

RITUAL AND THE MASONIC LODGE

Ritual is the heart and soul of Freemasonry. Ritual is the glue that holds a lodge together and binds Freemasons throughout the world. Without our beautiful Ritual and the time-honored lessons it holds, our Fraternity would be just another service club. While Masonic Lodges serve their communities, their most important mission is to make good men better. This is achieved through the lessons portrayed in the Ritual. The lessons the Ritual exemplifies adds meaning and purpose to a Mason's. The propagation of the mystic art is a purpose for a lodge, and the solemnity and impression, created by a well-rehearsed presentation of the Ritual is important in the making of a Mason. Care must always be taken to preserve the seriousness and perfection of our degrees. The Worshipful Master, Wardens, officers, and members must uphold the integrity of their lodge, not only for themselves but also for those yet to come.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE RITUAL IN IOWA

Iowa's Ritual descends directly from Brother Preston of England. Brother Preston was a man of great ability who excelled in Masonic knowledge. His Work emphasized the Ancient Charges, that was composed of the three Lectures of Masonry. Brother John Hammer brought the Preston Work to America in about 1793. Thomas Smith Webb received the Lectures from Hammer, but determined them unsuitable for American Masonry. Webb modified the Preston Work, and the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts adopted this Work. Brother Benjamin Gleason received the "Webb Work" from Webb himself. The Grand Lodge of England pronounced the Webb Work correct when Brother Gleason visited there. Brother Gleason taught Brother John Barney of Vermont the Lectures in 1817. The Grand Lodge of Vermont accepted this Work. The following year Brother Barney fully instructed Brother Samuel Willson in the Work.

From 1844 to 1860, the Masonic Work of Iowa was taught at the discretion of the Grand Master. At the 1859 Grand Lodge Communication resolutions were passed creating a Board of Custodians to procure the Ancient Work and exemplify it before Grand Lodge. The first Board of Custodians invited Brother Samuel Willson to teach the "Webb Work." After more than a week of instruction, the Custodians demonstrated the "Webb Work" at the 1860 Grand Lodge Communication and Samuel Willson certified their Work as correct. In May of 1865, Brother Augustus Gilbert, a Custodian, went to Vermont and made some minor corrections to the Work with the aid of Brother Samuel Willson. Later that year, Brother W.B. Langridge, another Custodian, also conferred with Brother Willson and transcribed a copy of the "Willson Notes." These Notes are the standard reference for the Ritual in Iowa today and are kept safe in a vault at the Iowa Masonic Library in Cedar Rapids.

Neither the "Webb Work" nor the "Willson Notes" contain floor work instructions. In September of 1882 the Custodians demonstrated floor movements to correspond with the Work, and this became the standard floor Work. The basic "Webb Work" has not changed in the more than 140 years that it has been used in Iowa. The importance that the Grand Lodge places on maintaining the purity and accuracy of the "Webb Work" is made clear in Article VIII, Sections 1 and 2 of the Constitution of the Grand Lodge of Iowa.

Section 1. Webb Work

"This Grand Lodge recognizes the Work and Lectures as now taught by its Board of Custodians as the "Ancient Webb Work." All innovations or changes in said Work or Lectures are forbidden. Said Work together with the floor movements shall be known as the Ritual."

Section 2. Lodges to use.

"In conferring the degrees of Masonry, the subordinate lodges must strictly adhere to the Work as

adopted and taught in this jurisdiction.”

The “Webb Work” has never been changed in content, only in presentation. Since 1907, there have been only nine or ten minor word changes. In addition, at Grand Lodge in 1989, new proficiency examinations were approved.

The Board of Custodians is in charge of the Ritual in Iowa. Through their good work and the assistance in instruction from District Lecturers (D.L.’s) and Masonic Instructors (M.I.’s), the quality of instruction within the state has remained high. Today, the Ritual is as important as in ages past and will continue to be the force that sets Masonry and Freemasons apart from other Fraternal or social organizations.

