

Research and the Grand Bodies

Stewart W. Miner

Virginia Research Lodge No. 1777

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I. Statement of the Problem

It is my intent today to cause you to consider the status of research in our Grand Bodies -- primarily in the Grand Lodge and Grand Chapter -- and to reflect on how research lodges and independent researchers can contribute to the satisfaction of needs at the Grand levels of Freemasonry. My hope is that in addressing some of the factors that inherently impact on the capacity of these bodies to cope with the issues that they must inevitably face, that you will be motivated to pass judgement on my views, to share your opinions as they pertain to our subject, and to let your imagination take flight in the pursuit of better insights of our fundamental purposes. The absence of commentary on research in the Grand Commandery does not imply disinterest on my part; rather it is in recognition that I am unfamiliar with any of its ongoing programs of Masonic research.

II. Factors Bearing on the Problem

Let us begin our assessment by acknowledging that pure research in the Grand Lodge and the Grand Chapter, hereafter referred to as our Grand Bodies, is characterized for the most part by its absence. No one in either body is clearly assigned specific research responsibilities, and as a result, research worthy of the name is lacking. In this connection it is interesting to note that while we have in selected years in the recent past been able to afford multiple Grand Chaplains, Stewards, Marshals, and on one occasion, a Grand Director of Ceremonies, the leadership of the Grand Lodge -- in its wisdom -- has seen fit to do without the continued services of a Grand Historian. The Grand Chapter has demonstrated equivalent foresight when it determined no need for any such officer.

In the Grand Bodies such investigative writing as is accomplished is usually consequent to the completion of work assigned to committees, standing and ad-hoc. So far as I can determine, we have only one Committee that even includes the word "research" in its title or charge to duty and that committee, the Grand Committee on Advance Planning, Research, and Construction, has not been particularly active over the years of its existence, during which it has focused its attention primarily on providing advice to lodges on temple construction and on promoting certain building programs for the Grand Lodge.

This is not to say that there is not any writing being done in our Grand Bodies. Rather it is to suggest that most of the writing that is done takes the form of committee reports, which may or may not be usefully informative. This causes us to be alert to the fact that reports in our Grand Bodies are prepared to serve specific administrative or operative purposes. For the most part these reports are accountable in nature, so worded as to highlight committee activities during the period between annual communications and convocations. They tend to be so phrased and structured that committee perpetuation is assured, and often they become the vehicles whereby new or expanded programs are propagated to the membership at large. Reports, in other words, while interesting and occasionally informative, rarely qualify as research.

I believe it fair to state that these observations on the character of reports apply to the entire complex of committees in our Grand Bodies, where "keeping book" has come to be regarded almost as a cardinal virtue. In consequence there is little impetus at the Grand level, particularly in a period of increasing costs and diminishing assets, to critically assess what has been and is being done in order to rationally prepare for that which will be. Thus we seem to be locked into a self-imposed status quo, doomed by our fixations from discovering alternatives that might lead to improved scenarios for the future.

There is one area of activity in our Grand Bodies that ought to promote real research. I speak of the committees that have been appointed to work in the field of Masonic (non-ritualistic) education. These committees trace their origin to a time when the brethren and companions first became aware of their obligation to do something to turn the tides that were beginning to run adversely for our fraternity. Thus, in the Grand Chapter, we have a Committee on Education and Service which by law is "to prepare and disseminate Masonic Education Material and information, including an updated High Priest's Help Manual each year to administer the Grand Chapter's 'Program for Progress', and to prepare records and reports as required by the Grand High Priest for long-range and continuing growth of Capitular Masonry in Virginia." The license is there -- 'tis a pity that it is not being used.

In the Grand Lodge the situation is quite similar. There the Committee on Masonic Education and Publications, interestingly, is not specifically charged to produce anything. Rather it is directed to conduct such conferences, seminars, and other forms of Masonic education as it may deem appropriate or as the Grand Master may order; to review and approve (note, not to write) all publications of the Grand Lodge concerning Masonic education, and to be responsible for the publication of the Virginia Masonic Herald. And the Committee on History, which reviews historical sketches produced by subordinate lodges, does not generate any research -- within or outside the committee. In consequence of these policies we are not now adding to a store of exemplary publications that were originally prepared 20 or more years ago; furthermore, we are not even doing well in keeping that rich store of educational materials reasonably up to date.

