



Independent Order of Odd Fellows  
Dedicated Members for Change

November 3, 2013

Dear Dedicated Members for Change,

A DMC newsletter that I sent out on October 20, 2013 has generated more dialogue and commentary than any previous newsletter. That October 20 newsletter asked the question "Did you know . . . ." and then related a number of historical facts about our Order and the changes that have occurred over time. Well, I have received a great deal of input on that column, primarily from long-time members who have experienced, first-hand, some of the evolution and change that has occurred in Odd Fellowship. And I have also received some input from members who have undertaken their own historical research. Following are some thoughts from Brother Louie Sarmiento on the subject of evolution and change in this Order, referring back to the "Did you know . . . ." that I originally published on October 20.

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Grand Warden

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I would like to add some inputs based on my historical study about the Order of Odd Fellows in general (IOOF, IOOF Manchester Unity, GUOOF and other Orders of Odd Fellows).

1. Did you know that the Odd Fellows first held their meetings in pubs and taverns, singing songs, eating food, and drinking ale?

A historical proof of this is the satirical depiction of a meeting night of a Lodge of Odd Fellows printed in 1797 by English artist and caricaturist Samuel Collings. The Grand, Grand-elect and Past Grand sitting on a canopied dais, while various assorted characters, including a quack and a musician, drink, smoke and talk. The Club met weekly at the cock in Old Street Square.

Along with the purpose of relieving each other in times of need, jolly practices were common in almost all associations and gatherings of men everywhere in England. All social and moral societies, such as the Freemasons and the Odd Fellows, or even the churches and meetings of



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religious groups, were provided freely with intoxicating drinks and fumes of tobacco. The temperance movement in the 19th Century eventually resulted to the prohibition of alcoholic drinks and tobacco within official meetings and activities of most Lodges and Churches. Theoretically, the origin of our quirky name is probably first intended for fun, out of convivial practices.

2. Did you know that Odd Fellowship once excluded from membership all women, black men, Asian men, Native American men, and persons who were deaf or blind?

The exclusion of other races was purely that of American origin noting that USA has a long history of slavery. The IOOF Manchester Unity and Grand United Order of Oddfellows United Kingdom has never discriminated on the grounds of race, creed or politics. Exclusion against race was never written in their constitution. >From the beginning, English Odd Fellows admit "free men" and not "Free white men". The admission of whites-only to membership was introduced by the Sovereign Grand Lodge in the USA after its separation from the Manchester Unity in 1843 and, to its eternal shame, continued right up until the 1960's.

There were Black, Asian, Aborigine and Indian members of the Odd Fellows as early as 1830's especially in Australia and United Kingdom. For example, the Ancient Independent Order of Odd Fellows in Australia (which soon merged with the Independent Order of Odd Fellows in 1868) had aborigines and Chinese members even before 1868. In fact, many of the Australian IOOF members were in disagreement with the "free white male" requirement of the Sovereign Grand Lodge that they petitioned not to follow this requirement of the Sovereign Grand Lodge. Eventually, the Sovereign Grand Lodge granted the Independent Order of Odd Fellows in Australia independence regarding this matter. There were also members in the USA who were against this requirement as early as the 1800's. There is one lodge under the Independent Order of Odd Fellows in New York that initiated a Japanese person in their Lodge. There were also incidents of Lodges in Indian Territory who initiated half-Indians into the Lodge. But shamefully, the Sovereign Grand Lodge threatened to suspend these Lodges if they do not drop non-whites in the membership in IOOF.

Because they were excluded from the IOOF, Black people in the USA and Canada obtained a Dispensation from the Grand United Order of Oddfellows in England in 1843 and set up their own Lodges, which still continue up until today, with their US headquarters in Philadelphia. The



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GUOOF is now in communication with the Sovereign Grand Lodge regarding having an inter-fraternal recognition.

The "white only" requirement did not exist exclusively within Odd Fellows but existed in almost all fraternal organizations in the US including the Free and Accepted Masons (Freemasons), Knights of Pythias, etc. African-American men who wanted to join Freemasonry formed the Prince Hall Freemasonry which consists mostly of Blacks.

