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The Length of Our Cable Tow

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The art of falconry dates as far back as 2,000 B.C. Training this bird of prey to hunt became an increasingly popular sport and pastime throughout Europe in the following centuries.



Certain phrases used in falconry slipped into our vocabulary. For example - the expression *under my thumb* was given birth from how a falconer tightly gripped the tethers tied to the falcon's leg, under his thumb to prevent the bird from flying away until it is released.

The phrase *wrapped around his little finger* came from wrapping those same tethers around the pinkie finger adding an extra anchor in securing the bird.

The term *hoodwink* originates from falconry too - the hoodwink is the hood placed over the bird's head to prevent the bird from immediately searching for prey.

Today, we often believe phrases and terms we hear in Masonry originated in our fraternity. If we further investigate the origin of words we

use in Freemasonry we find few purely Masonic words although Masonic writers and Masons have, over the centuries, enjoyed claiming phrases like *black ball* and *third-degree* came from Freemasonry and no place else.

The term *black ball*, however, did not originate in Freemasonry. The black ball was a small wooden or ivory colored ball used to place into a container to register a vote, as was a white ball and it was first used in 1550 - 167 years before the organized formation of Freemasonry as we know it today. In the reign of King Edward 6th reign in England we find written rules for how to take votes the King was interested in from his advisors. They used white and black balls to cast their votes.



The phrase *getting* or *giving the third degree* is claimed to not have existed until Freemasonry created the 3rd degree sometime in the 1730s. However, research offers evidence to the contrary. We find in 1578 - some 150 years before organized Freemasonry, botanists routinely described the preservation cycle of cold, moisture and dryness of herbs and plants in degrees. In the heat of the season herbs and plants were getting the 3rd degree. Even Shakespeare tinkered with the phrase called the 3rd degree in his play *Twelfth Night*

in 1602 and referred to it as a high state of high drunkenness.

When we look for the origin of the term *cable tow* we might consider it closer to a Masonic word than most, but only close. There is no explanation given by the Master in our ritual to make it clear to the candidate exactly what is meant by the phrase *my cable tow length from shore*.



The cable tow has been given many values, some saying a marine league of three miles. In Masonry it is purely symbolic. Amidst the flowery definitions offered by scholars over the years, the simplest is that it means the scope of a man's reasonable ability.¹ If we accept that simple explanation we are still left with the question of where did the *length from shore* part come from, and what does that mean?

The term cable tow first appears in an exposure written about Freemasonry.² In that publication, we find the words *cable rope*, which may have been misheard by the writer or misspelled in typesetting.

According to Albert Mackey's Encyclopedia of Freemasonry, the word *kabeltuaw* is of Old English and Germanic origin – appearing in later English as *cable tow*.

The candidate wears the cable tow and it is not removed until that point in the ritual when the Master is satisfied the candidate been duly bound by the obligation the candidate takes, agreeing that if he violates his word, he should end up, as it were, a *cable tow length from shore at low water mark*.

¹ Henry W. Coil, *Cable Tow, Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia*, Macoy, 1994 p.115.

The cable tow is mentioned two other times in ritual. Once when the Master directs the Sr. Deacon to tell the Stewards to release a brother from his cable tow. The second, when the Master further instructs at the brother in final minutes of that ceremony. Aside from these three times, a cable tow is mentioned, ritual is silent and does not further explain to the candidate what cable tow means in relation to the symbolic part of that Entered Apprentice penalty section.

Is there a brother in this room who did not wonder what the part about *the cable tow length from shore* meant when he first heard that reference?

Now, we all know the penalty sections of our three obligations are symbolic. They were never intended to be taken literally. They are, however, meant to be taken to heart as an example of the terrible, gruesome consequence an otherwise good man should suffer if he breaks his word and pledge.

Like so many things in Freemasonry, we must look very deep for the meaning. Sometimes meanings get lost because we are not familiar with what certain terms and phrases meant to past generations.

One of the most interesting explanations about the meaning of the phrase, *my cable tow length from shore* was sent to me in an email sometime in the late 1990s from a friend who was a Mason in another jurisdiction. His email in reply to a question I'd asked. I was not a member of the fraternity at the time but had read much about Freemasonry and was curious about the term cable tow.

