



Independent Order of Odd Fellows
Dedicated Members for Change

January 17, 2014

Dear Dedicated Members for Change,

Today, I would like to talk about "Quaint Historical Relics". Odd Fellowship, as you know, has many of them.

Today's quaint historical relic can be found on the back of the "official certificate" of the Encampment. The "official certificate" is just the Odd Fellow's way of saying "membership card." Parenthetically, the membership cards used by Odd Fellowship, in all its branches, is itself a quaint historical relic. Rather than having them computer generated, the cards are only available in hard-copy and are painstakingly hand-written. Plus, they are so small that the type is virtually invisible. A magnifying glass is needed to read some of the 2-point type. But, I digress.

Today's quaint historical relic is printed on the back of the Encampment membership card. Found there is the "telegraphic cipher and key". Now, if you were to ask potential new members of the Order in their teens, 20's and 30's, I imagine very few would know what a telegraph or a cipher is. Telegraphs and telegrams were used extensively a century ago. Yet, being outmoded or superseded has never stopped Odd Fellows. There, on the back of the card is the telegraphic cipher and the key to its interpretation.

The cipher and key harkens back to a time (in the late 1800's and early 1900's, I imagine) when telegraphs and telegrams were the major method of communication, and when Odd Fellows would travel from town to town and community to community in search of work. Sometimes, Odd Fellows in the new town or community would help the traveling Odd Fellow with work or housing or money. Sometimes, the traveling Odd Fellow would become ill or pass away. And sometimes, the traveling Odd Fellow was not an Odd Fellow at all - but rather a charlatan who tried to get some free food, housing or money. Hence, the telegraphic cipher and key. Odd Fellows Lodges used telegraphic codes to communicate with each other about these travelers. Let me give you some examples from the back of the membership card.

"Black" - If that cipher was telegraphed, it meant: "He is a fraud, and if he has a card or other papers from this lodge, they are forgeries."

"Boat" - That means: "He is an expelled member, and has not been in good standing for _____."

"Doubt" - "Identity in doubt. Wire description."



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"Green" - "Wire instructions to us at once as to the disposition of his remains."

"Help" - "Will your lodge pay nurse hire, and how much per day?"

"House" - "Is in our city, holding a visiting card from your lodge and asking of us financial assistance."

"Secretary" - "He has a fraudulent card."

"White" - "We don't know of any such party, and he does not belong to our lodge."

"Yellow" - "Is in our city and very sick. Claims membership in your lodge. Shall we give him attendance on your account."

These and other ciphers and keys are contained on the back of the Encampment membership card - holdovers from another time and another age. Yet Odd Fellows has not caught up to the 21st Century. Other examples abound. Odd Fellowship still uses hard-copy application forms. In fact, the forms use slick paper so that if the wrong pen is used, the writing will smear. Odd Fellows still requires annual reports to be painstakingly filled out by hand. Most Odd Fellows Lodges still distribute their newsletters in printed form, mailed to the members.

But change is coming. Here's a positive example of that change: For the past 161 years, voting at Grand Lodge sessions has been a slow and laborious process, subject to human error, of counting votes by hand. At the 2013 Grand Lodge Sessions, I (as the newly elected Grand Warden) suggested that we revise our voting methodology and use electronic voting. Newly elected Grand Master Rick Boyles enthusiastically supported the concept and I am delighted to note that the Grand Lodge Board of Directors, unanimously, approved electronic voting. And the 2014 Grand Lodge Sessions (the 162nd such session) will - for the first time in our Order's history - have such electronic voting. The voting will be swift and accurate, and instantly displayed for the session. This sort of movement into the 21st Century is a healthy sign for this Order, and long overdue.

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Grand Warden