No doubt, the "white-only" requirement is one of the main reasons why the Independent Order of Odd Fellows did not spread throughout the world as compared to Freemasonry or Rotary (both organizations exist in nearly 100 countries with millions of members today). Even though IOOF voted on to accept non-whites as members in the 1960's, this remains "just a theory" in many lodges under IOOF. There are still many IOOF Lodges especially in Southern States that are not positive about accepting non-whites as members. The culture of "Separate but equal" is still stuck in the minds of many people in the United States. IOOF Lodges remain predominantly a white fraternity. Many black people or those from minority races also do not want to be a part of IOOF for reasons that they know the history of racism within our Order. I, myself, experienced racism in this Order. There is a tendency for some whites to look-down at people who are from third world countries as second class people and they are first class.

The 1898 Annual Movable Conference of the IOOF Manchester Unity approved admission of female members on the same terms as men. Prior to this, there had always been female members, specifically widows of former members, but some others. There was never any exclusion of female members as such in the Odd Fellows in United Kingdom, but because of the legal status of women up to the end of the 19th century, in particular that a married women had no rights to money, property or benefits in her own right, all of which in law belonged to the husband, Odd Fellows and most other friendly societies did not pay benefits to married women. For single women and widows, the position was completely different and they could, and did, join friendly societies such as the Odd Fellows.

Although we accepted women in the Odd Fellows in 2001, this again remains "just a theory" in a number of our Lodges and jurisdictions. This, in fact, created imbalance within our Order. The Odd Fellows in Northern Europe (Sweden, Denmark and so on) do not allow mixed lodges (men



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and women). So, any woman who is a member from the US, Canada or Philippines who visits Lodges in Scandinavian countries cannot attend the meetings of the "Men's Lodges". Also, the Sovereign Grand Lodge and Grand Lodges are predominantly "male". In fact, you can only see one female who is an officer of the Sovereign Grand Lodge. If we remove the Rebekah Assembly or the International Association of Rebekah Assemblies, this may result to women having no or less opportunity to lead or be a part of the leadership in the Grand Lodges and Sovereign Grand Lodge.

3. Did you know that Odd Fellowship once had a "sign of distress" and an answer to that sign? And when the sign could be observed, the member in distress could use certain words, pronounced in full, to indicate distress. Did you know that once upon a time when a member of the Order desired to be recognized as an Odd Fellow by another Member of the Order, he could give a secret "sign of recognition"? When both the sign and the answer were given, the members could advance to each other, shake hands and exchange the words "Are you looking for me?" and the response "For you." Did you know that in Odd Fellowship there was once a "warning sign" and a "sign of safety", as well as a "sign of danger" that a member could use when conveying warning, danger or safety?

All mentioned above is still used by IOOF in Northern Europe and this could be offensive to them if they know it is written here. In the Philippines, we still teach our members all these signs that American and Canadian members no longer use just in case anyone of us go to Northern Europe. But admittedly, there are so many signs that many of our members worldwide have not really memorized them anymore. Its use in this era is questionable. Maybe, we should all decide on having only one handgrip, one hand sign and one password someday. Moreover, the IOOF in Europe had added "philosophical teachings" to each sign and password so they make sense to members. Therefore, signs and passwords are not merely "a mode of recognition" but as a symbolic teaching of a certain principle.

4. Did you know that at one time there were five Degrees obtainable by a member in a Lodge of Odd Fellows (not just four degrees that are presently available)?



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The degrees of initiation in the Odd Fellows evolved throughout time. Because there were so many organizations of Odd Fellows in the past, there were also so many variations of its initiation rituals. When older organizations of Odd Fellows were replaced by newer federation of Lodges, the older initiation rituals were also being replaced by newer versions. Most of the time, newer organizations were rivals of the older organizations of Odd Fellows. Expecting these groups to store the records and practices of older groups they successfully succeeded is thus unlikely.

The oldest surviving initiation ritual dates back in 1797 and belonged to the Order of Patriotic Odd Fellows. It contained an "Opening and Initiation Service", "Initiation", "White or Degree of Covenant", "Royal Blue Degree", and "Pink or Merit Degree", "Royal Arch of Titus or Fidelity Degree" and "Scarlet Degree or Priestly Degree". These degrees were all simple and brief as compared to the current versions.

