

HISTORY OF MASONRY IN NEBRASKA

by R. W. John Parsons

The history of Masonry in Nebraska extends back prior to Nebraska's entry into the Union in 1867. The area that now comprises Nebraska became a part of United States territory in 1803 as a result of the Louisiana Purchase. The Lewis and Clark expedition passed through Nebraska both enroute to and returning from the West Coast. While both William Clark and Merewether Lewis were Masons, there were no recorded Masonic activities held during their sojourn through this portion of the country. During the early portion of the 19th Century, fur traders traversed the Platte and Missouri River Valleys, setting up posts for trade with the local Indian tribes. In 1820, the first United States military post west of the Missouri was established at Fort Atkinson, now Fort Calhoun, Nebraska. This post was constructed to protect those individuals involved in the fur trade, and was also intended to prevent incursions into that lucrative business by British fur trading companies extending their reach south from Canada. The post was garrisoned by troops of the 6th Infantry, and was in existence until 1827, when the fur trade began to wane, and the troops assigned to the fort needed elsewhere. While there is no evidence of Masonic meetings being conducted at the post during its short existence, it is possible that a military lodge may have existed in the 6th Infantry Regiment, or that there may have been informal meetings of brethren assigned to the unit.

John C. Fremont explored a large portion of Nebraska in the early 1850s, and his reports were instrumental in providing Congress with sufficient information to warrant the formation of a territory, a preliminary step on the road to statehood. In 1854 the Kansas-Nebraska Territory was officially formed, and it was shortly after thereafter that we have documentation of Masonic meetings within the territory that now comprises Nebraska.

On October 3, 1855, the Grand Lodge of Illinois chartered Nebraska Lodge # 184. The first meeting was held in April 1855 in the second story of a trading post owned by Peter Sarpy, one of the pioneer fur traders in the region. The altar was ostensibly composed of a bale of Indian blankets. On May 28, 1856, the Grand Lodge of Missouri issued a charter to Giddings Lodge # 156 at Nebraska City, and on June 3, 1857, the Grand Lodge of Iowa chartered Capitol Lodge # 101, meeting in Omaha. These three lodges would be the start of the Grand Lodge of Nebraska.

In September 1857, Masters and Wardens from those three lodges assembled and organized the Grand Lodge of Nebraska. Nebraska Lodge # 184 became Nebraska Lodge # 1; Giddings Lodge was renamed Western Star Lodge # 2, and Capitol Lodge # 101 was transformed into Capitol Lodge # 3. (Interestingly, if one wishes to trace the roots of the Grand Lodge back a bit further, the Grand Lodges of Missouri, Illinois, and Iowa trace their lineage through lodges in Kentucky and Tennessee and ultimately to colonial-era Grand Lodges in Virginia and North Carolina.)

The first lodge created by the new Grand Lodge of Nebraska was Nemaha Valley Lodge # 4 in Brownville. The lodge was created in December of 1857, and it, along with Omadi Lodge # 5 (South Sioux City) and Plattsmouth Lodge # 6, both of which were created a month later, were chartered at the Grand Lodge Annual Communication in June 1858. The lodges followed the path of settlement, which, at that time, was along the Missouri River.

The first Nebraska lodges chartered away from the Missouri River area were far to the west, in Colorado Territory. Nebraska's Platte River Valley served as a corridor for thousands of individuals who traversed the area on their way to the newly discovered silver and gold mines in Colorado. Among those thousands of migrants, there were obviously numerous Masons, as the Grand Lodge of Nebraska issued charters to two lodges, Summit # 7 in Parkville, Colorado, and Rocky Mountain # 8 in Gold Hill, Colorado. These two lodges were chartered in June of 1861 and they, along with a third lodge in Central City, Colorado that had been issued a dispensation by Nebraska, formed the Grand Lodge of Colorado in August 1861. The Grand Lodge of Nebraska issued an additional two dispensations in 1863 to lodges in Idaho Territory. Those lodges had ceased to function by 1867.