DISTRICT LECTURERS, MASONIC INSTRUCTORS, AND SCHOOLS OF INSTRUCTION

If a Brother is interested in becoming a Masonic Instructor or District Lecturer, he should find a M.I. or D.L. to assist him in learning the Ritual. When a Brother has worked with and learned the Ritual from an M.I. or D.L., he may be recommended to the Board of Custodians for a rigid Masonic Instructor examination. The Masonic Instructor must know the Openings and Closings for each degree, how to call from Labor to Refreshment, how to Resume Labor, the First and Second Sections of the First and Third Degrees, the First Section and the Esoteric Work of the Second Section of the Second Degree, and the Proficiency Examinations for each degree. The Masonic Instructor is then given three years to prove his Ritual ability and to learn the correct floor Work. Only those M.I.’s who attend Regional Schools, M.I./D.L. Clubs, and/or the Grand Lodge School and prove their proficiency in the floor Work and Ritual are made District Lecturers. Schooling does not end with the granting of a D.L. Certificate. D.L.’s are required to attend at least one Regional School or Grand Lodge School every three years to remain an active instructor. The work of these dedicated men is commendable and important for those who are seeking further light in Masonry.

The work of M.I.’s and D.L.’s in Iowa Masonry is very important. Their task is maintaining the accuracy of the Ritual and assisting the officers and members in adhering to it. Their ability and expertise is one of the most valuable assets at the Master’s disposal.

OPENING LODGE

A lodge is opened in form to provide a transition from the outer world to the inner harmony that should prevail within a Masonic Hall. To create this atmosphere, the officers must be proficient in their respective parts. The Opening should never be rushed but should allow time for the Craft to forget the worries of the day and find peace for a time among brothers. Prayer is always offered and the Pledge of Allegiance may be given. The Opening Prayer is not Ritual, but the Closing Prayer is. It is the duty of the Master to Open and Close his lodge, set the Craft at Work, and give them proper instruction. By his proficiency and ability the example is set for others to emulate.

For a lodge to be Opened, there must be present at least one principle officer (W.M., S.W., or J.W.) and six Master Masons. For a Stated Communication, the six other Master Masons must be entitled to Vote (Chapter 16 Section 2: a,b,c). One principle officer must be in the room at all times while the lodge is at labor. If a lodge calls to Refreshment and Resumes Labor or Opens on a different degree, the lodge must be purged and tyled as done in the Opening. All business, except the examinations for proficiency in the First and Second Degrees, is conducted in the Third Degree.

CLOSING LODGE

Section 6. When Closed.

“A subordinate lodge must be closed on the same calendar day that it is opened.”

Lodges are Closed in form to reinforce the lessons therein learned and to carry them out into the world. The Closing must never be omitted or rushed. It serves as a refresher for the Candidate and Craft. As stated above, the Closing prayer must always end with the Ritual prayer.

CONFERRING DEGREES

Each degree serves a twofold purpose: First and foremost, it is for the benefit of the Candidate; and second, it is to reinforce the lessons and symbolism for the Craft on the sidelines. In the presentation of a degree, the participants should possess a thorough knowledge of the Ritual, expressed in an earnest, feeling manner, so that a deep impression is made upon the Candidate. For, in the end, that is the main object of a degree. If, at the conclusion of the Work, the Initiate is not awakened to the good, pure, true lessons exemplified, if he does not then determine to exemplify in his own life the great lessons of the institution (in short, if he does not leave the lodge a different man), he is either unfit for membership or his money has been taken and no value returned. Only competent brothers who know their parts should participate in degree work. It is wrong and irresponsible to put a member in an office or part without thorough instruction by a competent brother. No part of the Ritual can be read, except those parts contained in the Iowa Monitor, and its use should be kept to a bare minimum. Ciphers are prohibited in the lodge room. Ciphers are to be used only as an aid to the memory.

LODGE ROOM ETIQUETTE

The proper clothing of a Mason is a plain white apron. Officers, Past Masters, and others may wear aprons appropriate to their office. The apron is always the outermost garment and never is worn under a coat. When entering or retiring from the lodge while at labor, the member should go to the West of the Altar facing East, if the Master is not busy. If the Master is occupied, the brother should go to the West facing the Senior Warden and give the due guard and sign of the degree and quietly enter or leave. Those participating in the Work should speak clearly and from the heart for the candidate to understand fully the lessons being taught. The Admonition must always be read before the conferral of the Second Section of the Third Degree. Our degrees are serious and no talking or roughness should be condoned.

CONCLUSION

Interest in our meetings and in our degree work is increased with degree of accuracy and impressiveness with which the Ritual is given. All of the orthodox teachings of Masonry are contained in the Ritual, and its sublime truths are presented in such a manner that all intelligent candidates, no matter what their level of education, may grasp its meaning and admire its wondrous ability to cement us into one band of Friends and Brothers.

So Mote It Be.