During the initiatory ceremony of the Order of Patriotic Odd Fellows, the candidate is blindfolded, brought in the lodge room naked and was assisted to walk on a set of loose wooden planks that somehow symbolizes life. The initiation ceremony was emblematic of the life of man. A candidate enters the lodge room naked which is emblematic of birth. The imaginary road was thick with dangers. This was intended to represent the various challenges and difficulties that people encounter in real life. The eyes were blindfolded to represent ignorance and denote that in our walk through life we are in darkness and do not what will happen tomorrow. At the end of the initiation, a death scene is shown to represent the end of life. This is to remind the candidate that life here on earth is temporary so he should live a life of usefulness, be ready to help where help is needed.

The initiation rituals that we have today had been revised more than 8 times. As a matter of fact, the rituals that the IOOF in the US and Canada use are not entirely the same with the rituals that the IOOF in Denmark, Sweden or Norway use. IOOF Denmark added some changes unique to their own. For example, their first degree is shorter than the one used by the Sovereign Grand Lodge. The obligation during the Initiatory Degree is slightly different than what US or Canadians use.



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5. Did you know that consumption of alcohol was once always prohibited in Odd Fellows Lodges?

Prior to the 19th Century, almost all Lodges indulged to convivial practices. Consumption of alcohol and smoking were a part of meetings. This includes the Freemasons, the Odd Fellows and even the churches. Thomas Wildey and all early members of Washington Lodge no.1 in Baltimore, Maryland, just met in taverns or pubs. Undoubtedly, alcohol consumption and smoking were common practices during or after meetings. Many paintings and drawings in the 18th Century depict meetings of men consuming alcohol and tobacco. That was how men of that era spent their evenings.

The Temperance Movement in the mid-1800's, as mentioned earlier, influenced many organizations to ban alcoholic drinks and tobacco in their meetings. The 19th Century was a period of "social and moral reform". People in the 19th Century were so focused with "formality" and "class". The old convivial practices of Lodges were affected by this reform.

6. Did you know that the word "Independent" was not added to the name of Order of Odd Fellows until 1814?

Most of the early lodges were self-instituted. This meant that any member can gather at least five people to form their Lodge. Each lodge governed itself according to their own rules, initiation rites and practices. Hence, there were actually so many groups named "Odd Fellows" that were not necessarily related to each other.

In the late 18th Century, some of these assumed the role of a Grand Lodge and chartered other lodges. However, there is already a federation of Lodges of Odd Fellows named the "Grand Independent Order of Odd Fellows" in England sometime in 1797-98. In 1807, there is also a Lodge in Dover belonging to the "Free and Independent Order of Odd Fellows" whose charter is dated year 1800. The Independent Order of Odd Fellows (Manchester Unity) formed in 1814, as we know it today, was the most successful. They were able to persuade other lodges to join their Unity and became the largest friendly society in United Kingdom in the 19th Century. They also chartered the Independent Order of Odd Fellows in North America. It is obvious that the Odd



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Fellow groups with the name "Independent" were founded by disgruntled members who declared themselves "Independent" from older "Orders of Odd Fellows". Rivalry was very common back then (even today among lodges or Grand Lodges which is sad). But back in the days, lodges were brave enough to declare themselves independent from a Grand body.

But this does not mean that the Odd Fellows were a dysfunctional group. Rivalries and splits existed in almost all organizations in the 19th Century and below. Even in Freemasonry, there were rival groups within their Order. It was only in 1813 that the British Freemasons formed the United Grand Lodge of England to unite two rival groups within Freemasonry. But that did not even stop the schisms within Freemasonry. Today, there are many groups named Freemasons that do not recognize each other as a matter of "regularity" and "irregularity". Churches also had schisms, many churches in the 16th to 19th Century split from the Roman Catholic Church.

Today, there remains three major Orders of Odd Fellows: The Independent Order of Odd Fellows, the Manchester Unity Independent Order of Odd Fellows (Oddfellows) and the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows. One independent Lodge without a Grand body exists in Scotland named the Caledonian Lodge of Oddfellows.

In Friendship, Love and Truth,

Louie Sarmiento