

# What Happened to the Odd Fellows?

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Odd Fellowship does not seek a veiled origin in the misty shades of the past to surround it with the false glamour that arises from the belief in the doctrine of *omne ignotum pro magnifico*. This age of enlightenment has emaciated us from the gross credulity of the past. Antiquity bears with it no passport of truth or goodness.



~ *Odd Fellowship It's History and Manual, The History and Manual of Odd Fellowship, Theo. A. Ross*

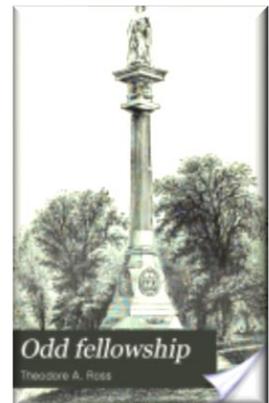
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## PART I

There was a time when Odd Fellows in the United States numbered one million members and Odd Fellowship was the largest fraternal order in North America. The Order grew dramatically in the 18th and 19th Centuries, and into the beginning of the 20th Century. But somewhere in the 20th Century, the numbers of members and the numbers of Lodges started to diminish. That trend has continued throughout the latter half of the 20th Century and now into the 21st Century.<sup>1</sup>

What happened?

Literature about the Odd Fellows falls short in comparison to what has been written about Freemasonry. Perhaps, because of what Theodore Ross wrote in the history and manual of Odd Fellowship, we might account for why there were not volumes of encyclopedia written by their members or scholars as found in Freemasonry, and why their books and materials are not as widespread today. In 1888 he wrote; *Odd Fellowship does not seek a veiled origin in the misty shades of the past to surround it with the false glamour that arises from the belief in the doctrine of omne ignotum pro magnifico* [Everything known is taken for magnificent]. *This age of*

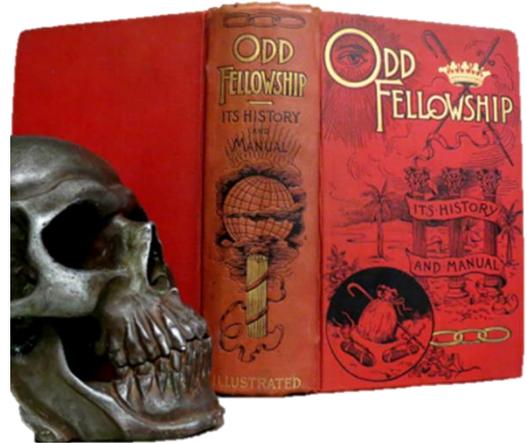


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<sup>1</sup> Stewart Savage, *Letter to the Dedicated Members for Change, April 1, 2016*, <http://davislodge.org/dmc-happened-order>, accessed September 5, 2018.

*enlightenment has emaciated us from the gross credulity of the past. Antiquity bears with it no passport of truth or goodness.*

Unlike the founders of organized speculative Freemasonry, the founders of the Odd Fellows did not attempt to create a link, real or invented, with antiquity. They started with the purpose of caring for members in a time when there were no system in place to insure one's welfare, health, or job protection. Poverty was the result of a provider becoming sick or dying. There were benefits and the burial expenses fell to the family. There was life insurance available in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but was available only to the wealthy and beyond the financial ability of the average working class. The Odd Fellows took on the responsibilities of visiting the sick, burying the dead, educating the orphans, and caring for the widows.



For a time, fraternal and friendly societies like the Odd Fellows were suppressed in England. Membership became a criminal offense, and such organizations were driven underground and forced to use codes, passwords, special handshakes, and similar mechanisms. Fear of revolution was not the sole reason for persecution; Fraternal and Friendly Societies like the Odd Fellows were the predecessors of modern-day trade unions and could facilitate effective local strike action by levying all their members for additional contributions for their benevolent funds, out of which payments could be made to the families of members who were on strike.

### **What's in a Name?**

There are several reasons given for the strange name of the fraternity. No matter what version of history to which one subscribes, it cannot be denied that the Odd Fellows are a unique and diverse group.

One old and apparently authoritative history of Odd Fellowship gives the explanation, "That common laboring men should associate themselves together and form a fraternity for social unity and fellowship and for mutual help was such a marked violation of the trends of the times (England in the 1700's) that they became known as 'peculiar' or 'odd,' and hence they were derided as 'Odd Fellows.' Because of the appropriateness of the name, those engaged in forming these unions accepted it. When legally incorporated the title 'Odd Fellows' was adopted."

