

Masonry: Where It Was, Where It Is, and Where It's Going

A Review of My Fifty Years as a Mason

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I would like to quote Worshipful Brother James R. Robinson, Past Master of Boone-Union Lodge No. 304, who, after receiving his Gold Card and 50-year membership lapel pin said, "Fifty years is not a long time." I totally agree with Worshipful Brother Robinson when I stop to think about what I have done and where I have been in the last fifty years, and before that, both inside and outside of Masonry. Time does, indeed, fly by, and it cannot be saved for future years.

I was Initiated, Passed and Raised at Boone-Union Lodge No. 304 in Union, Kentucky, in 1965, when I was 23 years old. I had three uncles, two cousins (one of whom was Master), one grandfather, and several friends from church who belonged to what became my mother Lodge. My father-in-law belonged to a Lodge in Chicago. Because of my acquaintance with these men, I became interested in who the Masons were, and what they did.

My initiation class consisted of five men, one of whom was my father and another of whom was a cousin. I was the active candidate in the Master Mason Degree. As I sat on the steps outside the Lodge, waiting to be called in for my turn to experience the Legend of the Temple, I listened for the words, "Ok, Ed, it's your turn. Come on up." As I waited, I wondered if I had made the right choice.

The Lodge was located on the second floor (Smitty's Grocery was on the ground floor), and with every step I made up the stairs, I wondered what was going to happen to me. The other four candidates never came back downstairs after they were called up for their Legend of the Temple experience! I soon found out what it meant to be raised to the sublime degree of a Master Mason, and over the years I have come to appreciate it even more. Today, as I reflect on my 50 years in Masonry, I find myself asking, "What have I seen and learned? Have I helped someone or some cause?"

In 1965, upon entering a Masonic Lodge for the first time, I noticed that almost every man was wearing a suit and tie. After experiencing the degree work, I recognized that the

officers knew their ritual parts almost to perfection. They seemed sincerely glad to meet me, and made me feel welcome in joining the Fraternity, and, especially, in my home Lodge.

As I observed my first election of officers later that year, I noticed that there was no shortage of candidates for the several chairs. As my class was the second one to come through in 1965, there were already others ahead of me who hoped someday to fill a chair in Lodge. (Because of my work schedule, it was actually several years before I found myself in a position to accept an office in Lodge.) There were no Past Masters being asked to fill a chair; Brothers moved through the ranks until they arrived in East as Master of the Lodge.

Our Lodge had an active Degree Team, and we frequently traveled to other Lodges to perform the Legend of the Temple. After a few years of regular attendance in Lodge, I was handed a script for the part of the Third Ruffian in the Legend of the Temple. "Learn the part," I was told. I did, and I remained a part of the team performing the Legend for the next 40 years.

Let's look at a statistical comparison of Kentucky Freemasonry in 1965 and 2015. The following information is taken from the proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky for those years:

	<u>1965</u>	<u>2015</u>
Total Members	100,235	38,814
50-Year Members	1,840	6,762
Total Lodges	471	369

Net Membership Decrease Since 1965: 61,421

Net Lodge Decrease Since 1965: 102

Total Current Members, Less 50-Year Members: 32,052

Membership numbers are not adjusted for dual (or plural) members. In other words, the total numbers are inflated.

Where are we today? Membership is down, and Past Masters are asked to fill positions in the line. Officers read their ritual parts from books, are unable to put on degree work themselves, and have to ask Brothers from other Lodges to stand in and render assistance. Many Lodges have only four or five committed Brothers who regularly attend. Older

members are uncomfortable driving at night, yet they still want the Lodge to stay alive and continue to function.

Many Lodges no longer confer all of the charges or the lectures of the three Degrees. Proficiencies are taught in a rough and unpolished manner; and non-proficient men are passed along. This is a disservice to the Lodge and to the new Brother. He is, after all, here to learn.

