

Whatever Happened to the Written Word?

By Thomas C. Warden

Member, Masonic Education Committee Grand Lodge, A.F. & A.M. of Missouri.

Brother Warden delivered this timely speech at the Midwest Conference on Masonic Education at Dearborn, Michigan in May, 1978. It appeared as a feature article in the Summer, 1978, Edition of The Freemason, official publication of the Grand Lodge, A.F.&A.M. of Missouri. We thank Brother Warden for Permitting its use as a Short Talk Bulletin.

Scattered throughout the western plains of the United States, from Wyoming's Bighorn Mountains northward and into Saskatchewan, Canada, are huge, elaborate patterns traced out in stone. Some were built 5,000 years ago – when the Egyptian pyramids were under construction – and others were laid out as recently as 1,700 years ago.

Their origin and use was long a mystery. Of such is the substance of legends... some of which even attributed these stone patterns to pre-Columbian members of the Masonic Lodge.

Evidence now suggests that these "medicine wheels" (The National Geographic, "Mystery of the Medicine Wheels," January, 1977.) – as they came to be known – were a primitive but accurate means for marking the summer solstice: the longest day.

Yet, in the recorded history of the American Indian, in this century and the last, there is no mention of astronomical uses ever having been made of the skies.

From the time of Coronado to that of Lewis and Clark, Indian history is devoid of an explanation for these stone formations. But they assuredly exist, they predate recorded history, and we know how they were used.

These rock formations are all relics of an Indian culture and heritage long eclipsed and forgotten because, quite simply, there is no written language!

This, perhaps, is a forceful reminder that learning, without the benefit of written words, is indeed a precarious, fragile and fleeting thing... that in a few hundred years, knowledge without the written word can be forever lost.

There is a more contemporary parallel to this phenomenon, and it is found in the early days of Freemasonry.

Worshipful Brother Harry Carr, of the Grand Lodge of England, in his eloquent essay, "Six Hundred Years of Craft Ritual," outlines the futility of tracing the early history of Freemasonry without adequate written records.

Brother Carr readily admits to the single flaw in his lecture: namely, that he lacks the corroborating exhibit to seal his conclusions – the verifiable, indelible written word.

He is 99 per cent certain as to Masonic origin, but – like a lawyer going into court – he is armed with circumstantial evidence. He does not have that scrap of paper which would seal his case.

Thus, early Masonic learning, not preserved by the written word, has – like the Master's word – been forever lost.

And this brings us to the task at hand for those who profess interest in Masonic Education.

Our nation at this very moment is precariously close to becoming a nation of functional illiterates... people who have completed the educational requirements of our society but who cannot read or write well enough to function efficiently.

This not only strikes at the very heart of our Democracy, but it poses a mind-boggling problem for those involved in education... be it public education or – for our purposes – Masonic Education.

How do we impart our traditions and history – and yes, our ritual – to men who can see but cannot understand, who perhaps can write but cannot comprehend?

Have no doubt about it, the destruction of our language can already be heard in lodges across the land. The sharp corners of ritual are being rounded off. How often, for instance, do you hear the word "Brethren" spoken "Brothern?"

This is just one small point, to be sure, but perhaps the long-range effect of all this is to be found in what we speak of in whispered words – a decline in fraternal membership!

Are potential members "afraid" to climb the steps of Freemasonry because of the barriers imposed by language... barriers, I might add, that are raised by illiteracy?

George Gallup, founder of the Gallup Poll, and a former teacher, is one of those expressing concern about the decline in reading and writing skills in the United States. He called the literary level a "national disgrace" and predicted that the decline in verbal facility could bring about a decline in the intellectual level of the nation.

Grim predictions like Gallup's are based on concrete evidence. College entrance scores have declined appreciably in the past half-dozen years. Instructors increasingly deplore the lower level of reading and writing skills in each new crop of college freshmen.

In an attempt to raise students to a literate level, English and journalism departments are adding remedial courses in the basics: grammar, punctuation, spelling, sentence structure, reading.

Gallup expresses doubt that "a generation raised in front of television sets will be capable of performing the intellectual feats of earlier and more literate generations."

