

Masonic Perspectives

**A Second Look at Aspects of Controversial Topics
In American Freemasonry**



ABOUT THIS PROJECT

Masonic Perspectives is a project created by Past Masters John W. Bizzack and Dan M. Kemble intended to bring the writings about controversial topics of the past in American Freemasonry and provide readers a second look and contemporary perspective on the topics to serve as a catalyst for further discussion. This project is a joint venture of Lexington Lodge No. 1, Lexington, Kentucky and William O. Ware Lodge of Research, Covington, Kentucky.



In this edition, a second look at two papers from a 1929 edition of *The Builder Magazine*:
The Future of Freemasonry and *Where are We Drifting?*



COMMENTARY ON PAPERS

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THE FUTURE OF FREEMASONRY

The Builder Magazine

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Herbert Hungerford

In the April number of *The Masonic World*, Bro. J. E. Morcombe, the editor, has an arresting article under the title *Freemasonry at the Crossroads*. It is one that should have the widest publicity, for, in spite of the assertions by those who love to prophesy smooth things, there is a crisis in the affairs of the Craft.

The keynote of the article is given in the first paragraph, in which Bro. Morcombe quotes a Past Grand Master of California:

I expect that Masonry will continue to exist for a long period of time - forever, as the usual phrase goes. But I am not so sure that it will hold its present high place in the estimation of men ...

This recalls a dictum of Albert Pike, in reference to a state of affairs somewhat similar to that with which we are now faced, which existed some years after the Civil War. He said that "Masonry, by its nature intended to be exclusive, had become popular."

We all know the really extraordinary influx into the Fraternity that began just after the World War, and which reached its peak in 1921, in which year very nearly 300,000 men became members. The article in *The Builder* just a year ago entitled *Where Are We Drifting?* may be recalled. In the second of the charts there given the curves of gains and losses indicated that in a year or two they would meet. This forecast has been fulfilled. In some Grand Lodges the year 1929 has actually shown a net loss of members, and others are at a standstill.

This condition is not peculiar to the Masonic Fraternity. It is known, and Bro. Morcombe in his article gives the figures, that other fraternal organizations are faced with the same conditions, and even more intensely. And not only fraternal societies, but clubs and churches are feeling the pinch of slackened interest and loss of members.

Statistics of membership give a somewhat superficial test of an institution's condition. Members there must be, obviously, but without knowing the quality little of value can be deduced from the quantity. Masonry has in the past attained a high reputation in the world, but this reputation was not in the least founded on the number of men who were Masons, but on their character. It was because in every community it was observed that many of the best men, the men most respected, the men most trusted,

were of the Craft, that Masonry gained the reputation it has enjoyed. And reputation cannot long survive the conditions which give rise to it.

It is obvious, because it is common human nature, that as soon as any state or condition is highly esteemed in the community there will be a greatly increased desire to attain to it. In proportion as a society is highly esteemed, and membership in it is regarded as a distinction, so will the number increase of those who desire to join it for the benefits it will bring them personally. In other words, the more an institution prospers the greater the number of parasites who seek to attach themselves to it. The condition is inevitable, human nature being what it is.

It is those who give who make an institution, whether it is a society, a church, or a nation. It is those who take without giving who reduce it to weakness. The parasites can hardly be wholly eliminated, but when their number grows to be too great the organization, or organism, is weakened, becomes sickly, and may even die.

We in America have been bitten by the lust for size, for numbers, for wealth. Freemasonry has in every country and in every period reflected in its own way the external environment. Some things it yields to, others it opposes, but whichever it be, it would not so act but for the existing conditions. The things that are accepted as a matter of course in the environment inevitably outnumber those which are resisted. That we should be gratified by increase in our numbers is natural, and such increase is not in itself evil so long as the level of qualification is maintained. But to maintain the standard means that increase in numbers must be set on one side as an aim. It is not something to be sought for, but if it comes, it must come of itself.

It is an undoubted fact that it has become altogether too easy for men to enter our lodges. The standard has been lowered; and though in theory any brother may undertake the task of raising it through the ballot box, in reality he is helpless. In most lodges it would be impossible, even could he devote his whole time to it, for a brother personally to satisfy himself of the qualifications of every applicant. Besides even those who feel the situation most keenly are necessarily affected by the actual conditions. They inevitably feel that it is hard to reject a man who is no whit worse than many who are already in the lodge. The effect is cumulative and increases in geometrical proportion. And while it may be true that candidates should not be accepted for negative reasons, because there appears nothing overt against their being received, but that there should be something positive, something in their life and character that fits them for initiation, yet it is most difficult to act on this principle, for it has come to such a pass that most Masons actively resent the rejection of any petition they have presented to the lodge and regard it as a personal injury. For one brother, or even a group, to attempt to act in this way would mean in most cases a disruption of the harmony of the lodge. It is a choice of evils.