While Nebraska and other portions of the West were still in the process of being settled, the country came near to being ripped asunder, as the Civil War erupted in April 1861. Nebraska remained loyal to the Union and raised a regiment of infantry (the 1st Nebraska) which was dispatched to join Federal forces campaigning east of the Mississippi. Not only did Nebraska supply troops, the Grand Lodge of Nebraska also issued a dispensation for a military lodge, named Monitor Lodge.

The establishment of military lodges had been a fairly common occurrence during the 18th Century, particularly in the British Army. Lodges were chartered by the Grand Lodges of England, Scotland, and Ireland, and assigned to a particular regiment. Consequently, the individual Masons in any particular regiment could hold Masonic meetings and initiate, pass, and raise candidates from that regiment. Moreover, they could meet wherever that regiment happened to be stationed, whether it be in North America, India, or in Europe. During the American Revolution several colonial Grand Lodges chartered military lodges that accompanied units of the Continental Army on their campaigns. After the Revolution, however, these military lodges surrendered their charters to the Grand Lodges that had issued them.

From the beginning of the 19th Century American Grand Lodges did not generally approve of issuing charters or dispensations to military units. Since nearly every unit was stationed in a place where a state Grand Lodge was already in existence, the thought was that it would be improper for a lodge, say chartered by the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania, to meet at a military post in Texas, where another Grand Lodge was sovereign. Given the fact that blue-uniformed Masons from Nebraska would probably not be welcome at a lodge meeting in Mississippi, the Grand Lodge of Nebraska decided to buck the tradition and issue a dispensation. Monitor Lodge was issued a dispensation in July 1863

and met until the cessation of hostilities in 1865. It had a highly successful, if brief, existence, initiating, passing, and raising brethren assigned to Union Army.

At the conclusion of the Civil War, settlement in Nebraska resumed anew, aided and encouraged in part by the Homestead Act of 1863 which encouraged settlers to settle and farm land. This population boom resulted in Nebraska becoming a state in 1867. More lodges were established in Nebraska, many of them still in communities along the Missouri River, such as Falls City, Omaha, Fort Calhoun, and Peru. However, as settlements spread west across Nebraska, so did lodges. By 1871, lodges had been established in Fremont, Lincoln, Beatrice, Seward, Grand Island, and North Platte. A lodge was also chartered in Wyoming Territory in 1870 (Wyoming Lodge # 28). This lodge transferred to the newly formed Grand Lodge of Wyoming in 1874, becoming Wyoming Lodge # 2. By the end of the 19th Century, lodges had been established throughout the state of Nebraska, and two other Grand Lodges, Colorado and Wyoming, could trace their roots to the Grand Lodge of Nebraska.

Membership in the fraternity continued to increase through the first half of the 20th Century. Growth in membership occurred in the years immediately after World War I, but the Depression of the 1930s caused a contraction in the membership rolls, as some members found themselves unable to keep up their membership. Several thousand members were lost for several years in a row during the 1930s, even as lodges cut their dues. The economic turnabout that coincided with the onset of World War II stopped the loss of membership. Moreover, there was a tremendous influx of new members during the war years, and membership continued to grow until the late 1950s. In 1957, a century after the beginning of the Grand Lodge, Masonic membership in Nebraska peaked at 46,213.

Changing population demographics, the emergence of a new generation of “non-joiners” (the “Baby Boomers”), and societal and cultural changes led to an ever-diminishing number of new Masons in Nebraska. These changes were certainly not limited to Nebraska, but were widespread throughout the country. The membership problem was exacerbated in some of the more rural parts of the state, as large elements of the population moved from the villages and small towns to larger communities. Many small town lodges were forced to close or consolidate with other nearby lodges.

