

A Century of Iowa Masonry

Freemasons were among the early prospectors who came to the Dubuque lead mines even before Iowa was organized as a Territory. By 1844, the four regularly established lodges of Burlington, Bloomington (Muscatine), Dubuque, and Iowa City felt competent enough to seek authority to establish a Grand Lodge. The recent Centennial Communication of that Grand jurisdiction bore witness to the fact that Iowa Masonry was well launched upon its second hundred years.

During the same year the Grand Lodge of Iowa came into being, it granted Letters of Dispensation to new groups at Wapello, Marion, Augusta, and Mount Pleasant. Growth of the order was relatively slow through the remainder of the decade. Only two lodges were empowered in 1845, both of them being in Van Buren County — at Farmington and Keosauqua. The largest number in any one year before 1850 was four.

The first lodge at Keokuk (Eagle) was one of the oldest in Iowa. It had received a dispensation from the Grand Lodge of Illinois, but, because of its Mormon contacts, had fallen into disfavor with that Grand jurisdiction and with some of the

delegates who had labored for the establishment of the Iowa Grand body. However, an Iowa charter was granted to a new Eagle Lodge, No. 12, in 1847.

Throughout the ten years immediately preceding the Civil War, Masonry in Iowa enjoyed vigorous expansion. Twelve lodges received authority to operate in 1851, among which were those at Sigourney (Hogin No. 32), Maquoketa (Helion No. 36), and Davenport (Davenport No. 37). By that time second lodges had appeared in several communities. The first of these, appropriately, was at Burlington, in 1849, the new body taking the name of Burlington No. 20, since No. 1 was known as Des Moines Lodge. The second venture at Farmington was made with Mount Moriah No. 27, at Keokuk with Hardin No. 29, at Muscatine with Hawkeye No. 30, and at Iowa City with Zion No. 31. These four last mentioned were established in 1851. The mortality, however, among these additional lodges was high. In time, Burlington, Hawkeye, and Zion lost their independent existence, as also did the first lodge at Farmington. The usual procedure in such cases was to surrender the charter and unite with a stronger local lodge. Of course, in some cities which made ample growth, not only one but several additional lodges were established.

Before the eruption between North and South, Masonry expanded most rapidly in 1854 and 1857. During the former year, twenty-one Masonic units received the necessary dispensations. These included one in Cedar Falls, and a second lodge at Davenport (Tuscan Lodge No. 57) which later became extinct. In 1857 the all-time record was achieved for the establishment by dispensation of Masonic Lodges in Iowa during a single year. The number was twenty-nine, and among the communities concerned were Sioux City (Landmark No. 103), Waterloo (Waterloo No. 105), Marshalltown (Marshall No. 108), Des Moines (Capital No. 110), Fort Dodge (Ashlar No. 111), Marengo (Marengo No. 114), and Waverly (Tyrell No. 116). During this year, also, Letters of Dispensation were granted to Capital Lodge No. 101 of Omaha, Nebraska, which were surrendered when Nebraska established its own jurisdiction. In 1858, Dubuque boldly undertook its second Masonic band (Mosaic Lodge No. 125). By the close of 1860, 163 lodges had received Letters of Dispensation, over thirty of which, by then or later, merged with other lodges, transferred to other jurisdictions, or lost their charters by revocation or surrender. Many of these lodges had started hopefully but found they did not have the vigor to continue.

The actual years of conflict checked the expansive course of Masonry in Iowa. Only two lodges received authority in 1861 — at Red Oak and Tracy. Three were added in 1862, including St. John's Lodge of Yankton, Dakota Territory, and three more in 1863. Only one was placed upon the State roll in 1864, this being National No. 172 at Farmersburg. Five more were empowered between January and April, 1865, thus giving a total of thirteen new lodges authorized within the State during the war period.

