



## THE BELOVED ORDER

### **My Purpose...**

I cannot say with any certainty that anything I offer here is accurate. After all, I am only recording feelings and impressions. That is usually all we have to ponder anyway, and those feelings and impressions are only as valid as our ability to recognize the facts and their consequences...

The Order has always been fairly competent in its record-keeping. The earliest records that I have seen relating to the business of the Order were, in my opinion, beyond competent in all respects, rendered both in form and content elegantly and mindful of the notions of Friendship, Love, and Truth...

Despite all those records, though, I cannot begin to know what actual thoughts and feelings raged within the minds and the hearts of men and women who have stepped forward and committed themselves to the Order, even those who make that commitment today. I am certain that there are as many reasons to make that commitment (or not) as there are men and women to consider it...

But I do know what being a member of the Order has meant to me. Also I do believe that I know now what it meant to others in my family who have been members of the Order...

And it is here that I will try to explain that personal meaning...

In Friendship, Love, and Truth...

### **Going to Lodge...**

I remember looking up to view my grandfather entering the kitchen from his home next door. He seemed a giant but that was mostly because I was only a tyke. As other men saw him, he was not so tall and he was slender. Most of the time he wore an open-neck long-sleeve khaki shirt and khaki trousers and work boots but on Lodge nights he was dressed in a fine double-breasted wool suit with a crisp white shirt and a necktie. And he wore a dark gray fedora...

His announcement of his plans for that evening was simple and direct. Earl was a simple and direct man. "I'm going to Lodge, Bob. You coming?" Of course my father, Robert, was going to Lodge as well, because he also wore a suit...

But my Grandfather still asked. Together they got into the car and drove to Saratoga village and parked on Oak Street and then wandered up the stairs to the second story of the Lodge hall...



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Earl and Robert were not unusual men. They got along with most others although Earl, in particular, had a low tolerance for "damned fools", as he called them, and their "malarkey". Robert also had a low tolerance for "damned fools" but he never talked about it. For both men, finding humility in themselves as well as in those around them seemed important. But as they rose up the stairs, both men looked at one another, shook their heads and smiled, and walked into another evening of Lodge together...

As they walked into the anteroom, they encountered men of the community whom they had known or with whom they had worked for many years. These men were doctors and lawyers, barbers and tradesmen, merchants and ranchers, civic leaders and working men. They extended their hands and a smile and a friendly greeting to all they could, even those they might not have wished to acknowledge...

Earl and Robert were both confident that all men in that room that night would be treated with an unusual respect. Despite the animosities that might exist, there was at least trust in the good intentions of the others. And when the doors were closed and the men were all seated, there was a quiet confidence that filled the room. There were some men who could describe the spell that gripped the group. There were others who could not describe it at all but they could feel its power...

The lodge meeting for Earl and Robert was a serious matter, a kind of extreme kabuki-like theatre wherein they were characters practicing the virtues of Friendship, Love, and Truth with their Lodge brothers. The raising of any topic related to politics (including politics within the Lodge and the Order) or religion was prohibited. They learned how to balance personal ambitions with the needs of others through the will of the assembled group. They learned how to rise and speak with passion and honesty in all that they believed to be relevant in that moment...

The so-called "ritual" and traditional meeting protocols guided the assembly and guaranteed the transparency of the process to every man present. Every elected and appointed officer of the Lodge had well-defined specific duties to perform. Every member understood their role. All in the meeting understood their place and the Noble Grand, the man who was elected to preside, had the attention and the respect of all present. His job was to moderate and facilitate the discussion without taking any position or without offering any perspective of his own...

And when any man slipped or lost his composure, he was obliged to regain his sense of presence and to gratefully accept the support and encouragement of the group. No decisions were made without the full consideration of the questions and answers around each decision and such considerations were made by the whole Lodge. All members were given an opportunity to voice their perspective. All members were given the respect and courtesy they were due as participants in this process...

All present were expected to be curious and to participate although none were chastised for their timidity. Those with experience in the rituals were expected to guide and advise those whose understandings were shaky. Those with the least experience were expected to watch and learn so



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that they could assume their responsibilities when their times came. All present were expected to practice patience and tolerance to an uncommon degree...

And when the meeting was adjourned and the doors were opened, the members returned to the outside world -- to their families, to their friends, to their neighbors, to their work -- refreshed in their understanding of the practice of civility and an uncommon degree of courtesy...

They also emerged from the Lodge meeting with a refreshed understanding of who in their community needed a hand and some encouragement. Sometimes that was a member of the Order and sometimes it was not...

### Principles and Values...

The Odd Fellows have a rich and powerful brand. The Three Links can be found almost any place that one might pass through in travel from one part of the country to another. But only if one is looking. Otherwise, the brand of Odd Fellowship is a small part of the larger panorama of our culture...

The Order's brand is a visual representation of three links in a chain. The first link is for **Friendship**, the second for **Love**, and the third for **Truth**. Odd Fellows often affirm what they express in a fraternal context by assuring the reader that their message comes with Friendship, Love, and Truth or "In F.L. & T." It is also worthy to note the explicit symbolism expressed by the chain itself. The first notion is that Truth is not possible unless one can know a way to express it with Love, and that Love is not possible unless one can create a bond of true Friendship. The second notion is that Friendship, Love, and Truth are not à la carte options for the members of the Order. The Three Links are bound together and, as such, are a package of three obligatory personal undertakings for each participant...

