

The Table Lodge--History

From time immemorial, Freemasons have enjoyed meeting about a "Festive Board" loaded with the fruits of their labor. Special emphasis was placed on the Summer and Winter Solstice, late in June and and December, which were, and are, St. John the Baptist (June 24th) and St. John the Evangelist (December 27th). The twentieth century has found Masonry ignoring, and often ignorant of, both the "Festive Board" and the Festivals. Is this as it should be? The answer may be partially revealed in the following recount of the history of the Table Lodge.

Man has been continually seeking some noble purpose to pursue even centuries ago, when life was perhaps more perilous and severe, feasting became a major diversion, as much for social desires as to satisfy the needs of the inner-man.

The feasts which are probably the oldest of all Fraternal repasts were those of the "Mysteries" of ancient Egypt, the so-called "Sons of Light." The oldest of Masonic origin, of which we have any reliable record, were the feasts upon being "Entered" and "Passed" to a Fellow of the Craft. These go back far beyond the records of organized Masonry.

The Masonic desirability of a social dinner is as old as the Freemasonry we know. In 1717, when the mother Grand Lodge was formed to revitalize the Lodges in and around London, one of the reasons given was to revive the Quarterly Communication and to hold the Annual Feast. Many historians claim this annual banquet was the most important move made by the new body. A short time later, the Grand Master directed there be installed the old, regular and peculiar toasts and health's of Freemasons.

Lawrence Dermott, the author of the first "Ahiman Rezon" (*Constitutions of Masonry*), remarked about the Table Lodge: *"It was expedient to abolish the old custom of studying Geometry in the Lodge, and some younger Brethren made it appear that a good knife and fork, in the hands of a dexterous Brother, over proper Materials (food), would give great satisfaction and add more to the conviviality of the Lodge than the best Scale and Compasses in Europe."*

From the idea of the feast, and the desire to promote a greater degree of fellowship and kinship in Masonry, was born the Table Lodge. Both the affection of friends and the love for the Fraternity flourished within its walls. Its Communications were more like a reunion than a Regular Lodge meeting, and it became a center of relaxation, celebration and inspiration of Freemasonry.

The Table Lodge had a most unusual pattern. Its meeting was conducted around the table, and the helpings of food and beverage were served in such a way they did not interfere with the other concerns of the Lodge. There were many toasts and the lusty voices of the Masons rang out with Masonic songs. The Table Lodge was traditionally a tiled Entered Apprentice Lodge, followed by the peculiar ritual used only in a Table Lodge, so all Entered Apprentices and Fellow Crafts could participate in the fellowship of

the Lodge. As all business is usually conducted in the Master Mason Degree, then called to refreshment, at which time all Entered Apprentices and Fellow Crafts could be admitted and the Table Lodge opened, using the suggested ceremony provided by the Committee on Work.

In our colonial days, the Table Lodge was Freemasonry's greatest asset. It buoyed up the spirit of the colonists who were members of the Craft when they were at their lowest ebb. While the repast was undoubtedly limited and meager, the fervor and zeal were there. Once the Table Lodge was opened, the objects in the room took on a military flavor. Everything that was used changed its name:

Table... Trestleboard; Table-cloth... Standard; Napkins... Flags; Plates... Tiles; Dishes... Platforms; Spoons... Trowels; Knives... Swords; Forks... Mattocks; Bottles... Barrels; Glasses... Cannons; To "Charge"... Fill-up; Lights... Stars; Chairs... Stalls; Food... Materials; Bread... Rough Ashlar; Red Drink... Strong Powder; Water... Weak Powder; Salt... Sand; Peper... Dust; Mustard... Paint; To Eat... Masticate; To Drink... "Fire" or Discharge Cannon

That the Table Lodge was an enjoyable experience, no one who has read the skimpy records can doubt. Dr. George Oliver, an early Masonic historian, wrote of the Table Lodge in his memoirs: *"Their song appears to have more zest than in privated company, the toast thrilled more vividly upon recollection, and the small medium of punch with which it was honored, retained a higher flavor than the potation if produced at a private board."*

Although alcoholic beverages did contribute to the festivities of the Table Lodge in days long gone, they were not a necessary adjunct. Wine was the libation, but that was changed when the 18th Amendment was adopted, so Masons would not violate the law. Although prohibition was subsequently repealed, Freemasonry did not follow suit. It retained a substitution, mainly out of respect for Brethren who practiced abstinence. Today, fruit juices and punches are used for the toasts. Actually, it is not what the glass contains, but the concept it offers.

The Table Lodge is a heritage of our past, which deserves consideration of revival. It has been stated that "The Table Lodge is the summary of Masonic Doctrine." It prescribed reverence for Divinity and the Moral Law. It strengthened the devotion that Masons held for the Lodge and Country. It increased the unity and fellowship of the Craft.