

Masonic Feasts

Jerusalem Lodge No. 31 – March 14, 2012

In 1717 A. D. there were 2 reasons according to Haywood in More About Masonry to constitute the Grand Lodge jurisdiction in London, England. One of the reasons was to revive the quarterly feast.

The books about Table Lodges published by Grand Lodge and Haywood tells us that Masonry spread rapidly around the world because of the great feasts associated with the fraternity. Apparently historians were at a loss as to explain the rapid spread of Masonry until they stumbled onto the feasts and the fellowship associated with the feasts.

I've heard it said that if I have a choice of eating or dining I'll take dining every time! Eating a meal provides nutrition to the body which is important. Dining would suggest entertainment with food and friends. At a banquet we start approaching a feast as we would expect a sumptuous meal and entertainment. Now a feast is a time for large sumptuous meals and drink with sensual and mental pleasure. We might think of the Masonic Feasts in terms of food, fluids, fun and fellowship

In the eighteenth century lodges, the feasts were an occasion, when the food and drink was bountiful. The room was filled with talking, laughter and singing while they ate. The sumptuous meals were laden with generous food and drink and lasted for long periods of time. Toasts and jokes were told and retold to the enjoyment of all present.

Masons often would count the days until the next feast, for the feasts created a love for the lodge and as a result Masons brought generous gifts for the lodge room that they enjoyed so much. The brotherly love and fellowship was indeed an integral part of the occasion.

The lodges at this time were small. Some of the lodges averaged 8, 10, 15 or possibly 25 members. We would say that's not enough members but then those lodges existed from generation to generation. The lodges flourished because the members loved their lodge and part of the reason could have been because of the great fellowship at the feasts.

Apparently, Masonic lodges responded to the large number of applicants through the 30's, 40's and 50's by having many emergent meetings and doing multiple degrees. On applying for my Lewis Jewell I found that my father was initiated on March 13, 1944. However the most interesting information was that at an emergent meeting in July he along with 2 of my uncles were raised to the degree of a Master Mason. I can only imagine what the temperature would have been in that uninsulated upper floor of the lodge building. With the apparent demand for ritual, did our fraternity become a ritual machine and set aside our feasts and allow fellowship to slip? (The result being that we are unfamiliar with the original feasts and fellowship so important to Masons.)

Many of to-day's service clubs started in the early 1900s. Most, if not all service clubs, have a banquet with their regular meetings. The organizers probably realized the importance of food for fellowship. We know that sharing a meal can help to develop a strong viable organization. Service clubs also spread rapidly around the world and so the question becomes did they effectively spread around

the world because of the community and charitable work that they were doing or because of the fellowship that occurred at their regular meetings? Most would probably say that it was a combination of both activities.

Many organizations and families dine together to celebrate special events. Wedding dinners often approach being a feast while some of our ethnic groups celebrate even birthdays and funerals with elaborate meals. Religious celebrations similarly have feasts to celebrate certain events. These modern day repasts are anticipated with great glee and the enjoyment and fellowship is remembered for sometime afterward.

Let me take you for a few minutes to high country in central Sulawesi, to an area called Trajaland. Here in 1989 Cathy and I had the opportunity to visit and attend a funeral celebration. Here there was a most intriguing culture that had existed for centuries. Their funerals are a time to celebrate the life of the deceased with elaborate and extensive feasts. However the celebrations are not held until family and friends are notified and until the feast can be afforded which may take as long as 3 months. They believe that the person's soul is still with them until the first albino buffalo is slaughtered. Then the deceased's soul has a means to be carried to heaven. Since they believe that the soul is still with the deceased until the celebration starts the body is kept in the home and cared for as if the person was still alive for that period of time. When the family has enough money to pay for the funeral observations they announce their relative has died and all are invited. The feast lasts for days up to a week with large numbers in attendance. The one that we attended was 3 months after death, the celebration with the feast had been going for 7 days and 13 buffalo had been slaughtered to feed the gathering of friends and family.

This communal celebration of speeches, food and appreciation for the deceased drew the whole community closer together and made each individual "part of the whole." In a jungle tribal society their survival depended on loyalty to their culture. Can we draw a parallel to Masonry?

It is interesting to note that some lodges have used their regular monthly meetings for Masonic Education, good speakers, and entertainment. Of course a feast in advance of such a meeting would further enhance social aspect. The emergent meetings that are held once or twice a month are then used for degree work. This approach provides the brethren with the opportunity to enjoy enhanced fun and fellowship at the regular meetings, to attend emergent meetings to witness well done ritual and still be home in reasonable time from both events.

Most lodges today have a lunch after the regular lodge meeting, and with special events they usually have a banquet before. This is not a feast as our ancient brethren would have enjoyed. They are important and do provide some limited fellowship. Some lodges have a breakfast, or noon luncheon outside of the regular lodge meetings. These efforts are commendable and does indeed provide a level of fellowship but rarely do we truly have a feast.

Masonic fellowship has been a vital part of Masonry for many centuries. The Masonic Feasts have probably been the ultimate occasions to maximize fellowship. Fun and fellowship is an experience that comes at many levels. There is some fellowship with a sandwich and coffee after lodge. However

there is a direct relationship with the quality and quantity of food and drink and the level of fellowship. If Masons can ensure good fellowship on a regular basis then indeed Masonry will flourish.

In conclusion I have a recommendation and a question. My recommendation is to do whatever you can do to improve and enhance good fellowship in your lodge and one of the methods might be to consider reviving the Masonic Feast on a regular basis.

My question is twofold and relates to Haywood's suggestion that the Masonic Feast was a Masonic Landmark and one of the more important activities of the lodge. Is Haywood correct in suggesting that the feast was an Ancient Landmark of Masonry? If he is correct then it would appear that collectively we have not preserved sacred and inviolable that Landmark. I leave you with this question. Do we believe that the feast is an Ancient Landmark or Masonry? If so then "It behooves us to revive the feast in to-days Masonic activities."

More About Masonry – H. L. Haywood – pages 202 – 203
Table Lodges – Grand Lodge

R. W. Bro. Douglas E. Galt
DDGM Ontario District