

Whither Are We Traveling?

Chapter Eight – The Decline of Fellowship

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The Decline of Fellowship

Question 7: Do we pay enough attention to the Festive Board?

Pisgah Lodge at Corydon was less than a month old then the time came for celebrating the Fest of St. John the Baptist in 1817. There was every reason for dispensing with an observance – the Lodge was small, little or no money was to be had, and no doubt it was a busy time for the Brethren, for there were forests to be cleared.

But the minutes tell us that a tiny handful of Freemasons assembled and marched to the court house to hear an oration, “after which in proper order the members and visiting Brethren marched in procession to Mr. Boon’s and partook a dinner prepared according to arrangement.”

Yellowed records of any Lodge a century old and more will describe similar events at which the fine old tradition of the Masonic Feast was kept alive in spite of hardships on the Hoosier frontier. And if the faithful Secretary went on to record the amount spent for a jug of whisky with which to gladden the occasion, we chuckle indulgently and explain to ourselves rather weakly that times were different then.

Times certainly were different. And I am not at all convinced in the area of Masonic fellowship that the change has been for the better.

Back in February, when I first questioned whether we pay enough attention to the Festive Board, I went on to observe: “Should any reader have to ask what the Festive Board is, that in itself will serve to show how far we have strayed from the traditional path of Freemasonry.”

Yes, of course, every Lodge has “eats” now and then – and too often that is just the word to describe it: eats. But how often are the Brethren permitted to meet around the Festive Board for the genuine, heart-warming fellowship of the traditional Masonic feast – the same kind of close-knit community of interest that a family experiences when it gathers for the Thanksgiving dinner?

By and large, Lodges have just about abandoned that happy camaraderie which for generations was extolled by Masonic orator and poet. H.L. Haywood, preeminent Masonic author and scholar of our age, writes in his book, *More About Masonry*:

In the Eighteenth Century Lodge the Feast bulked so large in the life of the Lodge that in many of them the members were seated at the table when the Lodges were opened and remained at it throughout the Communication, even when degrees were conferred. The result was that Masonic fellowship was good fellowship, as in a warm and fruitful soil, acquaintanceship, friendship, and affection could flourish – there was no grim and silent sitting on a bench, staring across at a wall. Out of this festal spirit flowered the love which Masons had for their Lodge. They brought gifts to it, and only by reading of old inventories can any present day Mason measure the extent of that love; there were gifts of chairs, tables, altars, pedestals, tapestries, silver, candlesticks, oil paintings, libraries, Bibles, mementos, curios, regalias and portraits. The Lodge was a home, warm, comfortable, luxurious, full of memories, and tokens, and affection, and even if a member died his presence was never wholly absent; to such a Lodge no member went grudgingly, nor

had to be coaxed, nor was moved by that ghastly, cold thing called a sense of duty, but went as if drawn by a magnet, and counted the days until he could go.

What business has any Lodge to be nothing but a machine for grinding out the work? It was not called into existence in order to have the minutes read! Even a mystic tie will snap under the strain of cheerlessness, repetition, monotony, dullness. A Lodge needs a fire lighted in it, and the only way to have that warmth is to restore the Lodge Feast, because when it is restored good fellowship and brotherly love will follow, and where good fellowship is, members will fill up an empty room not only with themselves but also with their gifts.

Then let's proceed to the question I keep asking so persistently. What has happened?

1. **First of all, we must not underestimate the Puritan influence on American Freemasonry.** It is that influence which, almost without our knowing it, attaches some sort of holier-than-thou stigma to the Hour of Refreshment, frowns upon anything cheerful and festive, and gives us that grim and silent staring at a wall of which Haywood speaks. How many times have you heard a pious Brother refer sneeringly to the "Knife and Fork Mason" and to the "Six-Thirty Degree," as if there might be something reprehensible in the enjoyment of fellowship? How silly can we become? The Brethren are not going to fill the benches until the walls bulge just to see the pious Brother clown his part in the Master Mason degree, and why should they?

For some reason, Freemasonry overseas was able to escape the more dour effects of Puritanism, but on almost every facet of American life we still suffer from it. The ramifications of its influence on Freemasonry in the United States are far too numerous and controversial to discuss here, and I must not elaborate on the subject except to say that a great many of our problems today can be traced back to the period when it was deemed almost a mortal sin to eat, drink and be merry.