Another explanation is that the original Odd Fellows were men who were engaged in various or odd trades that didn't have the numbers to form the security provided by a trade guild or union like the Masons. These workers of "odd jobs" banded together and initially met in the back rooms of pubs, paying a penny per week in dues that would help members who fell ill or had passed away. Eventually, the idea spread and formed a network of more formalized Lodges and the Odd Fellows developed their own unique rituals, philosophy, and purpose.

Modern references state that the true reason for the name Odd Fellows isn't known or documented. Whatever the reason may have been, the unusual name has been the object of public curiosity (and on occasion derision or mirth) over the centuries.

## **The Early History**

In the early history of the Order each Lodge was the arbiter of its own fate and practically supreme. The doctrine of self-institution prevailed then, as it did afterwards. Secessions from Lodges were frequent and rendered the Lodges less able to fulfill the object of their being. The brethren were slow to learn that "in union there is strength."

In 1803, the Odd Fellows were revived by an organization called the "London Union Odd Fellows" which later claimed itself as the "Grand Lodge of England" and assumed authority over all Odd Fellow lodges in that country.

In 1810, however, several lodges located in the Manchester area declared themselves as an "Independent Order of Odd Fellows" (IOOF) with the title "Manchester Unity." In 1814, they elected officers and proceeded to standardize degree work of the lodges. With their improved system, they were able to persuade other lodges to join their unity. They also chartered the Independent Order of Odd Fellows in North America.

While several Odd Fellow lodges had existed in New York City sometime in 1806 to 1818, the Independent Order of Odd Fellows was officially organized on April 26, 1819 in Baltimore, Maryland, by Thomas Wildey and four other members of the fraternity from England.

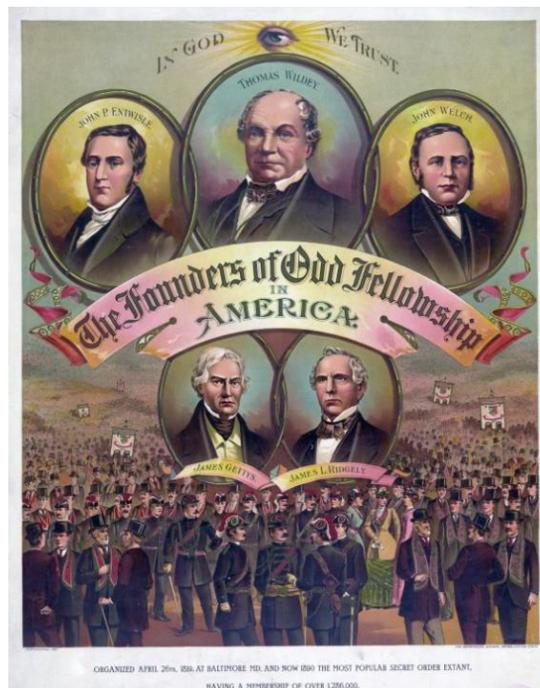
Since then, the Independent Order of Odd Fellows had spread throughout the world where it currently has about 10,000 Lodges located in Australia, Austria, Belgium, Belize, Canada, Chile, Cuba, Czech Republic, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, Norway, Poland, Philippines, Puerto Rico, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States, Uruguay and Venezuela.

Since 2001, The IOOF has been fully co-ed and all genders can join Odd Fellows Lodges.

## Rise of the American Order

The first lodge established on this continent was Shakespeare, No. 1, New York city, 26 Dec. 1806. The five Odd Fellows composing this lodge were of the Loyal Independent Order and the moving spirits were Solomon Chambers and his son John C., English mechanics from the south of London.

The founders were three boat builders, a comedian, and a vocalist – a group befitting the name “Odd Fellows,” indeed. The lodge was self-instituted, a common practice in those times. Their first candidate was a retired actor who was the keeper of the tavern where they met. Accounts state that lodge meetings were accompanied “by merry making and mirth and the wares of the tavern were freely indulged.”



The early members were zealous workers and other lodges were soon organized. In 1809 the roll of membership, in the six New York City lodges, comprised 36 prominent citizens and business men, as well as many others of less influence.