The Civil War placed an enormous strain upon the fraternal sentiments of Masonic brethren living on opposite sides of the Mason and Dixon line, as it did upon the churches and other national organizations whose ideals and principles had never contemplated sectional distinctions. Thomas Hart Benton, Jr., was Grand Master in 1861 when the fighting began. During the Communication of the Grand Lodge that year, Benton presented a moving appeal to Northern Masons from the Grand Lodge of Tennessee. That such a message should be sent to Iowa was understandable because the Iowa jurisdiction traced its Masonic lineage through the Grand Lodges of Missouri, Tennessee, and North Carolina.

"We appeal to you," was the cry from Tennessee, "and through you to the thousands of

Masons in your jurisdictions, to stop the effusion of blood while yet they may. . . . Restore peace to our unhappy country, and surely Heaven will bless every faithful effort toward its accomplishment. But if all efforts fail . . . if the sword must still be the last resort, and accepted as the final arbiter, we beseech the brethren engaged in the awful contest to remember that a fallen foe is still a brother, and as such is entitled to our warmest sympathies and kindest attentions. . . . While each is true to his sense of public and patriotic duty, on whichever side he may be arrayed, we earnestly urge that he shall also be true to those high and holy teachings inculcated by our order."

The appeal from Tennessee was received with deep feeling in Iowa. Every Mason, said Grand Master Benton, "within this jurisdiction heartily and cordially joins in the desire expressed for restoration of that tranquillity and prosperity for which our common country was so recently and so universally distinguished, and that we stand ready to unite in any effort consistent with our duty as men and Masons, that is at all likely to produce this desirable result." But Benton went on to say, "I must confess, however, that all hope of accomplishing anything as a fraternity, in staying the hand of civil discord, is with me at an end." The Grand Master was soon commissioned col-

onel of the Twenty-ninth Iowa Infantry. He served in the Union Army for three years, attaining the brevet rank of brigadier general. Like other citizens, Masons flocked to defend the Union. Fundamental in Masonic teaching is loyalty to God and country. "The true Mason," Benton reminded his brethren, "will ever be ready to respond to the call of the government to which he rightfully owes allegiance." Southern Masons felt likewise about the Confederacy.

Many Iowa Masons fell on the fields of battle. In 1864, Grand Master Edward A. Guilbert, then serving as Captain of Company A, Forty-sixth Iowa Infantry, wrote his address to the Grand Lodge from Camp McClellan at Davenport. Many of our brothers, he said, "sleep their last sleep in the trenches of Vicksburg, and Port Hudson, on the plains of Louisiana and Arkansas, and by the still clear waters of the far Tennessee." Three pages of the Proceedings of the Grand Lodge for 1864 record the names of Masons who had died in the service of their country.

Following the close of the Civil War there was an immediate acceleration of Masonic membership in Iowa. Every year dispensations were issued to large numbers of new lodges to be followed in due time by charters. Twenty-five charters were granted in 1867, nineteen in 1868, thirty in 1869,

and nineteen in 1870. Two hundred and eighty-six charters were sealed and granted from 1871 to 1900, inclusive. The increase of the lodges had meant a corresponding multiplication of the membership, of course. The four lodges which erected the Grand Lodge in 1844 then had a combined membership of 101. By 1864 the number of Iowa Masons had increased to 4549 and in 1904 to 33,181. There was a decrease in the number of new lodges established after the turn of the century: only eighty-six charters were granted between 1901 and 1931. This was to be expected since each passing year approached closer to the point of equipoise. By this time the Masonic fraternity had become a familiar institution in hundreds of cities and towns.

The ranks of membership were greatly enlarged during the first World War and in the lush years of the twenties. Before marching off to war large numbers of young men felt the urge to associate themselves with the ancient brotherhood, while in the booming years that followed the armistice there was a marked flocking to virtually all the fraternal orders. The high point of Masonic membership in Iowa occurred in 1927 in which year 86,541 names were recorded on the books of the Grand Secretary. The greatest number of lodges — 655 — was achieved in 1931, since

which date no new ones have been chartered in Iowa.

The expansive trend was sharply reversed as the country was swept into the stress of economic depression. As with other comparable institutions, Masonry lost ground annually during the thirties. The low point was 1941 in which year 66,691 members maintained their good standing. There was also a loss in the number of chartered lodges. But the decline was arrested as material conditions improved. In 1944, the number of lodges stood at 543 with 69,450 men in the ranks of the brotherhood.