The notions of Friendship, Love, and Truth are probably as old as the first of our kind to realize that cooperation and goodwill tend to produce favorable outcomes. There will always be among us those who still do not understand this. But they, too, are deserving of Friendship, Love, and Truth, even if they do not get why it might be offered or even why they should bother to return it in the same spirit as it was given...

These ideas were passed to us by the Abrahamic traditions with which we are very familiar and which are clearly woven into the rich texture of the Order's rituals. I made the connection of how universal the virtues of Friendship, Love, and Truth can also be found in the teachings of the Buddha 2,500 years ago. In one story it is said that the Buddha taught that suffering and unhappiness will visit those who practice three things: greed, aversion, and delusion. Friendship, Love, and Truth are the polar opposites of greed, aversion, and delusion. From a Buddhist perspective, Odd Fellowship is an ethical prescription for happiness and harmony...



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The central purpose of Odd Fellowship is **"to improve and elevate the character of mankind by promoting the principles of friendship, love, truth, faith, hope, charity and universal justice."** This seems like a good sound idea. There are not many who would want to argue with this notion...

But in today's world, this idea is also a "yeah, yeah, yeah, whatever" idea, so obvious that we really do not need to spend much time with it -- especially if it takes from our free time, our entertainment time, our toys and gadgets, our very busy lives...

If one pays any attention to the news of the world, then one should be able to understand that the stakes have never been higher than right now for our very survival as an advanced and civilized species and for the need to improve and elevate the character of mankind...

### The Command...

When I first joined the Order, I became fascinated by its very existence in a modern world. But rather than thinking about what the Order will become, I began my attempts to understand the Order by looking into the past, and I tried to imagine what started this experience in the first place...

The Command of Odd Fellowship is to **"visit the sick, relieve the distressed, bury the dead and educate the orphan."** These four social commitments probably made nothing but sense to Thomas Wildey when he arrived at Baltimore in 1817 in the midst of epidemic flashes of smallpox and yellow fever and the certain appalling conditions that attended these small plagues. Baltimore was a crowded little city of some 55,000 people that had been founded on the marshy shores of the Chesapeake almost 100 years before his arrival...

Then, there were no government services as we know them. There were no public schools, no healthcare systems, no public health services, no public assistance or support programs, no clean water and sewage treatment and garbage removal systems. Three years prior to his arrival the British Navy attacked the city's harbor in the Battle of Baltimore (War of 1812) and in the year of his arrival, Baltimore was witness to economic depression and massive unemployment...

And if that were not enough, the city came under a plague of yellow fever. Living conditions were appalling. People were dying in substantial numbers in the streets and in their homes simply because they did not understand yellow fever as we do today. But this was not new to Baltimore. The city had known yellow fever before, and typhus and typhoid and cholera and small pox...

And thus was Odd Fellowship started in North America...

So when Thomas Wildey attempted to define a purpose for his new Order in America, it is not difficult to see how he might have settled on the obligations to **"visit the sick, relieve the distressed, bury the dead and educate the orphan"**. Of course, we have to ask ourselves whether these obligations, as they are explicitly expressed, are as relevant today as they were in Wildey's time. Perhaps they are. Baltimore's present day plagues are HIV/AIDS and STDs, drugs,



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diabetes and obesity, crime and violence. But is this as relevant today in California as in early 19th century Baltimore...?

Then, unlike today, acting on these obligations was not a token nicety or a symbolic gesture. Nor was it a matter of handing the responsibility to an institutional arm of the Order, such as a Home. Nor was it a simple passing of a check to a grinning bureaucrat in a photo opportunity. It was a serious, solemn, and personal hands-on undertaking. And perhaps we should think about that, even if we only wish to make sure that the Order's purpose in this world is not misunderstood or misread...

Similar dire circumstances existed in San Francisco as men and women came to California seeking their fortunes in gold during the few years following the discovery of gold at Coloma in January 1848. The streets of a wild and raw San Francisco were filled with men and women who abandoned their lives elsewhere to find the riches about which they had only heard and upon which dreams they risked everything. Many arrived with nothing but their hope. And thus was the reason for the first Lodge in California to be organized and chartered...

It was again in the streets of San Francisco some forty years later that the old men of the Gold Rush, the ones for whom the adventure was a bust, drew the attention of California's Grand Lodge. The response was the creation of the Odd Fellows Home. The original purpose for the IOOF Home -- as stated in the official record of the 1893 Grand Lodge sessions in San Francisco -- came entirely out of compassion. Even though one did not want to live in the Home unless one had no other choices because of personal destitution, the hand of Odd Fellowship was extended to those who were in greatest need for that assistance to live the remainder of their days with some measure of dignity and respect...

In the Report of the Grand Master (pp 627 - 628 of the 1894 "Proceedings of the Grand Lodge"), California Grand Master J.F. Thompson left no question as to who in the Order were qualified to be received in the Home. It was quite simply those who were destitute, those lacking necessities of life, those lacking all money, resources, and possessions necessary for subsistence:

*There is urgent need of some means for caring for aged and indigent members of the Order, who have no homes and cannot be cared for by their respective lodges...*

*When it is known that there Odd Fellows in good standing who are inmates of county hospitals in this state; when it is known that many have lived in these places as public paupers; and that some have died and been buried as paupers in the Potter's Field\*, every true Odd Fellow must feel that the Order is not doing its full duty by its unfortunate members.*

*In almost every community there are Odd Fellows, honest and deserving men, who find themselves in their old age, broken in health as well as in fortune, and largely dependent upon their friends for support. To allow such*



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*men to be dependent upon the grudging charities of the world is to deny the great fraternal principles of our Order and stamp ourselves with the seal of hypocrisy.*

\* This term, "potter's field", comes from Matthew 27:7. It refers to the story in which Judas Iscariot became repentant for his betrayal of Jesus and returned the 30 pieces of silver to the priests. The money was ultimately used to buy a worthless piece of land; good only for the clay that potters might use, to create a burial place for indigent strangers and non-believers.

