

Wither Are We Traveling?

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It is said that the most prophetic words in the history of the world are simply, “THIS TOO SHALL PASS AWAY.” The poet, Walter de La Mare lamented this thought with his timeless words, “LOOK THEY LAST ON ALL THINGS LOVELY...” We all experience what is said in our own lives, and our Masonic Ritual mentions the “ravages of time.”

In nature, everything eventually reverts back to way it was. This might take millions of years, but whatever we “transform” out of the Earth’s resources eventually crumbles or wears away and we are left with its basic original form.

It might be said that this is the “Rule of the Universe,” and certainly all human endeavor is unfortunately governed by the same rule. Our beloved Craft started with individual stone masons who united in a little group (lodge of “free” masons) for their mutual benefit. What they did was seen to be good and wholesome so it was replicated by others. Eventually many lodges formed, each totally independent and running its own affairs. They all cooperated with each other and enjoyed fraternal association. As time went on, some of these lodges were “infiltrated” by outsiders who also saw that what the stone masons had done was “good and wholesome.” This led to the creation of Grand Lodges with “systemization and standardization.” During this time the term “Freemason” (one word) came into usage and to accommodate the “infiltrators,” Free and Accepted Masons was coined. What we now call a Freemason is actually an “accepted” Mason.

Freemasonry found its way to what is now the United States in the 1600s. It had developed and refined itself in Europe over at least 200 years so did not have to start from



A high hill and a low dale; a painting used in Mackey’s Encyclopedia to illustrate where Masons meet. In the early days, little lodges sprung up right across the United States. Many were “swallowed up” in big cities, but many still remain in country sides like we see in this painting.

“scratch.” Little lodges were formed in little towns, and as the United States grew, many little towns with their little lodges became big cities with big lodges. As a result, the “personal touch” of the little lodges was greatly diluted. In a little town, everybody knows everybody, and lodge members could “network” with people in their community. Freemasonry was an integral part of little societies so was able to maintain itself (most often, new mem-

bers were relatives of exiting members—father, sons, grandsons and so on). Ironically, the more people there are in a community, the LESS the interaction between people. In a large apartment/condo complex, one hardly knows the names of people he or she sees in elevators, common areas or at the local super-market.

All US lodges became part of the great world-wide march towards Grand Lodges. By 1960, over 4.1 million men in the USA were registered Freemasons, and every state had a Grand Lodge (including the District of Columbia). By 2013, Masonic membership had reduced to 1.2 million men and continues to decrease at about 50,000 members a year.

We need to step back here for a moment and ask if the existing little rural lodges are individually suffering the same decrease. For certain, most of these lodges are still there and are likely carrying on just fine. If you travel the back roads of the USA or Canada and drive into a farming community there will be a little town and one of the buildings will very often be a quaint Masonic lodge. These towns don't

change very much. You can go back twenty years later and everything is essentially the same. I will guess that about 20% of US Freemasons are in these “little rural lodges” (about 240,000 souls).* They don't grow very much, and they don't shrink very much either. They just sort of carry on and replace members who have passed away. They have been the same for up to two hundred years and not too many of the brethren even get into the big cities. They enjoy fraternal visits from other little lodges within a two or three hour drive and really don't give a lot of thought to the Masonic “plight” in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and so forth. In a word or two, “things go onward pretty much the same.”

Our Order is definitely crumbling in the “big cities” (basically anywhere that has the name “city”). Although our Club and many eminent Masons are trying to come to its rescue, we might be fighting a losing battle because it appears our great fraternity is simply going back to where it came from—specifically little lodges in little rural towns. That, Brethren, could be “wither we are traveling.”

Very early US Masons conducted lodge meetings in taverns such as Gadsby's Tavern seen on this stamp. There was evidently a second floor where various events could be held. Taverns were very often used for all Masonic “get-togethers” and other functions.

Freemasonry's objective, to make good men better, has not changed whether it meets in a little town brick building or a big city “palace.” If it does revert back to

its origins, it will likely rise again like a phoenix at some distant time because what it professes is timeless and has served the world well.

*Urban/Rural populations in the USA are 80.7% and 19.3% respectively.