To perform effectively its function of guidance for this large body of Masons in Iowa, the Grand Lodge is under the executive and fraternal direction of the Grand Master and his officers. These include a Grand Secretary, Grand Treasurer, and several standing and special committees. Among the committees are those on Dispensations and Charters, Division and Reference, Appeals and Grievances, Jurisprudence, Finance, Charity, Library, State Hospitals, and Masonic Service. The scope and activity of these committees are apparent from their titles with the exception, perhaps, of Masonic Service.

The Committee on Masonic Service originated in 1913 as the Masonic Research Committee.

Arising from its basic work of investigation into all phases of Masonic thought and interests, the Committee was designed to accomplish five purposes: (1) organization of Masonic study clubs; (2) formation of classes in Masonic law; (3) use of traveling libraries; (4) establishment of a Masonic lecture bureau; and (5) providing lecturers for schools of instruction. Out of the early activities of this committee came the creation of a National Masonic Research Society. While the Iowa committee continued its investigative and literary work, it became aware of an increasing demand for less specialized and more direct and immediately helpful service to the craft at large. The same impulses were in evidence elsewhere, and on the national stage resulted in the creation of the Masonic Service Association of the United States. In Iowa the Masonic Research Committee became, by 1921, the Masonic Service Committee.

This body is composed of five members appointed by the Grand Master. It has a full-time secretary who maintains his office in the Masonic Library at Cedar Rapids. The broad function of the Service Committee is to assist the order in all possible ways. Among the materials prepared and sent by the committee to the local groups or individuals are pamphlets and brochures, program

outlines and suggestions for anniversary and other occasions, summary of Grand Lodge proceedings, courses of study of Masonic history and practice, and considerable quantities of reference and research items. The committee also uses its machinery to convey certain of the Grand Master's communications to the craft, and to serve him or the Grand Lodge in any way it can. Notable among the Service Committee's functions is the maintenance of a Speaker's Bureau composed of competent Masons living in all parts of the State. The services of these men can be secured by the lodges upon simple request. During the past year sixty-nine speakers filled 121 assignments and spoke to Masonic audiences totalling nearly 10,000. More broadly, however, during the year ending with the centennial gathering of the Grand Lodge, the Masonic Service Committee had direct interest in 452 meetings involving an attendance well over 18,000.

At the heart of the Masonic structure lie the ancient landmarks, the ritual, and the truths and teachings they embody. To keep these clear and uncorrupted, the Grand Lodge of Iowa maintains a Board of Custodians, a system of District Lecturers, and periodic Schools of Instruction. It is the task of the Custodians to keep themselves carefully informed on Masonic history and maintain

the purity of the ritual. In earlier years it was the practice of a Grand Lecturer to travel through the State exemplifying and encouraging ritualistic proficiency in the lodges. As this method became too onerous, however, the Grand Lodge divided the State into districts and from these the custodians undertook to train and test a large number of instructors. When certified, these became known as District Lecturers; to their ranks were added by later provision, Masonic Instructors. It is the business of the Lecturers and Instructors to hold periodic schools of instruction in their districts, and the obligation of the lodges therein to send representatives to attend them.

Beyond the district gatherings there are held each year five Regional Schools of Instruction at as many important centers in the State. These are under the supervision of the Board of Custodians, and are attended by the Grand Master, Grand Secretary, and many Lecturers and Instructors. Beyond these, a Grand Lodge School of Instruction is held at the place of and immediately preceding the annual Grand Lodge Communication.

A striking accomplishment of the Grand Lodge of Iowa has been the accumulation of an impressive library. The first Grand Master, Oliver Cock, suggested a small annual appropriation for the purpose of "procuring books for the Grand

Lodge". The truly architectural spirit behind this enterprise, however, was Theodore S. Parvin, the first Grand Secretary and Grand Librarian. The purpose visualized was a growing library that would "Tend to throw light on the origin, antiquity, and constitutions of Masonry, and to furnish the members of the Grand Lodge with all tangible information concerning its progress, and the duties of Masons as individuals and members of Grand and subordinate lodges." For several years, the growing library had a migratory existence, its residence alternating between Muscatine, Iowa City, and Davenport. In 1884 it found a permanent home in a special building provided for it at Cedar Rapids.