He told me the nautical unit of length in the British Navy is 600 feet, however, that alone offered a little insight as to what the length of

² Samuel Prichard, *Three Distinct Knocks*. 1727/1730.

a cable tow might have meant in relationship to the symbolic penalty.³

He went on to note the penalty for such betrayal and the disloyal act of treason in the British Navy at the time the ritual in organized Freemasonry emerged, was, as expected, death by hanging.

A treasonous sailor was still received a burial at sea, but hardly with the customary honors. The sailor convicted of treason was given a burial meant to be as disgraceful as his act. After hanging, he was tied a cable tow's length (600 feet) from the shore. The reason was that 600 feet from shore is where the garbage from both the land and the sea collected and rotted until tides washed it out into the ocean and sank.

Therefore, a man convicted of treason was treated with continued dishonor after his death. His burial would be in the sea, but not the deep blue sea like other sailors. Instead, his place was just offshore where garbage collects and rots. That was the resting place he was deemed to deserve – a burial with no honor. In our rituals it is certain that the intent of specifying the burial of something at that distance from shore was to make the object irrecoverable.⁴

It is interesting to note that this idea of burial from shore appears in our earliest ritual documents, though the actual use of the words cable length came later. The first use of the term appears in the Wilkinson MS., c 1710.

³ Later research noted that a cable tow is "about 100 fathoms: in marine charts 605.56 feet, or one tenth of a sea mile," Ron Mark, Cable-Tow & Cable Length - Are they the same? How do they differ? Is there a Marine Connotation to Either? https://skirret.com/papers/cable-tow-cable_length.html, accessed, January 2017. *It should be noted the source Mark noted in his research shows a number of special combinations with the word 'cable', e.g., cable-rope, cable-range, cable-stock, etc., but it does not give 'cable-tow.'*

It was therefore symbolically fitting that such a penalty for a man who knowingly and wittingly violated and transgressed on his promise as a Freemason, should expect humiliation in burial, as well.

I discovered a paper some years later written by an unidentified brother from Euclid Lodge No. 158, (Qualicum Beach, British Columbia). The writer quotes well-known Masonic author, Carl Claudy who confirms the length of a cable tow in the British Navy as, 600 feet.⁵ Further inquiry led to another source further affirming the information in the rest of the explanation sent in that email.⁶ Interestingly, this idea of burial from shore appears in our earliest ritual documents, though the actual use of the words cable length came later. The first use of the term appears in the Wilkinson MS., c 1710.⁷

So, the next time you hear the Entered Apprentice obligation you now have another interpretation of what the cable tow, and the phrase *length from shore*, may symbolically means.

In a more contemporary language, we might think of it like this:

...my body buried in the rough sands of the sea, my cable tow length from shore where garbage collects and rots. That's what I deserve and the kind of dishonorable burial I should be given if I break my word and violate my obligation.

⁴ Ron Mark.

⁵ Euclid Lodge 158, <http://euclidlodge158.com/documents/ExplanationoftheFirstDegree.pdf>.

⁶ Garth Cochran, The Cable: A Paper, Calgary Lodge No. 23, Grand Register of Alberta, <http://www.blendon339.com/membership/masonic-education>.

⁷ Ron Mark.

Harsh criticisms of American Masons by Masons is found in Masonic writings starting in 1850 through the 1920s. This is the period when Masons were mass produced with little education or explanation of the aim and purpose of the fraternity except what each man may have gleaned from going through the rituals.

The word “ignorance” is often used to describe members in many of those writings. Judging from the number of times that word is used in source materials, there must have been much of it.

In none of the writings, however, does “ignorant” mean “stupid.” Instead, we find the word used as a characterization of members who were unenlightened and inadequately schooled regarding the intended aim, meaning, purpose, and heritage of the fraternity.

Some writers extended the assertion by calling Masonic ignorance a “willful offense.” That suggests some men “willfully” remain ignorant by failing to devote themselves to making a daily advancement in their Masonic knowledge as each Mason is charged.

As pointed out in an 1894 Masonic publication, at least six thousand books on Masonic topics in the English language were in print at the time, though not all were American publications.⁸ The means of acquiring Masonic knowledge, then, was within the reach of every Mason.

Today, that reach is even greater, not only because of the remarkable increase in Masonic books and other publications but also the Internet.

We all have experienced conflicts in our schedule, last minute changes, family issues and commitments, unexpected travel,

business commitments, illness, and from-time-to-time, the need to just rest. We know and understand each of these things that can prevent us from attending lodge or perhaps participating in an activity with our fraternity.