Another example of change is our relaxation of our dress code. It was explained to me that the Lodge represented King Solomon's Temple, and that attire for attending Lodge should be comparable for our attending a house of worship. Today, many pastors say that they would rather have men present in church, dressed any way they choose, rather than impose a dress code and not have them attend at all. Masonic Lodges, it seems, have adopted this line of reasoning. It is true, I suppose, that some Masons do not own suits, and many more do not like to wear a tie. Respectable, clean clothes, however, should always be the unspoken code for Lodge and Grand Lodge functions.

In the Address to a Newly Raised Candidate, Henry Pirtle writes in *The Kentucky Monitor*, "Membership in a Masonic Lodge can no more make you a Mason than membership in a musical club can make you a musician." As the ritual goes on to explain, there are four classes of men in the world. First, there are those who are Masons neither in name or by nature; second are those men who are Masons in name only; third are those men who are Masons by nature; and last are those few men who are Masons both in name and by nature, and this class are God's noblemen.

I recall hearing the late Worshipful Brother David W. Wood give the Address to a Newly Raised Candidate both at Boone-Union Lodge and at Petersburg Lodge. I thought so much of the Address that, after Worshipful Brother Wood's death, I learned to present it myself.

As the address says, there are some men who never ask for a petition because they are not interested, and simply do not care about that for which Masonry stands or the work that Masons do. Some men join Freemasonry, are raised to the sublime degree of a Master Mason, and perhaps even become Master of the Lodge, yet are Masons in name only. Think of all the Past Masters who, after their year in the East has ended, never return to Lodge. They exemplify this group.

By the way, being a Mason in name only also applies to those who join Freemasonry only to move on to the appendant bodies, and never participate in the meetings and degree work of the Blue Lodge. It makes one wonder, "Why did they really join? Is there some

material profit or favor they expect to gain from saying, 'I am a Mason,' or by wearing a ring?"

Those men who are Masons by nature never ask for a petition, but lead a respected, helpful, meaningful life, as all Masons should do. We probably all know someone for whom we have respect, who we believe would be a good Mason because of their many good qualities.

Those who are Masons both in name and by nature (of whom there are still many) take their obligations seriously, perform good deeds without expectation of recognition or reward, and take pride in their commitment to Freemasonry. Though our membership is down, those who are Masons both in name and by nature are the ones still attending Lodge, still filling stations when asked and, even though they may not want to, are still willing to learn and confer ritual parts. These men know how to open and close Lodge properly, instruct their Brethren in the lessons of the Fraternity and who perform acts of good will for their Lodge, their community, and, above all, their fellow man. These Brothers are the ones willing to assist those with the desire to learn.

Where are we going? That question will be answered by every Mason in the Commonwealth. To state it better, ask yourself, "Where am I going? Do I dress and act the part of a respected Mason? Do I attend Lodge regularly enough to know what is going on? Do I contribute to Lodge activities? Do I instruct by both word and actions?"

The members on whom we have relied to confer degrees, lecture and charges are fading away. I ask you, "Will you fill their shoes?" Our older members will always be needed, and, thanks-be-to-God, they have always been willing to agree to render assistance. Masonry will be around for a long time if the present members get involved in their Lodges and show the world what Masonry is.

Fifty years isn't a very long time. I have seen many changes at both the District and Grand Lodge levels. Many changes are due to electronic communication and voting procedures. Most of these changes are good, especially since Lodge secretaries no longer have to file Grand Lodge reports in triplicate, or communicate with sister Lodges via certified mail. A most significant step is the normalization of fraternal relations with the Prince Hall Masons, which would have never happened 50 years ago (or perhaps even ten to fifteen years ago).

I hope I have contributed a small part in Masonry, maybe having inspired a Brother to step-up and take a part or fill a chair. I remember that I was reluctant to do so, but I felt honored that I was asked, and I accepted the request. As a young man of 23 years of age sitting on the Lodge steps in 1965, wondering about the choice I had made, I had no idea

what to expect. I now know that my choice was the correct one. I have met (and continue to meet) many great men in Masonry. Yes, it was the correct choice, and Masonry has taught me very much. I have gotten more out of Masonry than I have put into it, and I am thankful for that.

It is up to the present and future members to learn, serve and maintain this great Fraternity in our world. My sincere wish is that they will. Fifty years isn't a very long time. Get involved now. Time is passing.

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