as touring performers carried the message about New York's unique "Entertainer's Lodge," to their brethren in other cities. By the 1920's almost every major town in the country played by a vaudeville troupe could claim a daylight lodge. From Boston to San Francisco, from Washington, D.C. to Vancouver, B.C., Canada and in between, stage artists, musicians and theater employees with a few others like newspaper and Western Union night workers gathered together to form daylight lodges. Masons who really went to "refreshment at High Twelve," and then came the "talkies..."

Vaudeville died, theater orchestras vanished and then the great depression killed what was left and so daytime lodges began to struggle and fade. For a brief time in the 1950's several were started in metropolitan areas with large manufacturing plants and lots of night workers, but they were by far the exception. The original daylight lodges often changed into evening lodges or consolidated and vanished into Masonic history. It seemed that by the 1970's only in the very largest cities could daylight lodges continue, the idea was now obsolete. But was it?

Retirees! Yes! Retirees! Many don't want to drive at night. Retirees moved to the "sun belt." They found other members of the Craft and formed High Twelve Luncheon Clubs and then they asked "why not have a lodge meeting during the day?" So in retirement communities in states like California, New Mexico, Texas, Arizona and Virginia daylight lodges began to sprout until today there are over one hundred such lodges in North America. Some of the older lodges seeing the success of their younger sister lodges, have reached out to the same community, the retired Mason, for new members. Lodges have even changed from night to day meetings, a reversal of a trend of fifty years. And it isn't just in North America that this trend is noted, for there are well over one hundred daylight lodges in the Australian grand lodges. A Conference of North American Daylight Lodges has been formed, and two international meetings have been held in Vancouver, British Columbia and Albuquerque, New Mexico. In 1989-90 two Grand Lodges, Delaware and New Mexico have Grand Masters who are Past Masters of daylight lodges.

These lodges are not large, most rely on affiliated membership in one form or another and frequently change officers because of age, health, death or a brother moving away, but they all possess a unique fellowship. Because they often began as a breakfast or luncheon gathering, most continue to have a real festive board so that when the Junior Warden calls the craft "from labor to refreshment," most likely it is "High Twelve" and the Junior Warden and Stewards have duties to perform in more than a symbolic manner.

In modern daylight masonry, the Medieval Mason would undoubtedly feel right at home thinking that these lodges really meet at the proper time.

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