Nevertheless, some research is being done in the Grand Lodge, primarily as a result of Grand Master mandate. The report of the Grand Secretary on Masonic Trials, given to the Grand Lodge last February, is a case in point. His effort resulted from a recommendation by the outgoing Grand Master of the previous year, who was interested in ascertaining

how Masonic offenses and/or trials were handled in other Grand Jurisdictions. In response the Grand Secretary prepared a questionnaire which was submitted to his counterparts in sister Grand Jurisdictions. Compilations of the returns of these questionnaires formed the report that he in turn submitted to Grand Lodge.

The February 1982 report of the Chairman of the Committee on Finance and the companion piece to that report, a detailed discussion of the growth of Grand Lodge expenditures in recent years, affords another example of research ordered by the Grand East. In this instance the order was precipitated by the realization that cash flow in Grand Lodge was not in balance. The object of the research and its presentation was to convince the delegates to Grand Lodge that continuation of Grand Lodge Programs, without interruption, would necessitate a sizable increase in the per-capita tax. This research, which was done in depth, responded well to the directive whereby it was authorized. It did not, however, make any attempt to evaluate the relative worth and/or necessity for specific line items, but it was promotional research--at or near its best.

In an attempt that I hoped might lead to a more regulated approach to research in the Grand Lodge, I appointed a Committee on Special Studies in 1974. It lived through my year and that of my successor, following which it was dropped. I appointed the Committee and tasked a number of knowledgeable Masons to research several topics that had not previously been studied in depth. I also directed the updating of our knowledge of a number of continuing issues. During 1974 some 15 studies were completed by the committee, and their reports were made available to my successor. Included were the following studies:

- Grand Lodge Certificates
- State-wide Concurrent Jurisdiction
- Districting the Grand Jurisdiction
- The District Deputy System

- The Concept of Moral Turpitude
- Population Trends in Virginia
- Masonic Home (Need for Duplex Apartments)
- Grand Lodge Questionnaire (submitted to other Grand Lodges)
 - a. 18-year-old Mason
 - b. District Deputy System
 - c. Certificates for Qualification
 - d. Automated Records System
 - e. Dues and Fees
 - f. Honors and Titles
- Origin of the Ritual
- Scholarships
- The Small Lodge
- Honors and Titles in Grand Lodge
- Automation of Grand Lodge Records
- Grand Lodge Resolutions
- Lodge Membership Trends

During the year 1975 the committee continued to function, but at a somewhat less ambitious level. According to the Proceedings for that year, it worked on research that led to:

- The fleshing out of duties of our Grand Lodge Committees
- The assessment of the adequacy of lodge reporting to the Grand Secretary (sent to all Grand Lodges)
- The revision of the Secretary's Manual
- The revision and expansion of the Leadership Development Guide for Worshipful Masters
- The preparation of a retirement proposal to benefit the employees of Grand Lodge
- Grand Lodge Resolutions

As noted previously, the Committee on Special Studies was terminated in February 1976, and the authorization of research projects since that time has been in accordance with the presiding Grand Master's conception of need and propriety.

If my assessment of the research efforts of the Grand Bodies is reasonably accurate, and I sincerely believe that it is, we can conclude that such research is usually limited in scope and motivated by some form of crisis. As a result many issues of interest, perhaps vital interest in the long run, are left in abeyance. There is no long-range research plan in our Grand Bodies, nor is there, so far as I can determine, any desire to establish one. In order for an issue to be addressed, under such circumstances, the wheel must squeak loudly enough to attract the attention of both the leadership and those that they purport to lead. Even then it may take months or years to place an item on the agenda.