The exact date of the first founding of Odd Fellowship is lost in the fogs of antiquity. Some historians trace its roots back to the Medieval Trade Guilds of the 12th and 13th Centuries. Others estimated that it existed before 1650. What is clear is that there were several Odd Fellow groups in England in the first half of the 1700s.<sup>2</sup>

It is said that the titles of the officers of the Lodge were taken from the “Order of Gregorian’s,” which met at St. Albans, in May of 1736. Other evidence suggests that our origins were in an organization known as the Ancient Order of Bucks which thrived in England in the 18th Century and had as its emblem three bucks with their antlers intertwined. These men had as their leader a “Most Noble Grand” and met in club rooms and taverns. One of their principal emblems was “a bundle of sticks,” familiar to modern Odd Fellows as signifying strength in union. In 1745, Daniel De Foe mentions the Society of Odd Fellows, and in the Gentleman’s Magazine, the Odd Fellows’ Lodge is mentioned as “a place where very pleasant and recreative evenings are spent.”

The earliest surviving printed official lodge record is said to be the “Rules of Loyal Aristarchus Lodge No. 9” in England dated March 12, 1748. This establishes the fact that this lodge had been operating for some time prior thereto, and its number indicates that at least eight other lodges that are associated with each other had existed up to that time.

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<sup>2</sup> The Independent Order of Odd Fellows, <https://odd-fellows.org/history>, accessed September 9, 2018.

After the Civil War, with the beginning of industrialization, the deteriorating social circumstances brought large numbers of people to the IOOF and the lodges rallied.

Over the next half-century, also known as the “Golden age of Fraternalism” in America, the Odd Fellows became the largest among all fraternal organizations, (at the time, even larger than Freemasonry). By 1889, the IOOF had lodges in every American state. In 1896, the World Almanac showed the Odd Fellows as the largest among all fraternal organizations



By the late nineteenth century, the Order had spread to most of the rest of the world, establishing lodges in the Americas, Australasia, and Europe. According to the Journal of the Annual Communication of the Sovereign Grand Lodge 1922, page 426, there were a reported 2,676,582 members. While this data from 1921 may not be the exact zenith of its membership, the organization experienced a loss in membership of 23.5% between 1920-1930. This shift

was due to the Great Depression and the introduction of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal which knelled the end of the Golden Age of Fraternalism and started a decline in membership. During the Depression, people could not afford Odd Fellows membership fees and many lodges

closed, and when the New Deal's social reforms started to take effect, the need for the social work of the Odd Fellows declined.

## **“Famous” Odd Fellows**

Odd Fellows, unlike many other organizations, makes no special effort to attract “name” members – nor, as does Freemasonry, call historic or well-known figures “Famous Odd Fellows.” Odd Fellow leadership declares “rubbing elbows” with the famous to give them satisfaction is not their perspective – they rely on a warm, personal type of affiliation. In addition, they always note in their materials that when listing men who are well-known or historical, they list them for education purposes – not for publicity.

Masons are often surprised to find that many of the names on the Masonic members list are the same as those on the Odd Fellow's lists, such as, Harry Truman, Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, Warren Harding, Ulysses S. Grant, Charles Lindbergh, Rutherford Hays, William McKinley, P.T. Barnum, Wyatt Earp, Earl Warren, to name only a few. And, by the way, another name that appears on the Odd Fellows list is Albert Pike.

## **PART II**

### **So, What Happened?**

**A**s with all fraternal organizations that have experienced a decline, there's a combination of factors that affected Odd Fellowship. The major contributors to the decline is often identified as two things.

First, the Odd Fellows started out as a beneficial society to provide things to members that governments did not. For example, early Odd Fellows could enjoy many benefits for themselves and their families such as help finding jobs, housing assistance, hospital and medical care, orphanages, retirement homes, and cemeteries. Eventually, government social programs replaced and usurped much of that. Second, in the early days the Lodge was the social center for many early Odd Fellows. Society changed over time with other forms of social interaction (films, radio, television, organized sports, convenient travel, and today, the Internet and the explosion of social media options and communication tools.

As Stewart Savage wrote in his 2016 letter to the Dedicated Members for Change:<sup>3</sup>

*It may be quaint for Odd Fellows and Lodges to continue to function as if it were 1916. But it's not 1916, and it's not smart to act as if it were. A person from 1916 would hardly recognize society in 2016. And to continue to act as if we*

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<sup>3</sup> Stewart Savage is Noble Grand Steward and member of Davis Odd Fellows Lodge. Davis Lodge, with 285 members, is the largest Odd Fellow Home in North America, located in Davis, California, <http://davislodge.org>, accessed, November 1, 2018.