These obvious conditions, that all thinking brethren deplore, do not stand alone, they are all really symptoms, by-products of the way in which the Craft in America has developed, incidents of its evolution. It is this that makes it so difficult to find a remedy. Most expedients that are offered do not touch the deep-seated root of the evil. Perhaps there is now no cure but the operation of natural laws. If the represent tendencies continue the Fraternity will lose its prestige, many will drop out, fewer will seek to join, and finally, it may be, a fresh start can be made.

Yet we can hardly be satisfied to wait for this process, which may end in death rather than cure. We must strive as we can to improve matters. There are thousands of Masons who are Masons in fact as well as in name, and could they work unitedly much might be accomplished. Much more is being accomplished as a matter of fact than we know, even as Elijah learned there were men in Israel who had not bent the knee to Baal. The problem is gradually being realized, most Grand Lodges are now actively trying to do something to meet it. The first necessity is to realize that the body is sick, the next to diagnose the disease. After that there may be some hope of a cure if the right treatment can be found.

WHERE ARE WE DRIFTING?

Statistics Show Some Interesting Trends in Modern Masonry. They Are Graphically Presented in the Article Which Follows. The Light Thrown on Our Present System of Admissions Is an Important Contribution to the Craft

The Builder Magazine - May 1929, Volume XV, Number 5

R. J. Meekren

What is the actual condition of the Masonic Fraternity in America today? We know that it has well over three million members, and there is undoubtedly a certain prestige given by such huge numbers. But in itself this does not tell us much of real value. Those who have read, even occasionally, the Reports of our Grand Lodges during the past ten years know that there has been a great expansion since the War. They will also be aware that there has been considerable, though vague, uneasiness in regard to the increasing losses due to members dropping out of the organization. Some Grand Lodges have been so impressed by these fears that they have introduced regulations restricting the freedom of the individual Mason by denying him the right to dimission from his lodge, permitting him only to transfer his membership. Whether justified or not, this is undoubtedly an innovation in the "body of Freemasonry," although those who advocate it do not seem to realize the fact. But though such drastic attempts to stop the leaks are being made or advocated, no one seems to have any very clear comprehension of the amount of these losses and their relation to the total membership.

It is a very curious thing that this lack of definite knowledge should exist, and all the more curious in view of the fact that American Grand Lodges as anywhere available in the Masonic world. Whenever dual or plural membership is suggested it almost always happens that the first objection advanced against it is the alleged difficulty it would cause in keeping accurate membership rolls. But such records are hardly worthwhile for their own sake and as an end in themselves.

As a preliminary essay in what is almost a virgin field of investigation, I have prepared the accompanying charts to show certain relationships between the gains and losses in membership over a period of fifteen years. The basic figures used for this purpose have been taken from the tables that have been compiled annually since 1913 by Bro. George A. Kies, Grand Secretary of Connecticut, and published annually in the Proceedings of that Grand Lodge. Without this foundation to build upon it is doubtful whether I

should ever have had the courage to undertake this task, even had time been available. Bro. Kies, therefore, should have at least half of whatever credit may be due.

As has already been mentioned, the official rulers and leaders of the Craft have very Frequently expressed grave fears in regard to losses from various causes, especially those by suspension for non-payment of dues. Rather less frequently, doubts have been voiced as to whether the growth in the last decade has not been altogether too rapid.

There are four avenues of loss, one of which is inevitable, that is death. The other three are dimission, suspension and expulsion. The first chart shows the relationship between these last. The graphic method of showing the relationship of varying figures is now so frequently used that most people are more or less familiar with it. The curves A and B show respectively the dimissions and affiliations for each year, according to the scale of numbers on the perpendicular axis. It must be borne in mind that on such a scale only round figures can be used. But this does not affect the general accuracy of the result so far as showing the relationship between them is concerned.