Since the days of Thomas Wildey in Baltimore, Odd Fellows have lived by the Command, attending to the needs of their sick and distressed members, friends, and neighbors, ensuring that the needs of the elderly and those who have passed are met with respect and dignity, and that the young are properly raised...

An Odd Fellow accepts the understanding that there will always be sickness, distress, infirmity and death, and youth requiring guidance and support. An Odd Fellow also accepts the undertaking to find the greatest needs in these circumstances and to extend a hand. That is not always done with the Lodge. But it is always done from the Odd Fellow's heart...

### **The Decision to Join...**

My father, Robert, joined the Order in 1948 and was initiated into the Saratoga Lodge #428. He was born at Saratoga in October 1920 on Fruitvale Avenue in a white farm house that was set in an orchard just opposite from the intersection of Three Oaks Way. That house and that orchard are long gone but it was not far from the Odd Fellows Home (now called the Saratoga Retirement Community). My grandfather, Earl, was an orchardist when he joined the Saratoga Lodge #428 the year following Robert's birth...

Robert spent the last four and one-half years of his life at the Odd Fellows Home with my mother, Doreen, until his passing in 2005. My brother, Mark, and I came every Tuesday to visit our parents. On the first and third Tuesdays of the month, we would take Dad into Friendship Hall in the Assisted Living area of the Home for his attendance at the meetings of the Volcano Lodge #25...

The charter of the Volcano Lodge #25 belonged to a Lodge in the Gold Rush town of Volcano in the Sierra foothills of California. But by the 1950s, Volcano had become a ghost town and the Grand Lodge removed the charter from the walls of the Lodge hall that the Odd Fellows had been sharing with the Masons for many years. The Volcano Lodge charter eventually was brought to the Home in Saratoga so that the old men residing at the Home could practice Odd Fellowship as they always had. They had their own Lodge now...

After bringing our father to his Lodge meeting, the doors of Friendship Hall would be closed, and my brother and I would sit outside and talk about all those things that close brothers might talk



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about. And at the end of the meeting, the doors would open and we would be invited in to visit with the old men. There was a good feeling about being there and I am not sure there are any words adequate to describe that feeling...

One evening, my brother and I realized that we knew very little about Odd Fellowship. We also realized that Dad had never even suggested that we should ever join the Order. This was not due to some lack of enthusiasm for the Order that our father might have held. My brother and I had been brought to the Saratoga Lodge Temple consistently as kids whenever our mother (who was a Rebekah) and our father attended a joint social. I also remember the annual picnics out at the Home. Both places were great venues for a young child's play...

Dad's enthusiasm for Odd Fellowship was quite obvious, in fact, and he often glowed in his greetings of others he encountered at the Home, telling that the halls of the Home were filled with Odd Fellowship. Robert had spent his life planning his last years at the Odd Fellows Home. With his birth a half mile up the road, he saw his passing at the Home as having come full circle. But my brother and I did have a sense that he was not an evangelist. In our father's eye, one either gets Odd Fellowship or not. And if one does not get it, there's not much point in wasting anybody's time. So he never asked...

My brother and I joined the Order shortly after that conversation. I remember Dad grinning from ear-to-ear when my brother and I asked if it might be OK to join the Volcano Lodge. But we did not tell him why we were joining. It was not because of Odd Fellowship. We knew practically nothing about Odd Fellowship. Pure and simple, it was because we knew that he was in his last years and we wanted to share some valuable experience with him. My brother and I both understood how important Odd Fellowship was to him and we reckoned that, at worst, the Order might be kinda weird but it would also be harmless...

Mark and I were initiated into the Order at Cupertino Lodge #70 and finished our degree work at Stockton Lodge #11. At the time, Mark was 50 years old and I was 52. In many respects, the experience of degree work was every bit as strange as we expected it to be...

But even stranger still was the remarkable understanding to which both my brother and I came: everything we had encountered in the degree work and the ritual, we already knew. Our father and our mother had raised us in the spirit and the lessons of Odd Fellowship. And there were no mysteries in our minds about the purpose and the work of the Order. It all made perfect sense...

Suddenly my brother and I began to understand so much about our grandfather, Earl, and our parents, Robert and Doreen, that we had never seen before. Suddenly we began to understand all their sometimes-quite-baffling relationships to family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and community. Suddenly we began to see their compassions and their passions, their humility, and their respective social and religious faiths in a much different light. And we began to understand who the "damned fools" really were and what the true nature of "malarkey" really might be...



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### Good Men of the Order...