I don’t have time, is a phrase that has been heard for generations for not attending or participating lodge or actively pursue Freemasonry in other ways. In fact, we find in 1884 an eloquent writing and presenting from the Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Washington who wrote:

The fatal source from which all Masonic ignorance proceeds: *I have not time*, [that] is the puerile cry of many a worthy man, who might otherwise become a bright and intelligent Mason.⁹

It is up to the individual Mason to decide how much time he will put into the fraternity once he is raised, and here is where a troublesome cycle begins.

Perhaps, those who are too busy to fit Masonry into their lives after asking to do become members – those who end up as only a name on a roster, are more like “cousins” instead of brothers. One Masonic commentator characterized those who end up as only names on a roster as simply “step-brothers.”

Regardless of what characterization may be used, one thing is certain - if Masonry is to mean anything to a man – and he to it – he must spend some time with it.

Spending some time with it requires members to manage their time so that becomes possible.

⁸ William H. Upton, “A Plea for the Teachings of Freemasonry,” *The Masonic Review*, *The Masonic*

Journal of Louisville, Kentucky: A Monthly Magazine for the Craft, 80 (1894).

⁹ *IBID.*

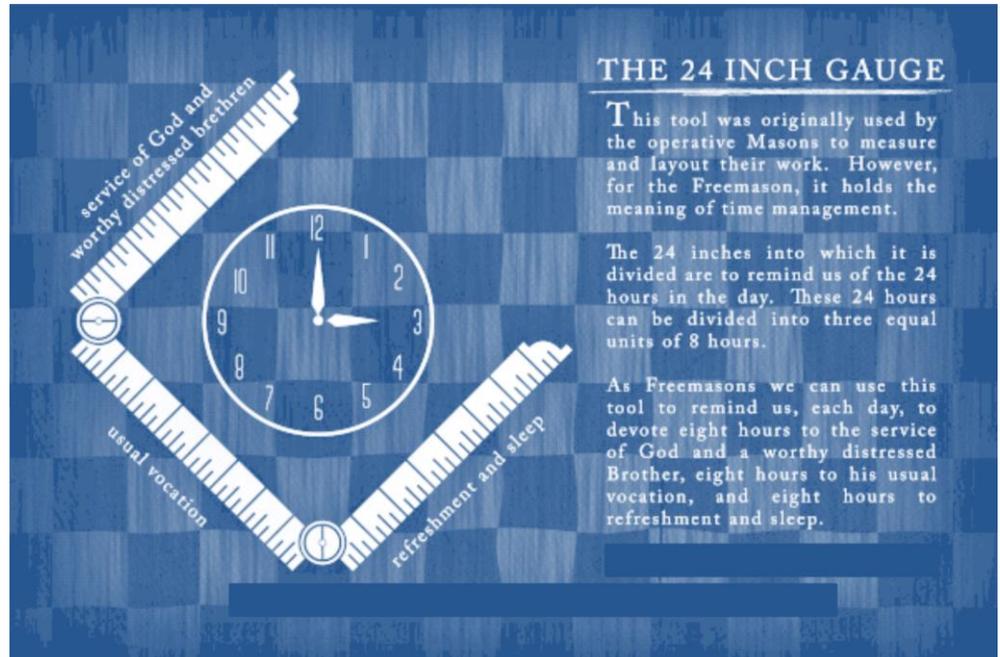
Time management - the skill of being able to manage all of one's responsibilities, ambitions, and needs with equity and regularity is emphasized through the lessons of the 24-inch gauge.

Learning to apply the lessons early in one's Masonic journey is one of the reasons the working tool is that of the Entered Apprentice.

The length of our cable tow seems directly linked to our respective abilities to apply the lessons of time management found in the symbol of the 24-inch gauge as well.

Once again, notwithstanding our respective interpretations of our symbols, their purpose and application, we cannot get around one fact.

That fact, brothers, is - *if Freemasonry is to mean anything to a man - and he to it - he must spend some time with it.*



Additional Sources

H. Upton, "A Plea for the Teachings of Freemasonry," *The Masonic Review*, *The Masonic Journal of Louisville, Kentucky: A Monthly Magazine for the Craft*, 80 (1894).

The Freemason: A Weekly Journal of Freemasonry, Literature, Science, and Art, XXX (July 1893).

Charles M. Moore, "Application and Lethargy Contrasted," *The Masonic Review*, XXII (1860).

The Cable Tow, *The Masonic Dictionary*, <http://www.masonicdictionary.com/cabletow.html>