One thing is apparent immediately upon inspection of these two curves, A and B. that they very closely parallel each other over the whole period. It will be noted that in 1916, and again in 1923, the distance between them increases. This distance represents in each year the difference between the number of Masons demitted and those affiliated. It is quite possible that economic and other external causes would account for this divergence of the curves at these two periods. The normal reason for dimission is change of residence. Whenever conditions lead to a general movement of population, such divergence is naturally to be expected. Whether the later divergence that appears in 1927 can be wholly accounted for in this way is not clear. For that we must wait and see. But on the whole, we may conclude that the relationship between dimission and affiliation appears to be quite normal, and the difference no greater than should be naturally expected.

The curve E shows the expulsions. While 674, the total for 1927, is altogether too many - it means that in over 600 lodges there has been careless investigation, or too little courage in denying admission to unfit applicants, yet relatively the figures are so small as to have little significance in a broad survey. And while the number has nearly doubled in the fifteen years, the rate of increase has been much less in proportion than the rate of growth. This is certainly not a discouraging feature.

The curves C and D show the relationship between suspensions and reinstatements. As in the case of A and B. the distance between these two curves shows the balance of the number of Masons suspended over those reinstated in any given year. We see there was an increase in these from 1913 to 1915, and then, after some fluctuations, a decrease. Roughly, only with larger numbers, the suspended increased at much the same rate as the dimitted Masons until 1918-1919, when they began to decrease. There is no doubt that a proportion, perhaps a larger proportion - there is no means of determining - of suspensions are due to the same cause as dimissions. Brethren move to another locality but neglect to keep in touch with their lodge. It is especially noteworthy that while 1921 showed the smallest balance of unaffiliated Masons in any year after 1915, the number of reinstatements was actually greater than the suspensions. The year 1921 was a remarkable one in several ways. It is one of the indications of the relation between dimissions and affiliations being on the whole a normal one, that this year shows no greater balance of dimits over affiliations than appears in 1925, when suspensions were rapidly increasing and, as will be seen, accessions were still more rapidly falling.

The rapid increase of suspensions is undoubtedly a very unhealthy symptom and should be carefully considered in the light of the curve of admissions in Chart II. Though here a word of warning must be given. The difference in scale must be taken into account. Were the curve A in Chart II drawn to the same scale as in Chart I, the peak in 1921 would be roughly six times as far from the base line as the curve of dismissals in the same year in the latter chart, which would take it a long way out of the page. The greater numbers involved in Chart II necessitated the reduction of scale. The larger scale was used in Chart I in order to show more distinctly the trend and fluctuations of the different curves.

Turning now to the second chart, the curve D shows the total losses through the three causes dealt with in Chart I. The interesting fact which strikes us first is that from 1913 to 1926 this line falls well below C, the curve of the losses by death during the same period. The death rate serves the purpose of a standard of comparison. The dotted straight line drawn through C shows that deaths have very steadily increased, which is a necessary consequence of the increase in membership. The year 1919 shows a sharp increase, due doubtless to the influenza epidemic. But the following years show a decreased rate which about balances it. Comparing this with curve D we may perhaps be justified in assuming that losses from other causes have not been critically serious. But unfortunately, the year 1927 shows them to be greater than the losses by death. This may be no more than a temporary fluctuation, but it must be noted that since 1921 these losses have tended to increase too steadily, and too sharply, to be an altogether encouraging sign.

But confidence is somewhat restored by the curve of accessions, the line A. These have been so much greater than losses from all sources that, in spite of the latter, the membership has rapidly increased. Yet it is not an altogether healthy curve. It looks like - altogether too much like - a fever chart. The tremendous number of admissions from 1919 to 1921 could not possibly be normal. At least after this "temperature" there would be a period of indigestion, if nothing worse.

It is curious to note that the peak in 1921 was also, as already observed in dealing with Chart I, coincident with the lowest net loss in dismissals and a slight gain as between suspensions and reinstatements. These phenomena, it may be assumed, were all due to much the same causes, whatever they were. The same influences that led to the unparalleled influx from the outside into the Craft, led also to the renewal of lapsed memberships.

The Curve B is plotted from the total net losses from all causes, and here again cause for misgiving is shown. From 1921 on, these losses have been tending ever upward as shown by the dotted line; while, ignoring the steep drop after 1921, there has been, from 1923 on, an even sharper trend downward in accessions. This points to the two lines meeting, or even passing, in 1930; which means in effect that the Masonic birthrate will fall below the death-rate, and the organization come to a standstill, or start on the downward grade, so far as membership is concerned.