The Volcano Lodge #25 was an amazing experience for my brother and me. The characters and the stories of Odd Fellowship that we encountered in this Lodge became the colors and the shadows that filled in the simple sketches that we were creating in the portrait of our family's fraternal legacy. Old men cannot read in the dim light of their advanced age but these old men did not need their charge books as they had taken the ritual into their hearts and could recite it from their hearts. Old men can argue. There can be no doubt about that. But they can also tell a story that will make those around them howl with laughter and, even when I do not fully understand, that will bring a glow to my heart and a smile to my lips...

The very first conversations I had with my brother after we joined Volcano revolved around the question "why isn't the world listening to these old men?". We never really found an adequate answer to that question. I think that our professional experiences made us perhaps a bit cynical -- or maybe a whole lot sarcastic -- and the conclusion to which we kept returning was simple: the world does not want to listen to old men, even when it should, and old men and their knowledge tend to get in the way of progress. This was not a conviction or an allegation. It was merely an observation we had made from our own professional experience...

There was a daisy-chain of introductions that occurred from my membership at Volcano that helped to form my understandings of Odd Fellowship's foundations. They began with George Kaiser...

### George Kaiser

George Kaiser was a modest man but he loved a good story. He was often seen at the Odd Fellows Home in Saratoga reading a paperback Western or carrying a book to a quiet place where he could spend the afternoon. One of George's favorite authors, Louis L'Amour, once wrote: "For one who reads, there is no limit to the number of lives that may be lived, for fiction, biography, and history offer an inexhaustible number of lives in many parts of the world, in all periods of time." It is certain that George knew of such adventures...

George Jacob Kaiser was born in the winter of 1921, in a town called Sidney. Sidney was a small agricultural community nestled in the Yellowstone River Valley on the broad, isolated, wind-swept plains of eastern Montana. It remains a small agricultural town today. Its largest neighboring city with more than 50,000 in population is Bismarck, North Dakota, 240 miles to the East of Sidney. George's parents, Adam Kaiser and Katherine Weber, were immigrants from Russia. He was raised and remained steadfast in the Protestant Christian faith throughout his life. George had six siblings, 2 brothers and 4 sisters...

George was once married for a short time but it did not seem to work out. And on more than a few occasions he had been kiddingly called a "ladies man". The reality, though, is that George was a real gentleman, a sweet and gentle man, a bit rough around the edges but modest and almost shy, and with a constant and friendly smile that revealed a genuine charm. George had no children but he had an abundance of friends. As a young man, he worked his way through Colorado to





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California where he joined the Army and spent some portion of his service time stationed out in the Pacific. George made an honest and honorable living as a workingman. Before retiring he was employed in Southern California where he worked to keep a golf course green and groomed...

George was approaching 65 years membership as an Odd Fellow when he passed away on a Sunday morning in April 2004. He joined the Order in 1940 and was initiated as a member of the Bell Gardens Lodge #487 near Los Angeles. He served as Vice Grand in 1972 and as Noble Grand in 1973 and subsequently as District Deputy Grand Master. After he retired and George had moved from his home in Huntington Park to come to the Odd Fellows Home in Saratoga, it was January 1989. He transferred his long-standing membership in Bell Gardens #487 to the Volcano Historical Lodge #25. In the little over 15 years that George lived at the Home, he worked hard to maintain the spirit of Odd Fellowship at the Home. George's efforts over the years to keep the Volcano Lodge active and vital were unrelenting. And those efforts were officially acknowledged by the California Grand Lodge and by the members of his lodge in an expression of profound appreciation presented to him just a few weeks before his passing...

When I joined the Volcano Lodge, George was the Lodge Secretary. George Kaiser's skills as a Lodge Secretary were diligently applied if somewhat rudimentary. He actually devoted more time and effort to describing what had not occurred in the typical Volcano Lodge meeting and he dutifully read "None" after announcing each agenda item encountered in the minutes of the previous Lodge meeting. I think he was tickled to death to see my brother and me walking into the Lodge meetings because I think he was prepared to hand his books and the Secretary's chair to the first one of us that stepped forward. It was I who took that step. George just wanted to enjoy the Odd Fellowship of the gathering of his brothers...

### **George Hannaford**

When I took the Secretary's chair at Volcano, I was encouraged to attend a desk officer's training event at Cupertino. It was there that I first met George Hannaford...

George Hannaford was the Grand Treasurer of the California Grand Lodge and he had been the Grand Treasurer since most folks could recall. He seemed in every respect the perfect man for the job. He could be stern, severe, and direct when he needed to be and such was certainly my first impression of him. Still, I came to know him as a disciplined and yet curious gentleman with a calm and reassuring demeanor, and who reliably based all his decisions on his best understanding of the information available to him...

George Hannaford had a kind of humility and self-reliance that served him and the Order well. He had no hesitation to examine carefully every sheet of a three inch high pile of papers filled with numbers. As I worked with George more and more over the years, I never once found him unprepared for a meeting and never unduly obsessed with the meeting process itself so long as order in the assembly prevailed. George was not a man who had to rely on his Grand Lodge credentials to do the job he had to do. And his professional, personal, and fraternal qualifications



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were as impressive as his presence but in my experience with George Hannaford, I found out about George's qualifications from others and not from George...

George Hannaford and I did not spend a great deal of personal time together but we did spend a few years together as directors on the Home Board. Every time we approached one another, he would greet me with a smile, grip my hand securely, and ask about my parents and myself with a genuine interest. Those moments touched me in ways I cannot describe...

It was from George Hannaford that I learned about the virtues of personal discipline and the power of presence and humility in Odd Fellowship. These are attributes I have found in few men and that I am still trying to master myself...