By the late 1990s, the leaders of Nebraska Masonry had recognized these problems, and set about to solve them. In 1986, direct solicitation of potential members was permitted, and the ritual sections that needed to be memorized by candidates were reduced in scale. One day classes were initiated in 1996 in order to accommodate the busy schedules of younger adult males, who were now more deeply involved with home, school, and civic activities than members of preceding generations had been. Over the past decade, these efforts have borne some fruit. More new members are created each year than are lost to death; however, suspensions, generally for non-payment of dues, still result in a net membership loss, although the percentage of the net loss has greatly declined. Nebraska Masonic leaders are now focusing on retaining membership, and have embarked upon several programs to accomplish that goal.

Interestingly enough, the one-day classes and shortening of the required memorization has not had a negative effect on either the quality or quantity of the candidates. Many of the men who became Masons in one-day classes recruit their friends to go through in the traditional manner, believing that the lessons they learned are better taught in slower, shorter segments. Additionally, many of the candidates who had only to learn the shorter form of the ritual, have since become fascinated with ritual work, and have taken efforts to become proficient in the ritual of all the degrees. Finally, there has been no statistical difference in the suspension rate for Masons who entered the fraternity during one-day classes, or by the more traditional method.

The Nebraska Grand Lodge also displayed great foresight by being the second Grand Lodge in the country (immediately after Connecticut), to recognize Prince Hall Masonry. This was done in 1990. Moreover, this was full recognition, with no limits imposed on lodge visits or interaction between members of the two grand lodges. Nebraska's bold step has paved the way for other grand lodges to follow suit. Indeed, most jurisdictions in the United States have recognized their Prince Hall counterparts.

As previously noted, efforts must be made to retain members, as well as to attract them. Lodges must become relevant in the communities in which they are located, and social activities developed to go hand-in-hand with the ritual activities of the lodge. Friendship dinners, involving all the appendant bodies, have proven to be a great way to recruit new members. Lodge sponsorship of activities, such as the Children's Identification Program (CHIP); have focused community attention on the lodges, thereby providing much positive reaction and an increase in membership. Masonic education forums have filled gaps in the knowledge of many Masons, not just the new members, and have become extremely popular.

In 2001 the United States again found itself in an unwanted war as terrorists attacked New York City and Washington, D. C. As in years past, many of those men serving in our armed forces were also Masons. As they deployed overseas to fight the nation's enemies they, like their forbears in other conflicts, desired to be able to meet with their brethren in Masonic communication. The Grand Lodge of Nebraska, using the example of the Civil War era Monitor Lodge, in 2005 granted a dispensation to Nebraska Masons to meet overseas. Swisher Lodge (named after a Nebraska Mason who was killed in Iraq) was formed and has held meetings in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Many of these outreach activities and efforts to bring Masonry into the spotlight culminated in 2007 during the 150th Anniversary Celebration of the founding of the Grand Lodge. Numerous activities were held in all portions of the state during the year, but the highlight was undoubtedly a ceremony conducted at the state Capitol in Lincoln. The rotunda of the capitol contains busts of individual who, because of outstanding service to the state or nation, have been elected

to membership in the Nebraska Hall of Fame. There are currently 23 individuals who have been so honored: eight of them, more than a third, are Masons.

Nearly 400 Masons, wearing aprons and jewels, marched in procession from a Masonic building in downtown Lincoln to the state capitol. Once inside the capitol, a memorial service was held honoring those eight Masons. Among the eight were: William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody, famed scout, hunter, showman, Medal of Honor recipient and member of Platte Valley Lodge # 32, North Platte; William Jennings Bryan, Congressman, three time candidate for President of the United States, Secretary of State in Woodrow Wilson's cabinet, and a member of Lincoln Lodge # 19; and John J. Pershing, Commander in Chief of the American Expeditionary Force in Europe during World War I and also a member of Lincoln Lodge # 19.

While Nebraska Masonry honors its past, we look forward to the future with unabated enthusiasm. We believe the best years of Masonry are yet to come.