Chart III shows the cumulative gross increase over the same period. In this the scale has been still further reduced, as we are now dealing with millions instead of thousands. This increase has been roughly 2,400,000; an average of 160,000 a year, or a-little more than half of that for 1921.

In this chart the four curves are all divergent (with the exception that D is not uniformly so). This is because they show the successive totals in each year from 1912, and not merely the number for each year by itself, as in the first two charts. The greatly reduced scale also tends to iron out the annual fluctuations. The divergence between A and B shows the cumulative totals of losses from death, that between B and C

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the actual number of unaffiliated Masons, that between C and D the total of the suspended and expelled, while the space between D and the base line represents the number of members in good standing in excess of 1,400,000. If the base were to show zero it would have to be drawn as far below its actual position as the curve D is above it in 1923. When this is taken into account (and to visualize it a sheet of white paper with a base line ruled on it at the right distance might be laid on the page) it will be seen that the losses by non-affiliation and suspension form only a very narrow fringe or border to the area showing total membership. In short, they do not give much support to alarmist views.

Coming now to the consideration of the curves in detail, we find that in 1927, in round numbers, 2,460,000 candidates had been admitted into the Order since 1912; while in the same period 444,000 Masons had deceased. In the last-named year, 1927, there were 68,000 unaffiliated Masons - not a very large number when compared with millions - and 192,000 who were under sentence of suspension or expulsion; which number is too large. According to this there were in good standing 3,157,000 Masons. This figure is between 80,000 and 90,000 less than those usually given. But there are many ways in which this discrepancy could have arisen. It must be remembered that returns come into each Grand Lodge at different times and there always has to be a certain amount of approximation. As these curves have been plotted from the positive data it is not probable that they are very far from giving the correct totals.

These curves bring out certain features that are not so easily observable in the two previous charts. They confirm the inference that the number of unaffiliated Masons is on the whole a normal one. Naturally there must always be some unaffiliated Masons - unless every Grand Lodge followed the novel method of forbidding dismission altogether. The greater the total number of Masons, the greater must be the actual number of those who, for one or other of a multitude of good and legitimate reasons, desire to leave one lodge and join another. As this must take, at the least, several months in each case, there must always be a balance of those who are for the time being unattached. The regularity of the divergence between B and C shows conclusively that this proportion has not increased, if anything it appears to have somewhat lessened, when it is compared with the divergence between A and B. For the loss by death must in the long run be about the same among Masons as for the community at large, and thus it gives us a norm by which to judge the other losses.

The curve D does not show quite the same regularity as C, for after having diverged rather too rapidly from 1913 to 1919 it then begins to approach C, and in 1920, 1921 and 1922 runs almost exactly parallel to it, which means that the total remained stationary during those years. But after 1922 it begins to diverge again more rapidly than ever. Whether or not this is merely temporary, a result of the "indigestion" following the orgy of the years 1920 to 1923, remains for the future to show us.

This preliminary and hasty survey at least shows a very promising field for further investigation and research, in which the statistics compiled annually by each Grand Lodge may be made to give up their real significance. Every institution, as every individual, exists in time. A wider realization of this fact is one result of the popular interest in the mathematical theories of relativity propounded by Einstein. As has been well said, history is not the bare record of a series of isolated facts but the representation of a process. We cannot understand any situation unless we have some idea of how it came to be. Without some knowledge of the past it is impossible to even guess at the future. The apparent conclusion to be drawn from this consideration of the history of the growth of the Masonic Fraternity in recent years is

mixed. There is no cause for alarm apparently, yet we cannot say that it is wholly healthy and as we could desire it to be.

APPENDIX

As it may be convenient for reference, the round totals as used in preparing the graphs for the article are here given, as taken from the Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Connecticut. Except in the case of expulsions, all figures below the hundreds have been omitted, and in some cases those higher than that have been approximated; as for example, 983 may be estimated as practically one thousand.

One thing may be gathered from this table which was not represented in the charts, and that is the relationship of the number of lodges to total membership. The average membership per lodge in 1927 was somewhat under 200, in 1913 it was a little over 100. This again is a characteristic and not reassuring symptom. The average number of suspended Masons to each lodge is very nearly twelve.

