

## Substantial Growth of Nebraska Masonry

(an article by Charles S Lobingier/reprinted from The Omaha Bee, 1900)

This day is an historic one in the annals of Masonry. Exactly 183 years ago the Grand Lodge of England was formed. On June 24<sup>th</sup>, 1717, designated by the annalists as “the high noon of the year, the day of light and of roses,” the four Masonic lodges of London established the body which there-after became the mother grand lodge of the world. Of course, this was not the beginning of Freemasonry. It merely marked the introduction of a new phase – the tendency toward complete organization and closer structural union – while Masonic lodges and the institutions of Masonry had then already existed for centuries.

Compared with these chapters in its history, Masonry in Nebraska is young. But, then, Nebraska is a young commonwealth and Masonry within its borders is practically as old as any phase of civilization. Coincident with the very first step toward the formation of civil government in what is now Nebraska was the movement for the organization of its first Masonic lodge. In the fall of 1854, the very time when Francis Burt, the first governor, arrived in the territory, the grand lodge of Illinois granted a dispensation to constitute Nebraska lodge No. 184, afterward No. 1 of Nebraska at Bellevue. This lodge was fully organized by the following April and among the members received during 1855 was Peter A Sarpy, the pioneer fur trader, whose relation to Nebraska history is almost like that of Daniel Boone to Kentucky. This pioneer Nebraska lodge held its meetings in Colonel Sarpy’s trading post and a picture of that historic building now adorns the walls of the ante-room of the Masonic hall in Omaha – a fitting and perpetual reminder of this cradle of Nebraska Freemasonry. This lodge was removed to Omaha in 1888 and is now in prosperous condition.

### Activity of Pioneer Masons

But Masonic activity in pioneer Nebraska was not confined to Bellevue. Almost from the first the members of the ancient craft in the little settlements that fringed the Missouri began to take steps toward organization. Giddings Lodge, No 165, afterward Western Star lodge, No. 2 at Nebraska City, was created May 10, 1855, and chartered by the grand lodge of Missouri, May 28, 1856. Capitol lodge, No. 3 of Nebraska was created January 9, 1857, and chartered June 3, 1857, at Omaha, where it is now a flourishing organization of over 300 members. On September 23, 1857, these three pioneer bodies, just as their sister lodges in London had done 140 years before, sent representatives to Omaha, who there constituted the Grand Lodge of Nebraska. The three subordinate lodges were there-upon renumbered and rechristened as above indicated.

From this time on the record of the fraternity in this state is one of steady and substantial, though never of extremely rapid progress. Each year in Nebraska history shows a gain both in membership and in the number of lodges, and it is a remarkable fact

that even during times of depression, like the grasshopper year of 1874, the rate of increase has not been lowered. The handful of craftsmen who transplanted Freemasonry to the territory of Nebraska has now been succeeded by nearly 13,000 master Masons, and the three pioneer lodges have increased to 244, of which St. John's, No 25, Omaha, is the largest, with a membership of about 360, Covert No. 11, also at Omaha, however, making a close second with 310.

## The Strength of Masonry

But the strength and usefulness of Masonry in Nebraska or elsewhere, for that matter, consist not merely nor even largely in point of numbers. Its influence has been exerted rather by reason of the character than of the size of its membership. Throughout Nebraska the local Masonic lodge has usually included at least some of those who constitute the bone and sinew of its citizenship and the following roll of past grand masters, who are still living, contains the names of many who will be recognized as prominently identified with the political, professional, commercial and social history of the state: Daniel H Wheeler, Omaha; Robert W Furnas, Brownville; Harry P Deuel, Omaha; William E Hill, Los Angeles, California; Martin Dunham, Omaha; George H Thummel, Grand Island; George W Lininger, Omaha; Edward K Valentine, West Point; Rolland H Oakley, Lincoln; James A Tulleys, Red Cloud; Okley Gibbs, Omaha; James R Cain, Falls City; Edwin F Warren, Nebraska City, Samuel W Hayes, Norfolk; John J Wemple, Cleveland, Ohio; Manoah B Reese, Lincoln; Charles K Coutant, Omaha; Milton J Hull, Washington, D.C.; George B France, York; John J Mercer, Omaha; Robert E French, Kearney; Bradner D Slaughter, Lincoln; Samuel P Davidson, Tecumseh; James P. A. Black, Bloomington; John A Ehrhardt, Stanton; Henry H Wilson, Lincoln; Charles J Phelps, Schuyler; John B Dinsmore, Sutton; Frank H Young, Broken Bow; W W Keysor, Omaha.

The following past grand masters have gone to their final reward: Robert C Jordan, George Armstrong, Orsamus H Irish, Frank Welch and Alfred G Hastings.

## Other Branches of Masonry

What precedes has reference to the Masonry of what is termed the blue lodge – that which forms the basis of the entire system. But there are many other branches of Masonry and in the various countries where the order exists different forms or “rites” have grown up, all based on the blue lodge, but adding and developing peculiarities of their own. Of those higher branches two have long been represented in Nebraska, viz: the York rite and the Scottish rite. The former includes chapters of Royal Arch Masons, councils of Royal and Select Masters and commanderies of Knights Templar. The grand chapter was organized in 1871. A session of the latter body was recently held at Lincoln, with that veteran Mason and public-spirited citizen, George W Lininger, in the chair as grand commander.

The Scottish Rite includes Lodges of Perfection, chapters of the Rose Croix, a preceptory of Knights Kadosh and a Consistory. The governing bodies in both rites report

a flourishing condition of affairs in their respective ranks.

The Ancient Arabic Order Nobles of the Mystic Shrine admits to membership only Masons who have completed the higher degrees of either the York or the Scottish rite. It is represented in Nebraska by two temples. A memorable session of the Imperial council of this order was held in Omaha in 1892.

### Order of the Easter Star

The Order of the Easter Star, to which women are admitted, is well represented through the state and appears to be growing in popularity.

Such is the barest outline of the external features of Masonry in Nebraska. Time would fail to tell of its achievements from within – of widows kept from want, of orphans educated and supported, of men strengthened and improved in character and fitted for better citizenship. These are matters of which the outside world often knows little, but they are illustrated in the careers of Masonic lodges throughout the state. And thus today Masonry in Nebraska looks back upon a comparatively brief but thoroughly honorable history and forward to a career of usefulness for perhaps many centuries to come.

Author: Charles S Lobingier