It is disquieting, Brethren, to comprehend that in the United States the median age is 28. Half of our people were born before 1950; the other half were born after. In other words, half are substantially pre-television, half are post-television.

Those of us in the pre-1950 generation are, in varying degrees, readers. The post-1950 vintage American is a viewer, a listener, and predominately a non-reader.

This carries profound implications for those of us who labor in the vineyard of printed words, who attempt to convince viewers and listeners that the printed word yet has merit.

Perhaps I should depart from our theme long enough to tell you that I am a printer by trade, a newspaper journalist by profession, and a Freemason by choice. You will detect a definite bias for the printed word, and a deep concern for the future of Freemasonry, in what I have to say.

First let us look at some of the statistics, and then consider their implications for the Masonic Fraternity.

Recent studies show that only 47 per cent of America's 17-year-age can read a traffic ticket. In a few years, some of these youngsters will be petitioning Masonic lodges for membership.

And a 1975 United States Department of Education study revealed that more than 23 million adults are "functionally illiterate." Some, no doubt, are already members of the Fraternity.

Back to public education, which Freemasonry wholeheartedly supports. We spend over \$1,500 a year per student... yet the system does not teach him to read, write, or do arithmetic.

Our high school graduates, in addition to 12 years in class, have logged 15,000 hours watching television... more time than they have put into anything other than sleeping. They have seen 250,000 commercials and 18,000 killings, most in living color.

In Missouri last year, more than 80 per cent of the first students to take all of the state's new basic skills test failed to pass at least one of the three test segments. State officials have not determined the passing score for the test, but 70 per cent has been frequently mentioned as a guideline.

Based on that, 83 per cent of the 175 eighth-graders taking the test at one school failed to pass at least one of the three test segments.

Dr. Ernest L. Boyer, U.S. Commissioner of Education and a former university professor and administrator, said it best: "The safest thing one can say about a college diploma today is not

that it signifies educational achievement, but rather that its holder probably has been around the campus for about four years. Beyond that, everything is uncertain."

This is in full agreement with a 14-year national decline in scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). Average scores in the verbal sections have gone down 49 points. Dr. William Kottmeyer, a prominent St. Louis educator and author-in-residence at McGraw-Hill, Inc., sounded an even more serious note by calling the falling SAT scores "an ominous indicator. "

The only way a democracy can exist, he warned, "is if you have free access to information... (for) the ability to take information from the printed page is the tool of freedom."

This is what we face, Brethren: an increase in illiteracy, a decrease in respect for and use of the printed word. If you can believe what some of these respected individuals say, even our democracy stands in jeopardy.

What has happened to the word? Need we, as Masonic educators, be concerned if reading and writing skills decline?

I should hope that a few persuasive voices will say "yes"!

Right Worshipful Brother Stanton T. Brown, Grand Lecturer of the Grand Lodge, A.F. & A.M. of Missouri, had this to say about ritual and how it must resist attempts to chip away at its perfectional usage:

"Many ritual-thinkers within Freemasonry have sought to modernize its formal structure and language to conform to today's society. Their work poses one question: Should Freemasonry be made over in the image of today's society or would today's society be the better if it were to recast itself in the mold used successfully by Freemasonry for more than 250 unbroken years?"

What my Brother from Missouri is saying to ritualists holds true for educators also. For he has, in my view, answered his own question: Society would be substantially more secure if it could recast itself in the mold used successfully by Freemasons for two and one half centuries.

Ritual has been the fabric of Freemasonry throughout these two and a half centuries; the written word is the sinew – the thread – that has held it together.

If Freemasonry comes apart at the seams, it will be because the written word has disintegrated. And the written word, Brethren, is disintegrating.

The trend can be turned around; it will not be easy.

Change must be effected in the public school system that we as Freemasons hold so dear. It thus behooves all of Freemasonry not to yield another iota in the disintegration and destruction of the English language, and this can be done by individual and collective efforts to upgrade educational standards as educator standards.

We hold this power of change in the ballots we cast at school elections and in the persuasive voices heard at parent-teacher organization meetings. As citizens, we must elect people who subscribe to the theory that reading and writing shall once again be among the supportive pillars of an education, and we must endorse curriculums and programs designed to accomplish that goal.