### **Don Smith**

Before I joined the Order, I had heard a number of Order member names mentioned in my parents' home but these names did not mean much to me -- except one. Don Smith, according to my mother, was "that wonderful young man from Stockton" and she repeated this assessment of Don many times over many years. I finally got the opportunity to meet Don after I joined the Order and made the decision to take my Second and Third Degrees in the Stockton Lodge...

There is probably no man alive today who carries the torch for the Order that Don does. His hopes for the future of Odd Fellowship are unwavering and, while he has often expressed his frustrations in this regard, I have never seen that frustration turn to anger. A tall man with a hearty laugh and a hopeful optimistic demeanor (even in the darkest moments), Don Smith has a long and very dedicated connection with the Order. He served as the youngest Sovereign Grand Master ever in the Order and has been directly associated with the Odd Fellows Home for well over 30 years. I do not know any one person who has dedicated their life and their passion to the Order to the extent that Don has. Don's fraternal accomplishments and his expertise in the ways of the Order easily earn him a place of prominence in the history of the Order...

Don has given me a lot from the beginning including a few lessons on civility, patience, and persistence. But mostly I am grateful to him for allowing me to serve the memory of the Odd Fellows Home now only found in the legacy of the Saratoga Retirement Community, to dig into some skills and expertise I had not used in some years, and to turn it all into a very interesting experience...

### **Gerald Poarch**

I first encountered Gerald Poarch in my home town of Mill Valley not long before I had joined the Order. The Mill Valley Masonic Lodge was hosting a joint fraternal organizations event. I had only stumbled across the event and I found it curious as a gathering steeped in 19th century nostalgia attempting to find relevance at the turn of the 21st. I cannot remember exactly how many fraternal orders were represented but there were many more than I expected. I recall that Gerald was the



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only man in the room wearing a suit and thinking to myself that the Odd Fellows were the best dressed folks in attendance...

Gerald happened to be the Grand Secretary of the California Grand Lodge and a Past Grand Master of California. I did not find this out until after I had joined the Volcano Historical Lodge #25 and found myself with the duties of Lodge Secretary. Gerald gave generously of his time to attend Volcano Lodge meetings and devoted a good bit of that to bring me up to speed on the duties of being a Lodge Secretary (even though the secretarial duties at Volcano were relatively light)...

What I found more valuable were the lessons that came after he stood, called out "Noble Grand!", waited for the Noble Grand to acknowledge, and then proceeded to explain how something he had just witnessed in the Lodge meeting might have been improved or corrected. It was from Gerald Poarch that I learned that everything related to the Order -- and I mean everything from the ritual to the symbols of Odd Fellowship, to the protocols of behavior, to the spoken cadence of the Valediction, to the regalia and the secret work largely unknown to most members -- all of these things have meaning...

That is, if one is curious enough to learn about that meaning...

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There were, of course, many others including the good men of Cupertino (in particular, Gordon Mason, Ron Kaderabic, Don Lang, and Duane Brouse) who cared enough to come to the Volcano Lodge to fill out the quorum as the numbers of the old men diminished over time...

### **Return to Saratoga #428...**

The Volcano Lodge meets on the first and third Tuesdays of the month. The Saratoga Lodge meets on the second and fourth Tuesdays. My brother and I asked our father if he wished to return to revisit Saratoga #428, his home Lodge and the Lodge of his father. I will not forget the look on his face -- the smile and the fire in his eyes at that moment -- but there was no hesitation in his "Let's go!"...

My father, my brother, and I continued to make as many journeys to Saratoga Lodge on a regular basis as we could. My brother and I both served the Saratoga Lodge as Noble Grand. I believe that pleased Robert in a number of ways. But it allowed me to begin to appreciate the place of the Lodge in a community and the place of the Order in a modern society...

In my grandfather's time, the social fabric of the community was simpler than it is today. Not everybody wanted to be an Odd Fellow even though it was one of only a relatively few forms of social engagement and entertainment (the alternatives including church, private men's and women's clubs and, of course, the saloon). Neither did the Odd Fellows want every applicant to join...



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It was difficult to be anonymous in the community of Saratoga in 1921. If the Lodge in 1921 had regarded my grandfather as a ne'er-do-well or as a disturbance to the ritual and interactive social processes of the Lodge, he would have been black-balled from membership. My guess is that a number of men were not accepted into the Order for those and perhaps other reasons. I have a notion that the two questions that were on each member's mind as they voted to accept a new member were (1) Is he willing to learn Odd Fellowship? and (2) Is it likely that he will try to practice Odd Fellowship? If the answers to these two questions were "yes", a white ball was voted...

There was, in my grandfather's time, a necessary orientation of the Lodge to the community. Often the Lodge hall in most communities was to be found physically in the very center of town. Traveling beyond the boundaries of the community simply was not practical for an evening. A trip by auto from Saratoga to San Jose now takes about 15 minutes but in 1921 it was a day's journey to San Jose and back...

But these attributes of organizational awareness did not make the Lodge a "community service" organization, no more than the churches or the scouts or other organizations with selective membership protocols are "community service" organizations. The churches, the Girl Scouts and the Boy Scouts, and the Order have served the purpose of providing the community with men and women of good character and even better intentions. The building of personal character is the consistent theme in all these groups...