III. The Role of the Research Lodge

In view of prevailing conditions it would thus seem that there is ample opportunity for research lodges to provide a valuable and essential service to our Grand Bodies. It is obvious, however, that this potential has not yet been tested, and unfortunately, it may never be. Grand Bodies and Grand Officers are zealous protectors of their "interests," and I suspect that there are few within these circles of privilege who would be willing to share their concerns by assigning fact-finding responsibilities to others -- except, perhaps, on a piecemeal basis. And even then, I fear, the sharing would probably be highly selective and subjective in nature, primarily because of the continued primacy of the promotional factor in the generation of Grand Body research. Hence, I cannot realistically anticipate either a time or a circumstance that would lead to greater reliance of Grand Bodies on research lodges for service and research support.

This is not to say that the product of the research lodge is unwelcome in the Grand Bodies. No responsible leader is going to turn down or ignore research that has the potential to give him better insight into the issues he faces or the promise to enhance his capacity to properly administer that which is placed in his charge. But it is to state, emphatically, that it is unlikely that the Grand Bodies will ever, on their own, request research lodges to act on their behalf. Stated more directly, they will receive our work, but without obligation on their part. Hence it is up to us, the independent researchers, working separately or in concert, to provide the Grand Bodies, as we see fit, with the fruits of our labors.

The amount of fruit that we will be able to provide is limited only by the constrictions of our own imaginations and ambition. It is therefore essential that we consider the parameters of opportunity that we face; that we block out an immediate and long-range research plan; and that we program our activities in such fashion that the goals of our plan may be systematically and methodically achieved. Frankly, we have no business criticizing the inadequacies of others, if we ourselves are unwilling or unable to breach the gaps that are so easily identified. In making this observation I am "laying down the glove," so to speak, in the hope that by doing so, I might motivate into action the untested store of latent talent reposing in the membership of our research lodges. We must keep in mind the fact that resources, if unused, waste away, and that is an eventuality that the fraternity can ill afford.

It is also an eventuality that we can easily avoid by merely adhering to the purposes for which our charter was issued. That instrument is all the authority that we need to delve into issues of consequence to our Grand Bodies. By it we are entitled to access to sources of information whereby we may exercise our research talents to properly preserve the past or our fraternity, to assess and evaluate those elements that impact on our capabilities to cope with the present, and to prepare ourselves, through the exploration

and development of applications of Masonic principles that hold promise, for a more prosperous future.

Preservation of the Past

With respect to the preservation of the past, it is my judgement that we ought to promote the drafting and issuance of what I call -- for lack of a better term -- period histories. By that I mean a series of short histories for limited periods of time. You may ask, "How short is short?" and I must confess that I don't really know. But I would suggest that historical summaries, done on a decade-by-decade basis would be useful to the preservation of our heritage. They might also lead, if they prove to be quality documents, to the eventual production of full blown Grand Body histories. This approach, incidentally, is being used in our Grand Chapter.

In preserving our past we might also serve our Grand Bodies by focusing on the production of biographic sketches of those who have occupied leadership positions in the past. It is my impression that there is a dearth of published information of this nature, particularly for the years prior to the advent of this century. Some Grand Bodies in other jurisdictions, also concerned that future generations may know the past more fully, are taking steps to preserve the present in greater detail, using to advantage the latest developments in the telecommunications field. Specifically, they are conducting interviews with presiding officers and preserving the take therefrom in the form of video tapes or "talking books" on tape. It is an idea that is worth investigation.

Coping With the Present

The potential of research lodges to constructively assess the attempts of Grand Bodies to cope with the present is virtually limitless, and because we are enamored with the present, we probably look upon this segment of the research horizon with more than usual interest. At the outset we must recognize that time does not permit an exhaustive examination of the research possibilities in this area. At best we can allude only to those

issues that are pervasively dominate, and in so doing understand that we are looking only at the tip of the iceberg. Issues of that nature, I think, are those pertaining to the Grand Sessions, the Grand Visitations, and the Grand Programs as a whole. Each of them now cry for critical assessment from the "net benefit" point of view. In short, are our practices cost efficient? Do these practices permit the achievement of the goals for which they were designed? Are those goals realistic, when viewed from the perspective of the present day strengths and weaknesses of the Craft?

