



LODGE VEGAS # 32

Stated Meetings and Entered Apprentices

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In the United States, Freemasons have a curious custom. We initiate a candidate into our lodges as an Entered Apprentice. In most jurisdictions that use Preston-Webb ritual, we then send him out of the room, reinvest him with what he was divested, and bring him back in. Finally, we place him in the northeast corner of the lodge, and we tell him that he "there stands a just and upright Mason," and we charge him ever to walk and act as such.

Then we slam the door of the lodge in his face.

In all but a small handful of U.S. Grand Lodges, we deny the rights of our Entered Apprentices in a way that the rest of the Masonic world would never dream of. Lodges in almost every country but ours conduct their business meetings on their degree of choice, so all of their attending members can take part. And U.S. Freemasonry is weaker for not doing it.

The concept of conducting our business on the Master Mason degree is actually an innovation in the body of Masonry that didn't occur until a full hundred years after the fraternity was established in America. The lodges of Washington, Franklin, Hancock, Revere, Madison - they all allowed their Entered Apprentices to be there when conducting the monthly stuff of lodge administration. So why did we stop? And how does our present policy of "Master Masons Only" weaken the fraternity?

Society turned against Freemasonry, especially after the disappearance (and probable death) of William Morgan in upstate New York in 1826. Morgan was what folks back then used to quaintly call a ne'er do well. He claimed to be a Mason, and shortly after his arrival in the area, he attended lodge meetings and began to put the touch on his brethren. When his honor, and his status as a Mason, came into question and Masonic wallets closed to his advances, he hit upon a surefire way to make cash. He decided to publish an expose of Masonic ritual. It is debatable whether the Masons of Batavia murdered Morgan or not, but he did disappear after being "taken for a ride." And America went into a four-alarm anti-Masonic rage. Lodges closed. Grand lodges shut down. Openly Masonic politicians were targeted, and America's original third-party, the Anti-Masonic Party was formed. Masonry was in a bad way, and in some parts of the country, faced extinction.

In 1842, a Masonic convention was called in Baltimore, and grand lodge representatives from all around the country assembled to determine a "uniform mode of work throughout all the Lodges of the United States and to make other lawful regulations for the interest and security of the Craft," and hopefully, "to recommend such measures as shall tend to the elevation of the Order to its due degree of respect throughout the world at large." These were the beginnings of the dramatic changes for Masonry in the United States.

Because of the fear that, like Morgan, "cowans and eavesdroppers" might join the fraternity, be initiated, view a meeting or two, then publish Masonic secrets, it was decided to bar Entered Apprentices and Fellow Craft from participating in lodge business meetings. One hundred and sixty four years later we are still

carrying on that tradition of fear. Through the generations the true meaning of why we have barred the lower degrees from our lodge halls has been lost, replaced with business as usual. We have failed to even know our own recent history, condemning ourselves to the state of the Craft we have today. By expelling the EAs and FCs from participating in regular meetings of the lodge, the slow, thoughtful advancement through the degrees was abandoned. Time between degrees was uniformly reduced, from months or even years down to a week or less. Masonic study was replaced by the rote memorization of the Q&A lectures, or catechism.

Our lodge rooms have become so desolate of white aprons that we are desperate to put as many men in the chairs as fast as we can. Because of this, and the fact we don't allow the brethren of lower degrees to sit in lodge, we have lessened the requirements to the degrees to that of the regurgitation of a few dozen lines of memorized text, so we can push the Brothers through as quickly as possible, just so they can sit in lodge. Do these men even understand the meaning behind those words? It is doubtful, and our purpose is no longer to explain it to them, but to pass them so they can sit in lodge. A mentor (when we even bother to give them one) has become nothing more than a prompter, to make sure they get the words just right. And in many states, even the definition of proficiency has been diluted down to simply knowing the grips, steps and passwords of each degree before moving along. The progression through the degrees has become little more than a brief annoyance to be got through as quickly as possible on the way to the "good stuff" of the Master Mason degree. Without meaning to, and for the noblest of purposes, we have turned our lodges into degree mills, thinking somehow this will make good men better. We have been caught in the American fantasy- thinking, saying it so, makes it so. We say we make good men better, so therefore we do.

A very telling statistic on how we are doing making good men better is that of demits and suspensions for non-payment of dues. In 1950 the average term a man stayed a Mason before he demitted or was suspended for NPD was 23 years. That means a man would belong to a 23 years before he left us. By the year 2000, that term was just over two years. It seems the men of today can't wait to leave us. Rushing men through the degrees so they can sit in lodge to hear about the bills, or how much money we made on the bean supper, is not keeping them, it's losing them.

William Morgan, it seems, has had his revenge after all.

There is not a word of our ritual, a single grip or password that is not published in books or on the Internet. Our secrets are out, our security has been breached. The reason for keeping the lower degrees out of our lodge rooms is no longer valid. So why do we let our Apprentices and Fellows sit at home watching TV on lodge nights instead of sharing our Brotherhood?

By contrast, outside of the United States, Freemasonry has not lost sight of its initiatic roots. In many jurisdictions, the advancement from candidate to Entered Apprentice, and then onward can take months or years. True understanding of the lessons of the degrees is a requirement before moving on, and the brother often must present original papers in lodge before moving on. Requirements are tougher outside of the U.S. and one-day classes are considered irregular and unnecessary. Yet, their lodges are growing, while ours dwindle. There is a reason.

We forget that these early days for our new Brothers are the most formative, like a newborn child's. Our new Brothers coming into lodge really don't have a good sense of what a Freemason is or what he does. What we teach him in these formative steps is the way he perceives and serves the Fraternity through out his Masonic career. Teach him that his presence is not wanted, then teach him about debating the electric bill, pancake breakfasts, and raffles, then that is the Mason he will ever be. Perpetually fixed in the mentality of the recent past, destined for demit because of monotony, never to be seen in the lodge room again.

We need to teach him his that presence is wanted, that he is a man of enlightenment, seeking to better himself with courses of moral instruction, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols, always the seeker of Truth through the seven liberal arts. We need to teach him that each degree is a true achievement and not merely a curious way to spend a Tuesday night. We need to get to know him, and he us, from the very first meeting-to know his family, his career, his hopes, his successes and his disappointments- because that's what true Brotherhood is, and the true purpose of fraternity. If we instill in him true charity, love, and let it be heard in his words and seen in his actions, and get him truly involved in his Lodge from the very first day that he becomes a Mason, the Craft will have a true and faithful Brother among us for life.

Prepare By, Br. Florian for the benefit of the Craft, Nov, 2012