Year	Raised	Died	Demitted	Affil'd	Suspended	Reinstated	Expelled	Membership	Lodges
1913	92,280	21,636	22,660	20,700	14,400	6,498	384	1,519,000	14,114
1914	104,300	22,700	25,300	22,300	17,700	7,200	400	1,607,000	14,145
1915	104,000	22,300	25,800	22,200	19,100	6,900	450	1,681,000	14,698
1916	109,700	25,200	30,200	21,400	20,000	9,600	470	1,749,000	14,712
1917	117,600	25,800	29,000	23,800	19,000	9,800	400	1,822,000	14,800
1918	130,200	26,600	26,500	21,900	20,700	9,000	350	1,932,000	14,920
1919	153,000	35,300	26,400	21,200	15,900	10,800	300	2,037,000	15,069
1920	218,700	31,100	23,800	15,500	13,100	12,700	300	2,238,000	15,168
1921	293,300	29,600	46,500	43,300	12,400	12,800	300	2,521,000	15,426
1922	263,000	29,300	46,700	42,600	15,300	10,000	500	2,721,000	15,696
1923	185,400	32,400	45,000	38,700	22,600	9,600	700	2,872,000	15,951
1924	173,300	32,900	40,700	36,000	26,900	10,200	670	2,978,000	15,997
1925	170,600	35,000	40,600	37,600	30,600	11,100	700	3,009,000	16,257
1926	147,900	34,600	40,900	36,100	40,200	11,600	640	3,131,000	16,400

1927	138,500	38,800	38,000	30,900	47,900	14,200	674	3,243,000	16,470
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COMMENTARY

~ **John W. Bizzack, PM**

Hungerford's article, *The Future of Freemasonry*, was written 90 years ago. What he wrote about was not just what was going on in American Freemasonry in 1929 but rather what had been going on much longer. He points out that by the early years of the century, a crisis in the affairs of the Craft was apparent, just as it was apparent then with respect to membership loss and lack of interest in other fraternal organizations, societies, clubs, and churches. Hungerford identifies and acknowledges that the Fraternity in America had grown too quickly. "Parasites," as he refers to them, attached themselves to the Fraternity during this period of rapid expansion much like what had occurred in the early 1800s, prior to, during and following the Civil War, Age of Fraternalism, and again leading up to World War II and afterwards. He notes America was "bitten by the lust for size, for numbers, for wealth" and Freemasonry reflected its external environment. He also aptly notes that by 1929 it had been made too easy for men to become members (both points noted once again in 1962 by Dwight L. Smith, Past Grand Master of Indiana, in his classic writing, *Whither Are we Traveling?*) His conclusion is that if no cure is found the fraternity will lose its prestige and once it did, many would "drop out" and "fewer will seek to join," thus offering, what he calls a "fresh start" for American Freemasonry. Hungerford would be surprised to learn that the pre and post years of World War II would do the same thing to the fraternity that occurred following World War I with respect to rapid expansion of membership, the ease by which a man could be admitted as a member, and that prestige has continued to decline as well over the past 90 years. It would probably not be a surprise to Hungerford, however, that his prediction that fewer would join the fraternity has come true, in part, for reasons he forewarned.

~ **Dan M. Kemble, PM**

In his article, "The Future of Freemasonry," Professor Herbert Hungerford writes, "The first necessity is to realize the body is sick." By any objective standard, American Freemasonry is gravely ill. Just as Hungerford warned, our failure to maintain exclusive standards of membership has filled our Lodges with "parasites" who have drained the Fraternity of its vitality. Despite having lost over three-quarters of our members in the last fifty years, despite the inability of Lodges to perform the most perfunctory ceremonies with any degree of competence, and despite the shabby and worn-down appearance of our buildings and members, the leadership of American Freemasonry remains in denial with respect to the crisis that exists. What Hungerford perhaps did not foresee was the time when the leadership of American Freemasonry would be drawn from the parasite class that he identified. American Freemasonry has little hope for improvement as long as its leaders come from this pool of men. Tinkering with Landmarks, organizing ATV rides and conferring midnight outdoor electrocution degrees are of questionable value in their own right. Seeing them as even a part of the cure for what ails the Craft is absurd. The immediate need in American Freemasonry is for its leadership to acknowledge that, as an institution, it is sick and in need of treatment. The only treatment plan that will cause the condition of our Fraternity to begin to improve is the slow process of replacing men who are members in name only with quality men who are actually fit for Freemasonry. Professor Hungerford offers wise counsel. American Freemasonry desperately needs to take heed.