In the hope that I will not inject personal bias into the context of these remarks, I would begin by stating that there is much concern in the rank and file of the fraternity about the annual meetings of our Grand Bodies. This concern extends from apprehension over the time and place of the meeting to the costs that are involved in its implementation. The membership as a whole thinks that we spend entirely too much money on our annual meetings, and they are beginning to look askance at such things as the way that we conduct our business, the rules concerning suffrage, and increasingly, at the influence of past presiding officers over the operations and the-outcome of these sessions. Researchers should be alert to these concerns and be willing to explore and develop alternatives of promise.

For anyone who travels extensively in fraternal circles, it should also be obvious that there is growing dissatisfaction in the Craft over many aspects of the Grand Visitation. Many are of the opinion that we have made the Grand Visitation a commonplace event, and in the process -- which has been costly to implement -- we have cheapened the visit and lessened its impact proportionately. Furthermore there are many questions now being asked about the forms and practices associated with the Grand Visit and the Grand Visitor, who in chasing to and fro has insufficient time to properly administer the body for which he is responsible. We need to research the evolution of the Grand Visit and to reach a consensus as to what the majority wants it to be.

In coping with the present, our current financial position suggests that it would be prudent to assess the programs of the Grand Bodies from the "net benefits" point of view, as indicated previously. It seems to me that in the last quarter century, which has been characterized by declining membership and shrinkage of the taxable base, we have nevertheless continued to escalate expenditures by (a) uncritically funding previously established programs without really examining their performance and (b) by adding new and dollar-demanding programs to the overall Grand Body retinue. Now the time has come when the piper must be paid, and to make that payment, some programs are bound to suffer. Which ones should go first? Should we eliminate by dictum, or shall we rationally assess the relative value of each and then make a decision as to how our tax dollars shall be spent? In short, there is a crying need for periodic evaluation of what we are doing and how we are doing it.

Preparing for the Future

Perhaps nothing is more uncertain than the future, but when speaking of the future one thing is sure: it must be prepared for. Unfortunately preparation and anticipation of the future has not been one of the great strengths of the Craft. But at this point in time some of us must assume the role of the seer, and by reasoned application of databases, current and historical, project the scenarios that we are most likely to confront during the waning years of this century. In this regard nothing is of greater consequence than getting a proper fix on structural and geographical trends affecting our membership and on the development of satisfactory remedial actions--which in the long run may well involve the institution of perpetual membership plans and controlled membership selection processes. Both have already been implemented elsewhere.

But Masonic futurism cannot and should not be restricted to concern about members alone. In the next decade and a half it will also be important for us to study in depth the role that is to be played by the Grand Lodge in the family of Freemasonry (its position is

already being challenged in a way that is discreet and indirect). During that time frame it would also serve the cause of Freemasonry if we were to look for and develop alternative methods to improve the legislative, administrative, and pedagogical efforts of our Grand Bodies. Finally, as we move into the future, we should be well advised to pay some attention to the refinement of the role that we want Freemasonry to play in the society in which we live. Is that role to be revolutionary, evolutionary, or reactionary? The choice is ours to make, and I pray that we will act with wisdom and dispatch.

IV. Conclusions

In conclusion let me summarize by stating that it appears that our Grand Bodies have no established research capabilities of their own. Furthermore, such research as they may produce is usually the result of ad hoc requests levied on an appropriate committee of the Grand Body involved. This research often is of a promotional nature, it being essential to the development of an approved policy or program. While Grand Bodies are not adverse to the research efforts of research lodges, we said, they are unlikely to task the latter with specific research tasks. Nevertheless they stand ready to receive the product of research lodges, insofar as that product is applicable to their needs. This would appear to leave the door of opportunity wide open to the alert research lodge, which can greatly benefit the cause of the fraternity by focusing its investigative forces on preserving the past, coping with present, and preparing for the future. The trestleboard is full to overflowing and the workers are few. What are we prepared to do about it?

Note: By vote of the Lodge, this paper was turned over to the Grand Secretary for possible inclusion in the Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Virginia. A digest of what is contained herein, suitable for national consumption, will appear in The Philalethes magazine at a later date.