Change must also be effected within the boundaries of our Fraternity. And that is where we, as Masonic educators, face a monumental challenge.

Problems plaguing the ritualists are vexing for educators as well. Brother Brown tells me that the ritual in Missouri contains some 22,000 words. And this poses another question: Should the ritualists re-write our ceremonies to please a less literate generation so they can comprehend what those 22,000 words mean? Hopefully, not!

Or should we, as Masonic educators, redouble our efforts with initiates so they will be better prepared to travel the road that awaits them in the temple? Hopefully, yes.

It is in this particular regard that due caution is needed. The audio-visual trend in schools has snowballed to the point that many students have permanently dilated pupils as a result of spending too much time watching slides and films.

Masonic ritual relies upon mouth to ear, as does Masonic education to some extent. But the preponderance of our responsibility – our Masonic tradition, heritage, history – is essentially and necessarily dependent upon the written word. For the most vivid memory pales by comparison to the faintest ink on a printed page.

Our excursion down the celluloid trail of educational aids needs to be tempered with the realization that slides and films cannot ideally replace the knowledge that can be imparted mouth to ear, and via the indelible, lasting printed word.

If this trend toward quick and easy leaning is disquieting, so is a notable departure from the power of brevity that we find all too frequently among those of us entrusted with Masonic education.

Perhaps in our eagerness, we are also boring and verbose. I have been to meetings of Masonic educators that, frankly, left me weary and wondering... weary of meaningless, meandering dialogue, and wondering how we have managed to attract members to our Fraternity, if indeed we can lay claim to that accomplishment.

Brother Samuel Clemens, the world knows him as Mark Twain, said it best: "Few sinners are saved after the first 20 minutes of a sermon."

If we must contend with less literate initiates as a result of an educational system gone astray, must we also frighten them by talking too much and too long about things irrelevant and of

peripheral significance to the goal of preparing them for the ritual, and afterward, of continuing their enlightenment?

Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, The Lord's Prayer, and the Twenty-Third Psalm are three of the great literary treasures venerated by mankind. And not one of them is as long as 300 words.

Never have the powers of brevity been so demonstratively illustrated as in these classics of word construction. So much is said with so few words.

If we can find moral messages in the working tools of an Entered Apprentice; in the pillars, the globes, the winding stairway of a Fellowcraft; in the hour glass, the scythe, and the allseeing eye of the Master Mason, I would hope that we might also perceive warnings from the destruction of the written and printed word, from the synthetic lure of quick and easy knowledge proffered by photographic imagery, from the deception that brevity has no power, no place in the educational process.

Masonic education faces many challenges, but the rising level of illiteracy, undeniably, is the most complex, the most serious of them all. Reading, writing and literary understanding are at the very heart of our fraternal existence.

And it is beyond comprehension that one day hence, a distant generation will wonder about the strange patterns – the square and compass – that they find on the cornerstones of an ancient civilization's ruins.

Will Freemasonry, like the medicine wheel of the early Plains Indians, become a relic of a culture long eclipsed and forgotten, simply because no written record exists? The printed word will cease to exist in just a few generations of illiterates.

"Preposterous!" you say. Is it? The same thing almost happened to Freemasonry 600 years ago, though the ritual survived when written records did not. But our early history was irrevocably lost.

I am reminded of the words written by the Greek tragic poet Aeschylus who – 2,000 years ago – intoned, "So in a Libyan fable it is told, that once an eagle, stricken with a dart, said, when he saw the fashion of the shaft, 'With our own feathers, not others' hands, are we now smitten' . "

Brethren, I suggest that it is not cowans and eavesdroppers that threaten from without; we threaten ourselves when we condone the destruction of the written word. By our own inaction, not by others' failings, are we being smitten.

Dash 30 dash, -30-, is a newsman's indenture for the end of a news story. I have spoken for almost 30 minutes and thus it is fitting that I stop. While my words may end here, I hope my thoughts will tease you into reappraisal and renewal of Masonic education's ways and means and goals, for the betterment of the Fraternity both you and I hold so dear.

STB August 1978