There is probably no greater need in the world today than the universal building of personal character. Even while the notion of character building among urban and suburban youth can be marked with cynicism, there are continuing individual efforts to set character building as a respectable priority in our social lives. And some are even attempting to make the development of character a commercially viable pursuit. But none of these efforts have the power and value of the Odd Fellows Three Links brand...

In my grandfather's time, "visit the sick" meant spending the afternoon preparing two family-sized portions of the evening meal (there were no frozen food sections or microwaves in 1921) and taking that extra supper down the street and holding the hand of a sick woman while her family sat down to a hot meal; "relieve the distressed" meant building an "old folks home" in Saratoga, some with sweat and some with their own wealth, to care for men and women of the Order who had to do no more than to show their membership cards to prove the quality of their character; "bury the dead" meant the setting aside of land to ensure that, if such would be needed or desired, any and every member of the Order would have last rites with dignity and respect; "educate the orphan" meant the building and on-going support of an orphanage in Gilroy, California...

There was no exclusive attention drawn by the Lodge to the local community. An Odd Fellow's compassion and assistance were all inclusive among friends, among neighbors, among members, and among those who knew nothing about Odd Fellowship. And especially welcome were those members who came from another remote place -- perhaps from the opposite side of the planet --



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who had absolutely no relationship with the local community but wished to engage in the practice of Odd Fellowship with the local Lodge...

When faced with needs -- real needs -- within our communities, be they local or regional or national or global, we all need to step up...

But the members of the Order have always felt obliged to step up to address those needs without hesitation...

### The Challenges...

The world around us has changed in significant ways since the Order's zenith era. What has not changed is the value of personal integrity injected in all that one does for oneself and for family, friends, neighbors, fellow citizens, and the largest sense of humanity...

In my grandfather's time, the judgment of a woman's or a man's character was exactly that, a judgment based on personal knowledge and observation. It was difficult to be anonymous in a small community. Even in my younger years as a banker in San Francisco, such assessments of character could be made and expressed. When a lender requested a character reference from another banker, the short-hand in a conversation was the question "Would YOU make this person a loan?" and a less than a fully unqualified endorsement of the borrower in the affirmative alerted the seasoned lender to the possibility that, regardless of the capital that the borrower possessed or the apparent capacity of the borrower to repay a loan with interest, there might be a character issue and character was the trump card...

Character in the lending business is much less important now that a greater reliance is made on credit scoring and financial formulas to predict the successful consummation of a loan transaction. While the numbers predict that success based on past performance, some portion of the participants in this activity play only to those numbers to obtain their credit. That may be the significant reason why we are seeing our troubled financial times today...

We cannot assume that all who come to the Order seeking membership admission can instantly become an Odd Fellow in any sense but name only. Our experience in the Order shows us that some joined the Order for other reasons. But for those who do have sincere goals in this regard (Is she or he willing to learn Odd Fellowship? Is it likely that she or he will try to practice Odd Fellowship?), being an Odd Fellow is really an ideal that we all strive to become. We each know people around us who exhibit the attributes of Odd Fellowship, some more completely than others. But to assume that any one of us is the perfect Odd Fellow is a bit unrealistic. I know that I have failed on a number of occasions and I seek the ways to correct those failings...

Defining (or perhaps re-defining) the purpose of the Order for the 21st Century will not be a simple task. But it must be done if the Order is to experience *sustainable* forward motion. What is it exactly that will improve and elevate the character of mankind in the times in which we find ourselves right



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now? Has the Order fully articulated the qualities that are Odd Fellowship or the modern and relevant processes that will bring individual members closer to the goals of this purpose? These are critical questions...

The ideal circumstance, of course, is that the purpose of the Order will be "universal". That is to say that it will resonate and will remain relevant over time and across nations and cultures. As Louie Sarmiento has shown us, folks seeking to join the Order in the Philippines, Ireland, Brazil, and Mexico all need somehow to be on the same page as folks in California. There is some common notion being shared but I really wonder whether it is being articulated consistently with due consideration given to the principles, values, traditions, and rituals of the Order...

This expression of common purpose is critical to solving the membership issues that many in the Order find a top priority. It is a chicken and egg conversation. What comes first? Some say that if the Order can gather in new members, a new 21st Century purpose can be created and developed. In response, others say that new members are not likely to be gathered unless they are given a compelling reason to become associated with the Order. I have never met anyone who wished to join an organization with serious long term commitment simply because it was seeking members with the promise of a mission to be developed later. Great organizations and institutions do not get created -- and they cannot continue to thrive -- without a purpose that is relevant to the needs of its members, its beneficiaries, and society at large...

The more significant challenge for the Order will be to create the organizational structures and the processes that are a direct design result of their responses to those purposes. Whatever is created should probably be as unique to the Order as its brand and should go far beyond the typical contemporary private sector response to perceived social needs, i.e. prioritizing the list of appeals and writing checks or issuing apologies for facing demands far greater than available resources. The Order's wealth may be considerable both at the Grand Lodge and even at some local Lodges but it is not inexhaustible...

If the Order is to continue with its central purpose "to improve and elevate the character of mankind by promoting the principles of friendship, love, truth, faith, hope, charity and universal justice" then it seems appropriate that each member begins with the humility that whispers to each of us that we should probably begin with ourselves. Moreover, if the decline of the Order's membership and social influence is attributable to the notion that the Order is not in tune with the current social environment, that the structure and methods and the practices are no longer relevant, then we have to open our hearts and our minds to rebuilding the modern methods and processes that promote the principles and values on which the Order was original built...