2. **We must remember that this is the day of the service club.** And, like it or not, our beloved Fraternity has members by the thousands who think Freemasonry should be made over to fit the Babbitt pattern; the glad-handing and first-naming, the perfunctory first stanza of "America" and the perfunctory Pledge of Allegiance, the raucous laughter, the ribald stories, the movie showing how corn plasters are manufactured. That kind of thing carried into Freemasonry becomes a travesty on Masonic fellowship, but it has crept into our Lodges, and we might as well face up to it.
3. **The casual living of our day.** By this I mean the dress of the cookout supper, the manners of the truck stop café. No Lodge can experience the true joys of the Festive Board unless the Brethren are willing to adopt some of the ways of civilization. Hard words, perhaps, but the need to be spoken.
4. **The over-emphasis on "togetherness."** (I approach the subject with fear and trembling.) Togetherness is to be encouraged, but it can be carried too far, and has been carried too far in Freemasonry. In characteristic Midwestern style, we have gone overboard. Instead of inviting the ladies' auxiliaries and the junior

divisions to meet in our quarters and pursuing our own ways with dignity and restraint, we have literally abdicated in favor of the “family” idea. Masonic fellowship has been one of the casualties.

II

Then where do we go from here?

1. **Well, first of all, we need to regain a sense of balance.** For many Masons, fellowship is the most precious jewel in the Masonic diadem. It is necessary to the very existence of our Fraternity. If Brethren can not find it in their Ancient Craft Lodge, they will find it elsewhere, and the officers and workers who howl to high heaven when new members desert their Lodge in favor of appendant organizations might reflect on the fact that the Brethren simply may be in search of that which the Lodge denies them. We need to cultivate Masonic fellowship with all our zeal – not to choke it out with trivialities, nor speak of it with supercilious scorn. We need the Hour of Refreshment in all its beauty and dignity; we need to revive those noble old traditions of our Craft. We haven’t outgrown them; we haven’t found anything better; we have lost something and haven’t discovered what is wrong!
2. **But if the Festive Board is to serve its purpose, it must be dignified.** I have said it before and I repeat: A Masonic gathering is neither the proper time nor place for dirty language or suggestive stories. And just as lacking in propriety is the sectarian preaching, and the rabble-rousing, and the political speech disguised as “Americanism.”
3. **The Festive Board must be appropriate.** It is not an occasion for comedians, nor variety shows, nor vaudeville troupes, nor tap dancers, nor magicians, nor barbershop quartets, nor homegrown movies, nor cute little child entertainers. They have their place, but their place is at the Family Night party, not at the Festive Board of Freemasonry. We can not realize the by-products of Masonic fellowship when the stage setting is so inappropriate as to be ridiculous.
4. And finally, the Festive Board must be Masonic. Repeatedly I am invited to Lodge banquets to deliver an address. “Give us one of those straight-from-the-shoulder Masonic speeches,” they tell me in advance. “We want you to lay it right on the line.” And then, lo and behold, when I arrive to deliver that so-called Masonic speech and “lay it on the line” to the Brethren, I find the room half filled with ladies and children! Bless ‘em – I love them, too. But let’s acknowledge the most basic of all basic fundamentals: Freemasonry is for Freemasons. Surely a few occasions can be set aside in the annual program of a Lodge when Master Masons can enjoy the fellowship to which they are entitled in a manner consistent with the traditions and practices of our ancient Craft.

I hope to see the day when the Table Lodge is authorized in Indiana, as it has been in the older Jurisdictions for two centuries and more. I hope to see the day when every Lodge takes pride in an appropriate observance of the Feasts of the Sts. John – something more imaginative than the tedious routine of the Master Mason degree with doughnuts and coffee afterwards! Yes, and I hope to see the day when a Master Mason in the United States will have occasion to sing of his Lodge with the same depth of feeling that Robert Burns felt when he sang of his:

Of t have I met your social band,
 And spent the cheerful festive night;
Of t, honor'd with supreme command,
 Presided o'er the sons of light;
And, by that hieroglyphic bright,
 Which none but Craftsmen ever saw!
Strong mem'ry on my heart shall write
 Those happy scenes, when far awa'.