*lived in a 1916 world ignores the reality of today. More importantly, it provides no connection to the young men and women of today – in particular, those born in the 1980's and 1990's. We all know that we need those young men and women as new members in our Lodges.*

In that regard, Savage went on to address some relics of the past that he noted made little sense in the 21st Century. He says:

- *Odd Fellows is a fraternal order, and in that sense, we are all brothers and sisters in the Order. But to constantly refer to other members as “Brother John” or “Sister Sally” makes it appear that we are all residents in a monastery or nunnery.*
- *Another quaint relic of the past is the use of passwords and signs. In the 1800's there was a real need for passwords and signs because Odd Fellows Lodges provided many benefits to members including helping members with money, housing, food, jobs, and the like. Odd Fellows would travel to visit other Lodges to get help in these areas – and the passwords and signs assisted Lodges in insuring that the person who passed himself off as an Odd Fellow truly was a member of the Order. That doesn't really happen in the 21st Century.*
- *In a prior Century, officers of Lodges would memorize the ritual, rather than read it from the charge book. To be frank, that was done in large part because a significant number of members were not literate – they simply could not read it from the charge book. So, memorization was a necessity. Today, 99.9% of Odd Fellows are literate, and the requirement to memorize is a throwback. That said, I have seen too often members stumbling over their lines and mispronouncing words till it becomes cringe-worthy. It is important that members practice their reading so that it is smooth and said with feeling.*
- **Hard copies.** *It amazes me that in this electronic age, so many documents and newsletters produced by the Order and by Lodges is still in hard-copy. Some forms, in fact, are requested to be filled out by typewriters. Lodges that fail to have websites, Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, and that fail to use e-mail and text capabilities are a generation behind the times.*
- **All Male Lodges.** *In 1999, the California Grand Lodge voted to open Lodge membership to women, and the first female members joined in 2000 and 2001. Yet, here we are 16 years later and there are still a small minority of Odd Fellows Lodges that have no female members. That's just wrong, and it is also not smart. Half the population is female, and to ignore that reality, is a mistake. Women bring intelligence, enthusiasm, energy, and new life to a Lodge. And it's long*

*overdue that every single Lodge in California has female members on their rosters.*

- ***Oaths and Obligations.*** *The oath taken by the President of the United States upon assuming office is 35 words long. It is cogent, to the point, and meaningful. The obligation we take in the Initiatory Degree to become an Odd Fellow is 222 words in length. It is rambling, disjointed, and has diminished significantly due to its ponderous length. If the Leader of the Free World can take office in 35 words, surely a new Odd Fellow can assume membership with less than 222 words. The Odd Fellows' obligation needs some serious modernization.*
- ***Non-Sectarian.*** *Our Odd Fellows' literature and websites proudly declare that we are "non-sectarian". But are we? "Non-sectarian" means not involving or relating to a specific religion. The degrees of our Order are meaningful and teach important lessons, but we cannot ignore the fact that they are derived from the Old Testament, which is the seminal text of the Jewish and Christian religions. And the "Lord's Prayer" which is recited during the formal opening of Lodge meetings, is found in the New Testament, which is clearly affiliated with Christianity, but not Judaism. What message are we sending to potential members who affiliate with Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Shintoism, Confucianism, Sikhism, Taoism, and even Judaism? If one of our guiding tenets is "truth", can we truly say we are non-sectarian?*

It is clear from Steward Savage's writing and perspectives that the Odd Fellows struggle with many of the same issues surviving fraternities deal with as well: issues of how we can best deliver to our members what they seek from and can contribute to the institution.

Like Freemasonry, the IOOF wears regalia, performs rituals, meet in lodges, and use symbols that represent their tenants, philosophies, and lessons. They elect officers, collect dues, promote websites, have a grand jurisdiction, and their lodges are located throughout the world. Unlike Freemasonry, their founding and central purpose was relief – a laudable pursuit in any age.

The Age of Fraternalism may be dead in terms of it being defined by an era. Certainly, the reasons behind those years becoming the prime time for such organizations has passed. Fraternalism, however, is still breathing.

American Freemasonry, although dwindling in members and not as widely appealing as it once was for many reasons, endures, as do the Odd Fellows.

One must wonder if the Odd Fellows see with equal clarity - at least as much as Freemasonry is starting to slowly discover - that the real success of the institution rests in the way the promise of the fraternity is delivered to its members. That determinant stands true no matter how many names appear on the membership rolls in any fraternal organization.

There *is* strength in fewness – especially when the few are well-instructed and committed.

#### **Sources**

- Much of the information used in Part I is attributed to the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, Sovereign Grand Lodge, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, (<https://odd-fellows.org>).
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