To accomplish the purpose to improve and elevate the character of mankind, every representative of the Order must be able to walk the walk as well as talk the talk. Every action and every utterance must reinforce the delivery of that purpose. This is important for recruitment and it is important for bringing a 19th Century Ritual into a meaningful and relevant 21st Century context...



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The communication of this mission is also important for the 21st Century, and this is perhaps our third greatest challenge beyond recruitment and development of the Order's membership as a force of exemplary citizenship. If the Order has any hope of reaching out to the younger generations of this society or any other society with any critical mass, we must understand the view of the world that our youth has and how that is formed with professional and carefully crafted viral communications on the Public Network. Our children, if they are connected at all with others on the Public Network, have a much different view of their "community" than their elders, and we will ignore that world view held by our children at our peril if we wish to mainstream the notions promoted by the Order in the coming generations...

In my grandfather's time, virtually every lodge enjoyed the membership of the most influential citizens of the community as well as the least. It has been suggested over and over that finding local community leaders to bring into the lodge is a critical part of lifting a Lodge out of its doldrums. It is true that community leaders will tend to bring knowledge, professional and organizational skills, and lofty ambitions to the lodge as well as the influence to pull other community leaders into the lodge membership and efforts...

It is important, however, to also see that community leaders have another very important role to play in the lodge. On a couple of occasions, my father pointed out **that it is not so important what the lodge does for the community as it is for a member of the Order to learn what he or she can do for their community...**

In this sense, **a Lodge is an incubator for community leadership** and existing community leaders can assist in the mentoring process. A Lodge is a place where character is elevated, where any man or woman -- willing to know and understand Odd Fellowship, and determined to practice Odd Fellowship -- can learn how to become a good responsible leader and can make more valuable contributions to neighbors and their peace and prosperity and well-being...

### **The Search for Relevance and Purpose...**

#### **Regarding Community Service**

Some folks in the Order seem very intent on defining the Lodge as a community service organization. This is understandable, I guess, although we must also recognize that community service organizations, as such, are relatively recent social inventions. When my grandfather joined the Order in 1921, community service organizations were really private selective membership clubs with an awareness for folks in the community needing help with food, shelter, illness, bereavement, and other basic and essential comforts, etc...

I do not believe, though, that my grandfather thought of his lodge (Saratoga #428) as a "community service organization". Yes, 90 years ago the notions of visiting the sick, relieving the distressed, burying the dead and educating the orphan were more immediate than they are today, and the



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members of the lodge with their sister Rebekahs served the needs of others with a special attention to members of the Order...

But the lodge really had another purpose and that was a place to meet, socialize, and practice Odd Fellowship. My grandfather came to the IOOF temple with other men in the community to attend Lodge with some trusted expectations. For some hours, he mingled with other farmers and ranchers and town tradesmen and merchants and doctors and lawyers and loggers. Together, they learned about themselves and the issues they had in common. And together, they entered the hall, closed the doors on the outside world, practiced conducting themselves as gentle and civil people. When they left the lodge hall, they took that civility with them and practiced it in their day-to-day lives...

What is the difference? The Odd Fellows did not really organize community service events. They were regarded as a "secret society" (before these words suggested anything as sinister as they might today). If we go back and examine the secret work, we will see that Odd Fellows did not boast about their membership and actually had very subtle and elaborate methods for recognizing strangers who might be members of the Order. It was NOT that the Odd Fellows were getting together to take care of a problem that needed attention in the community but, rather, it was good people taking care of a problem and most of them were members of the IOOF, the same organization that taught them to be good people...

And all of that was anchored around the Ritual with its underlying principles and values. Today there are many who believe the Ritual is archaic, hokey and unnecessary. **But the Ritual is really necessary and must be preserved until such time as the Order is able to develop a New Ritual to replace the old Ritual, one that will resonate with a modern world that is wired and connected in the 21st Century.** The Ritual (and the Laws) have a letter and a spirit and they should not be used to define the limits (real and imagined) of our actions but, rather, how we should conduct ourselves as members of the Order...

I have long felt that the Grand Lodge should organize itself as a foundation-type business organization that supports the Homes, the Rebekah Children's Services, the Youth Camp, and other non-local project opportunities as they arise. But there are other reasons why the "community service" role does not make sense for local Lodges notwithstanding the fact that community service is a worthy pursuit in which every citizen should participate...

When an organization declares itself a "community service organization", that organization essentially redefines the boundaries of its constituency. A different set of expectations often comes from the community in defining the needs that should be addressed. Those expectations are largely created and defined by whatever perceptions the community might have about the Order and what the Order can offer to the community in the way of "service". There can be no long-term success in any organization if that organization cannot or will not set and manage the community's expectations and also live up to those expectations...





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For this reason alone, a "community service organization" in a modern civic setting tends to be dedicated to a very specific purpose and has defined its mission and what others might expect it to do for the common good of the community. In my home town of Mill Valley, community service organizations are dedicated to a long list of specific on-going projects in providing financial support for the various public schools (Kiddo! and Tamalpais High School Foundation), in providing support to the arts (public library support organizations, Fall Arts Festival, O'Hanlon Center, Outdoor Art Club, Singers Marin, and Milley Awards), in finding and responding to the genuine needs of our neighbors (Bread and Roses, Homeward Bound, and Sarcoma Alliance). Even though the Odd Fellows of Mill Valley are only a faint memory in the minds of some (and unknown to most), the former Lodge hall has assumed a new place and purpose for service to the community (as the 142 Throckmorton Theatre) but one should note that the aforementioned efforts are all very well defined in scope and commitment. The community knows exactly what it can expect from each organization...

