

The Sherlock Holmes of Societies

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When American Name Society publications arrive in a pile of mail at my office in Mexico, they always get opened first because of the enjoyment that they bring. I think of the society as the Sherlock Holmes of learned associations, looking at sometimes obscure and often delightful topics with the sort of resoluteness that Holmes showed.

I have a continuing debt to the society because membership has kept me sensitive to one aspect of my work over the years on fraternal societies. These orders include the secret ritualistic lodges such as the Pythians, Odd Fellows, Woodsmen, Red Men, and, pre-eminently, the Freemasons,¹ organizations whose temples at one time were found on every Main Street.

The language developed by these lodges in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is understudied. As they elaborated on their original rituals they created more and more special names for officers and initiates.² "The nature of masonic sociability has not been understood because historians have seldom looked at actual masonic practices," writes Professor Margaret Jacob (1991, 15). This remains true although the study of fraternal orders has been extended by some recent studies such as those of Kertzer (1988) and Clawson (1989).

Steven Bullock in *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730-1840*, claims that

Just as it illuminates the zones of participation and freedom that constitute liberty, Masonry also reveals crucial changes in the ideal of equality. Masonry's first century [in the United States] spans the period when equality became a central and explicit national value. The fraternity served as a focal point for this transformation from a hierarchical society of superiors and inferiors to a republican society of independent citizens. (1996, 4)

When I have presented at ANS meetings I have always been struck by the number of people who had a grandfather or aunt who was a

member of the Masons or Eastern Star, and by the comparative absence of such membership among people today. Increasing (and then decreasing) involvement in fraternal orders is demonstrated by a study by Richard Gustafson, one of Freemasons in Wisconsin and the percentage in the population of male (white) men who belonged:

1850	.28%	1930	2.13%
1860	.48%	1940	1.63%
1870	.87%	1950	1.82%
1880	.85%	1954	1.78%
1890	.82%	1960	1.60%
1900	.88%	1970	1.16%
1910	1.13%	1980	.85%
1920	1.61%	1990	.57%

The anniversary of ANS should make all of us mindful of the fact that its existence has depended on the hard work of a few while the rest of us, including myself, have been content with being passengers. The only claim I can make is that I have called attention to the need to consider fraternal groups when it comes to names scholarship. I just haven't had the time to do the sort of research that is needed. Among the topics which remain to be researched is how often names prominent in lodge ritual were used by parents in the naming of children.³ A wonderful project would be a dictionary of names employed in the rituals of American fraternal orders. However, since more than 1000 Masonic degrees alone have been staged at one time or another, it would be a monumental task.

Fraternal society use of names is not wholly a historical exercise since, even today, the resources of American fraternal orders are hardly minor. While during the last two decades there has been a decline in the percent of American males belonging to fraternal groups, the Masons by the 1990s could still claim approximately 2 million members, and the Odd Fellows claimed 360,000. Others, however, have virtually disappeared. The Knights of Pythian have been reduced since their Victorian

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heyday to only 78,000 members, and the Red Men have only 28,000. On the other hand, the Elks claim 1.5 million, although they have virtually converted their lodges into family entertainment centers; Moose report 1.8 million members and the Eagles have in their nests some 1.1 million (World Almanac 1994, 575 ff). Though they may not be as important as they were a generation ago, the lodges have been a neglected factor in the creation and perpetuation of names, and in that respect and in the broader context of family life are noteworthy when social history is being discussed:

The importance of clubs, lodges, and taverns as alternatives to marriage lay not only in time spent beyond the company of one's wife, but also in the structure and content of the new institutions. Recent historians have pointed out that fraternal orders posed 'an alternative to domesticity.' One scholar, Mary Ann Clawson, has studied the form and the ideology of these lodges and observed that fraternalism was based on 'the same overarching metaphor of the family' as the domestic model, but that it created 'fictive fraternal bonds' in place of the blood ties and marriage bonds of the home. Historian Mark Carnes analyzed the content of fraternal ritual and found that, at one level, it had the function of 'effacing' a man's real kin (especially mothers and wives), replacing them with an all male family that provided love, intimacy, nurture, and support. Wives recognized their competitors, and they organized a national campaign against the fraternal movement. Rotundo 1993, 143

I enjoy being a member of ANS. Some of us will never break par at the name game but still enjoy it. I tip my Shriner's fez to those colleagues who have really been champions, and am grateful for the chance to thank those who have taken the initiative and made the society what it is, truly a *learned* society.

Notes

1. Curiously, Freemasonry is not only representative of American fraternalism but of the occult, and also of the scientific and philosophical revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when "The Cartesian concept of matter relegated spirits, whether good or bad, to the purely mental world; conjuration ceased to be a meaningful ambition" (Thomas 1988, 770).
2. See, e.g., Duncan (1974, 51-53).
3. Female names might be forthcoming not only from the women's lodge but from the men's lodges too, since, "members invariably referred to their orders with feminine pronouns and metaphors. This in itself is unexceptional; what is more

significant was the extent to which fraternal members elaborated upon the simile of lodge as mother. One orator, employing language that would have been unthinkable to post-Freudian generations, described Masonry as 'a divinity whose alluring graces beckon men to the grotto, where she shrouds herself in symbols to be seen by eyes, and understood by hearts'" (Carnes 1989, 119).

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