

The Challenges Of Past Masters

By

Donald M. Robey, PGM

Presented to A. Douglas Smith, Jr. Lodge of Research, #1949

On

September 30, 2000

The opinions presented in this paper are strictly those of the author and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Master and Wardens of the A. Douglas Smith Jr., Lodge of Research #1949 or the official views of the Grand Lodge of Ancient Free and Accepted Masons of Virginia.

The Challenges Of Past Masters

by

Donald M. Robey, PGM

Anyone who has served in the East of any Masonic body, but more especially in the East of a symbolic lodge, has a special feeling of satisfaction and pride in his accomplishments in that office. It is only natural that he will also have a feeling of regret that he was not able to accomplish everything he had hoped during his term. He will also have second thoughts on how he handled some situations. Most of all, though, he has a deep and abiding concern for his lodge.

But, what about “life after service in the East?” What happens then? The answer will depend a great deal upon the individual and his attitude. There are some who relinquish the gavel with great reluctance . . . and there are some who never seem to give it up. And, yes, there are a few (fortunately a very few) who walk away from the job and never appear to look back and seldom come back. Fortunately, the vast majority of Past presiding officers take on a status of “senior advisors” who greatly assist their successors in the government of the Craft.

Many lodges take full advantage of the talents of these experienced leaders. They are used on “executive councils”, as Trustees, Committee Chairmen, coaches, and as pro-tem officers. So long as they are used to good advantage and are made to continue to feel needed and useful, they will continue to be great assets to the organization. It is when they are ignored and “cast off” that they look around for other outlets for their talents.

Some lodges which have a number of Past Masters available have formed them into a “Past Masters Association”, and when there are several lodges in close proximity they often form a regional association of Past Masters. One of the most successful of this type is the Past Masters Association of the District of Columbia. Thanks to the talents of a dedicated Secretary, it publishes a quarterly newsletter which is sent to all of its members “wheresoever dispersed”, keeping the membership informed of activities in the various lodges, news of the activities of the members, losses

through death, changes of address, marriages, etc. It is a most appreciated service which promotes pride, continued interest, and as a periphery benefit, it increases contributions to the Masonic and Eastern Star Home and other fund-raising activities of the D.C. lodges. Dues in the Association are kept at an absolute minimum, with a number of the D.C. lodges paying the dues in the Association for all of their Past Masters. This serves as an additional link in the chain of communication. The Past Masters Association meets several times each year, usually at the “festive board.”

That special kinship which Past Masters have with one another is evident in many ways. In many lodges it is customary for the Past Masters to sit together (frequently in the Southeast corner) where they have, at times, been likened to “buzzards sitting on a fence.” It seems they want to be near the Secretary so that they can see and hear everything that is going on, and, of course they’re willing, ready and able to assist, prompt or correct the Master, if need be. If you were to eavesdrop on them, you’d hear frequent comments such as, “During my year, we did such and so and so; or, “Remember when such and such happened?” And there is usually a good amount of reminiscing done. But, it is part of that special fellowship which Past Masters enjoy.

In a number of retirement communities across the country, you’ll find that the strong “tie that binds” has brought Past Masters together. They have been the founders of literally hundreds of Masonic clubs in those communities, and have been instrumental in increasing attendance at local lodges. And, bless ‘em, many of them have become active in those lodges, bringing with them a wealth of experience and knowledge. Some of them have gone through the officer’s line again. Essentially, they give proof to that old adage that Freemasonry is “a universal society of friends and brothers.”

We frequently hear Past Masters referred to as the “back-bone of the lodge.” That just might be a gross understatement of fact. Past masters may be

© 2004 - A. Douglas Smith, Jr., Lodge of Research #1949, AF&AM - All Rights Reserved

described as the backbone of the entire fraternity. After all, most Grand Lodge officers are, first, Past Masters. It is their knowledge, experience, enthusiasm and interest which makes any Grand Lodge “tick”. Almost without exception, Past Masters are men of vision, who are continuously working for the good of the Craft, steering the course for its future.

The final paragraph of the January 1931 Short Talk Bulletin, of the Masonic Service Association, “The Past Master,” reads: “The honorable station of Past Master can not be honored by the brethren if it is not honored by its possessor.” Fortunately, almost all who have earned the title of Past Master continue to serve their lodges with distinction. It is a title which has been earned by their total involvement in lodge activities and by their personal sacrifices. As with all honors and titles, Past Masters find that there are new rights and privileges which go with the title. There are also additional duties and responsibilities . . . and new challenges.

Among the initial shocks that a new Past Master faces is that the telephone stops its constant ringing, that he now has time for a personal life and an opportunity to read and study. Many find that in their first year as a Past Master they gain more Masonic knowledge than in all the preceding years. To aid them in this period, there are several of The Masonic Service Association Short Talk Bulletins which are recommended reading: “The Past Master” (Jan. ‘31); “Lodge Courtesies” (Aug. ‘24); “Master” (Feb. ‘41); “Past Master’s Jewel” (Apr. ‘45); “The Master’s Jewel Speaks” (Oct. ‘43). All are still available from the Masonic Service Association in Silver Spring, Maryland for a small fee.

With the title of Past Master, he is also accorded the accolade of “Worshipful”, indicating that he is an honored and respected brother. It is a reputation which he must continually strive to uphold.

Yes! Past Masters can be properly referred to as the “backbone of the Craft.”

It is a wise Master who recognizes the talents of the Past Masters and who uses them to good advantage. They can serve as a “sounding board” for the programs and activities a Master is considering. He can “pick their brains” for ideas and he can count on

the Past Masters to give him the wisdom of their experience. The Master serves as the rudder, steering the course, but it’s often the Past Masters who assist him to “keep it on an even keel.”

Have you ever wondered why, in a Past Master’s Jewel, the compasses are open at a 60 degree angle on a quadrant instead of on a square?

The compasses open at sixty degrees are in an easy position to construct a square. The Master has worn the square while he presided; now, as a Past Master, he is supposed to be in possession of the knowledge necessary to make a square, hence the position of the compasses and the quadrant.

There are many geometric methods of erecting a square; the Past Master’s jewel hints at one of the simplest and most used methods as best for the Past Master to employ in instructing his successor.

So now you all know “The Rest of the Story.”

I hope this enlightens you somewhat on the value of our Past Masters and why we always take the time to recognize them briefly during our meetings and especially when we honor them on an annual “Past Master’s Night” in our Lodges.