If the Order is to be a community service organization, it will also have to be able to describe what the community's expectations of it can be. This will be a significant undertaking. If the Order continues to rely on its traditional mission to "visit the sick, relieve the distressed, bury the dead and educate the orphan", the Order runs the risk of being regarded as irrelevant to the immediate recognized needs of most modern communities (except, perhaps, in a time of crisis). If it seeks to redefine its social mission, the Order will have to find the approval for that among the agents of the mission (its members) and the beneficiaries of the mission (the community). Either way it goes, the Order will have to make its "community service" mission workable in any rural, suburban, and urban community the Order has a presence. And it is imperative that all due consideration be given to ensuring that the Order's response to the "community service" mission, particularly as provided by the individual Lodge, is relevant to the community, financially sustainable, and beneficial to the favor of the Odd Fellows brand...

At one time an Odd Fellows Lodge could probably be found in any given town or city into which one might wish to wander. That is no longer true, though, and an orientation to community service could be a significant inhibiting factor to future interest and resulting growth in the Order. If Lodges are driven to community service involvement, they will probably confine themselves to that purpose and that focus will necessarily exclude membership from outside of the immediate community.

As I am discovering now, what is my incentive to drive 60 miles to Saratoga and 60 miles back to Mill Valley on two Tuesday evenings per month to attend the Lodge of my fathers if only to help the Lodge decide how it will devote its time and energies and financial resources to the local community? I tend to believe that I am better serving my community by remaining in Mill Valley and doing my community service where I live. But as I have said, the Odd Fellows of Mill Valley are now little more than a historical footnote...

### **Regarding Mutual Benefits**

I can understand how some folks might be attracted to the notion that "the Order takes care of its own". I have even read that the Sovereign Grand Lodge and the Grand Lodge are classified as



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Mutual Benefit Corporations under the IRS Tax Code 501(c)(8). If the Order was a "charity", it would be registered as such under IRS Tax Code 501(c)(3), and many organizations under the Grand Lodge are so registered...

But I have some difficulty with this personally. First, my father, Robert, always maintained that you get out of Odd Fellows what you put into it (and that really sounds like an echo from my grandfather, Earl). And in his mind the most valuable benefit was a better understanding of and ability to practice Odd Fellowship. This mostly meant putting aside personal differences in all things to enjoy the good company of others, brothers and sisters, and to work for some common good purpose. This did not even remotely suggest that an Odd Fellow should be his brother's keeper...

My father never suggested to me at any time that members of the Order came before anyone else. It was whoever needed help. As for the Odd Fellows Home, he understood its history and he simply maintained that was for Odd Fellows and Rebekahs who spent their lives doing the good work of the Order. He was a member for 57 years and lived at the Home from 2001 until 2005 when he passed (with my mother, a Rebekah of 60 years until she passed in 2008). And he did not take a dime from the Order. He paid his way fully and never complained about it...

Now, if the Order is a "mutual benefit" organization with a preference to members, to me the question that begs an answer is this: how much more preference are members entitled to as opposed to non-members? I ask this in all seriousness because I have met some in the Order who would be happy to share, as needed, whatever they have even if their personal circumstances have become diminished. And I have met others who would whine about their "need" under any personal adversity...

I think we walk a perilous line when we attempt to define how much more of our resources are due to the members of the Order in favorable comparison to others in perhaps greater need. Moreover, except from the minds of some members and in by-laws of individual lodges, I can find no written references suggesting that members enjoy any explicit preferred entitlement to material or service or financial benefits over non-members...

Just sayin'...

### Epilogue...

Seems to be the way of the world these days that we all come into the room, sit down, and place our ideas out on the table for others to consider. And within a very short time, some of us find our ideas criticized and belittled. Our ideas are either swept off the table by others or we pull them back ourselves and we fall into silence, reluctant to speak again for the experience...

The problem with this, of course, is that we can find ourselves ending the discussion with all ideas completely trashed. And then we have absolutely nothing with which to work and move forward...



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To move forward in this effort and to ensure that we have every good idea available to us, I would suggest that, when we wish to add to this discussion, we develop and present to the group our own set of specific recommendations in an open fashion. There is really nothing that puts the problem or question into a clear perspective than having to assume the real responsibility of having to suggest and respond to some genuine solutions with the notions of Friendship, Love, and Truth in one's intentions. Expressing simple disapproval of another's ideas does not come even remotely close to that. Poorly conceived notions should be allowed to experience a natural and logical death...

That is why I find myself completely at odds with those who divide the Order into "new members" and "old members". We are, in fact, one group of people and should be intent on developing a common purpose for the 21st Century...

Indeed, it is the rich diversity of ideas that will likely come together in ways that we cannot right now imagine that will save the Order. But it is not one person that will be able to do this. Nor will it be a small brain trust within the Order. That is simply not the Odd Fellow way...

None of the ideas I present here come from anywhere but my own heart and mind and experience. These notions may or may not be the right vision of the Order's past or of the Order's future. But that is not for me to decide. It is for each member of the Order to ponder and determine with their Sisters and their Brothers...

In Friendship, Love, and Truth...

Robin Oliver