This collection has enjoyed remarkable growth in the course of a hundred years until its 40,000 volumes are now regarded as one of the leading Masonic libraries of the world. In its great Masonic section (for there are also large numbers of non-Masonic works) all phases of the fraternity may be studied: "history, traditions, symbolism, moral teachings, ritual, jurisprudence; Masonic conditions abroad; Anti-Masonic propaganda; histories of Grand Lodges, both foreign and American, including those of many individual lodges which have attained age and prominence. In addition to these may be found many volumes

dealing with the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite, Royal Arch, Royal and Select Masters, Knight Templar, and other rites in Masonry, some of them little known in this country."

Some items in this collection are of great rarity and value. The library contains many foreign language works, of course, since Masonry, like religion and philosophy, is universal in its scope. There is also a section of periodical literature, Masonic and otherwise. Many books and pamphlets have appeared under the imprint of the Grand Lodge of Iowa, and since 1897 it has published, monthly for the most part, the *Grand Lodge Bulletin*. It is not necessary that those who desire to use the Grand Lodge Library or publications make the journey to Cedar Rapids. Any lodge, or individual Mason, may borrow items on request. Indeed, the Grand Librarian is prepared to assemble a "Traveling Library" of from ten to twenty or more selected works and forward them to lodges for a period of three months, with renewal privileges.

Though the Grand Lodge exercises so large a part in the life of Freemasonry in Iowa, it is in the subordinate local lodges that the true substance and vigor of the fraternity are found. These lodges hold regular meetings once a month. Beyond that, however, as many additional meet-

ings are held as the conferring of degrees requires. The principal officers are elected and other officers appointed, annually. There are three degrees in what is known as Blue Lodge Masonry, the type to which all Masons belong. A few go on to affiliate with the Scottish Rite and York Rite bodies and obtain additional degrees. Masonry is not a religious association as the term is conventionally understood, yet at the base of all its thought and belief is the rule of the Great Architect of the Universe, the brotherhood of men, and the attainment of the just and upright life. To promote understanding of these, and the moral, ethical, and philosophic system that Masonry has evolved through the centuries, are the rich symbols, landmarks, and ritual in evidence at every tyled lodge meeting.

Many Iowa lodges were established amid pioneer conditions. Most of them began existence in humble circumstances. The first meeting places were usually rooms above stores or hotels on the Main Streets of the rural towns, in one-room schoolhouses, or, even, the auxiliary rooms of the early churches. The Iowa City brethren, for example, held their first gatherings in William Reynolds's schoolroom and Chauncey Swan's hotel, while the early home of the Bloomington Lodge, and the first to be built for any Masonic group in

Iowa, was the specially constructed second floor of the little Episcopal Church. As certain communities grew and prospered, becoming the large cities of the Commonwealth, impressive temples replaced the earlier modest lodgings. It is to be remembered that, in theory, every Masonic temple reflects something of the magnificence of King Solomon's Temple at Jerusalem. Notable examples of these improved edifices are to be found in Burlington, Muscatine, Iowa City, Waterloo, Chariton, and many other places. Such structures as those at Dubuque, Des Moines, Sioux City, Davenport, and Cedar Rapids, may be said to be in the grand manner.

In all countries where it exists, Freemasonry is an important and constructive force in the social order. In some lands it is politically active, but this is not the case in the United States. Everywhere, however, when it is true to its principles and teachings, it stands only for that which is good. As this fraternity begins its second century in Iowa, it appears to move on a rising tide of vigor and popularity. This should be pleasing to all people, for it is an ancient and honorable institution, whose purpose is to work for justice, freedom, generosity, goodwill, brotherhood, and peace among all men.

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