



Independent Order of Odd Fellows
Dedicated Members for Change

September 25, 2012

Dear Dedicated Members for Change,

I recently came into possession of a rare volume, entitled *The Illustrated History of Odd Fellowship*, written by Theodore A. Ross, who at the time of its publication had served as Grand Secretary of the Sovereign Grand Lodge for close to 20 years. It's quite a tome, numbering well over 600 pages. I'd like to quote a couple of passages from this book which you may find interesting:

"The Order of Odd Fellows originated in England in the Eighteenth Century. In the early part of that century the celebrated Daniel De Foe mentions the Society of Odd Fellows, and in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for 1745, the Odd Fellows Lodge is mentioned as 'a place where very pleasant and recreative evenings are spent.' The poet James Montgomery, in 1788, wrote a song for a Body of Odd Fellows. The *Odd Fellows' Keepsake* states that the early English Lodges were supported and their members relieved by each member and visitor paying a penny to the Secretary on entering the Lodge. These allusions are sufficient proof of the existence of the Order at the time, but they tell us nothing of its aims, objects and characteristics.

"From other sources it is known that the Lodges were originally formed by workingmen for social purposes, and for giving the brethren aid and assisting them to obtain employment when out of work. When a brother could not obtain work he was given a Card and funds enough to carry him to the next Lodge, and if unsuccessful there, that Lodge facilitated his farther progress in the same way.

"When he found employment, there he deposited his Card.

"At first there was little or no Ritual, and no formal method of conducting the business of the Lodge. These were matters of gradual and slow growth."

These excerpts reveal a great deal of the path taken by our Order. What do we learn from the passages?

Well, to begin with, we learn that Odd Fellows is an evolving and changing Order. In the beginning, it appears that Odd Fellows were akin to a club - a place to spend "very pleasant and recreative evenings". And we know that "Lodges were originally formed by workingmen for social purposes." We can just imagine the early brothers drinking ale, throwing darts, and



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having an all-around enjoyable evening together in the social atmosphere of the local pub. And it appears that early Lodges were open to not only members, but visitors. Those early Lodges provided a measure of support for needy members by collecting a small tithe - "a penny" - from members and visitors. (Although I hasten to add that a penny in Eighteenth Century England was the equivalent of a dollar today. For a penny one could purchase a cup of coffee or a pint of ale. A penny wasn't even the smallest denomination in Olde England - a penny could be divided in fourths called farthings or in half called ha-pennies.)

But early Odd Fellows Lodges kept evolving into places that supported members who had lost their jobs. Odd Fellowship became the social services provider. Remember, this was in a time well before governments provided any sort of social safety net. This was well before the time of government operated Employment Development Departments. When a member in Town A lost his job, he could depend on his Lodge to give him a Card, a little traveling money, and a good wish before his Lodge brothers sent him on his way to a Lodge in a neighboring town. Hopefully, at this new Lodge, a local Brother would help the traveling Brother find a job. If he did, the traveling Brother would deposit his card and stay.

Clearly, with Brothers traveling from town to town and Lodge to Lodge to find work, it was necessary to develop secret grips, passwords, and signs which would change from time to time. Only in this way could a traveling Brother be distinguished from a fraud or charlatan who just wanted money, or a place to sleep, or a job.

Indeed, Odd Fellowship evolved and changed from a social club, into a mutual benefit society, and ultimately into a true fraternal Order which admits men and women. And it is my belief that Odd Fellowship must continue to evolve today to meet the needs and attract new members. The world in the Twenty-First Century is quite a different world than the one that existed in the Eighteenth Century or even the Nineteenth or Twentieth Centuries. Yet we have today some members in our Order who view Odd Fellowship through lenses cut in prior centuries. But here's the rub: unless we modernize and make our Order relevant to the men and women of the Twenty-First Century, we will continue the downward death spiral that we have seen take hold of our Order for the last sixty-plus years.

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Dave Rosenberg