



Independent Order of Odd Fellows  
Dedicated Members for Change

August 6, 2014

Dear Dedicated Members for Change,

I have written many articles about the slow and steady decline in membership that we've seen in the Odd Fellows Lodges in California and throughout the United States for the past three generations. We all know the scenario, and the efforts that are being made (recently, with some measure of success) to slow, stop and ultimately reverse that trend. As we all should recognize by now, the decline cannot be halted by continuing to do business as usual. That "business-as-usual" approach hasn't worked for the past 64 years, and won't suddenly work just because we repeat it in the 65th, 66th or 67th year. To succeed in the 21st Century, our Odd Fellows Lodges must become three-dimensional Lodges emphasizing not only our history, heritage and ritual, but also opening the doors of our Lodges to reach out into our local communities with good works, and reaching out to our members to bring back the social and fun aspects of belonging to a fraternity.

But what about our other branches? What about the Rebekah Lodges, the Encampments, the Cantons, the Ladies Encampment Auxiliary, the Ladies Auxiliary Patriarchs Militant, Theta Rho, and Junior Odd Fellows?

Let's be frank. It's not a pretty picture. If the Odd Fellows Lodges have suffered membership declines, the other branches have also suffered declines, multiplied and squared.

The Rebekahs in California were once a remarkably large and powerful branch. In 1950 (just 64 years ago), California had 50,002 Rebekah members in 367 Rebekah Lodges. In 2004 (just 10 years ago), the number of members had dropped like a stone to 5,718 and the number of Lodges had shrunk to 123. Today, the decline continues in that there are just 1,951 regular members in our Rebekah Lodges, and the number of Rebekah Lodges has fallen to 62. The downward trend is shocking and concerning. And, clearly, it is unsustainable. In the last 10 years alone, the membership numbers have dropped to just one third of what they were; the number of Lodges has halved. If the trend were to continue at the same rate, we can expect to see 10 years from today just 650 Rebekahs in 31 Lodges.

And 1,951 members in 62 Lodges averages just 32 members per Lodge. While that doesn't sound too bad on the surface, if we peel away the layers of the onion, we see that the situation is dire. First of all, of the 1,951 members, only 1,728 are dues paying members. Second, 136 of the members are members in the jurisdictional Lodge. Third, we all know that having members "on the books" doesn't mean they are all active members; we know that at least half the members of any Lodge are members on paper and rarely attend or participate. Accordingly, I would



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estimate that there are, today, only about 800 "active" Rebekahs in California. Divided into the 61 non-jurisdictional Lodges, that averages out to about 13 members per Lodge. We all know that a Lodge with only 13 active members - particularly if the members are in their 70's, 80's and 90's, is a Lodge with challenges. Of course, an "average" or 13 also means that there are Lodges with more than 13 and Lodges with less than 13 - perhaps far less than 13 members. The alarm light is surely blinking red for those Lodges.

And, indeed, we see all sorts of challenges and problems when numbers diminish to these levels. Lodges have difficulty filling officer positions. Members are recycled year after year into offices. Checks and balances fail at the Lodge level. Often quorums can't be reached to have real Lodge meetings. The Rebekah Assembly - a hard-working entity - has had real budget challenges due to the great decline in membership.

The Grand Encampment and the Cantons of the Patriarchs Militant are in even more dire straits. It's, frankly, hard to get the actual numbers, but it is my understanding that there are about 208 members of the Encampment, serving in 13 Encampments in California, and there are about 92 Patriarchs Militant serving in 7 Cantons in California. Those numbers show that these branches are shells of what once existed in California, when thousands attended the Grand Encampment, and uniformed Patriarchs Militant, complete with bands, marched by the hundreds in parades. And if we continue applying the reality that only half the members of any organization are "active" members, then we really have only about 100 active members in the Grand Encampment and less than 50 active Patriarchs Militant in California.

Why have these numbers diminished? The answer is simple. Members of the Encampment can only come from third-degree Odd Fellows. If the Odd Fellows Lodges are weak, the Encampments must be weak. Similarly, members of the military branch can only come from the Encampments. If the Encampments are weak, the Cantons must be weak. And yet, these branches blithely continue to do business as usual as if it were 1920 and thousands of members were in the Encampments and Cantons. They continue to hold four-day grand gatherings, even though in some cases, less than 20 voting members show up.

The numbers and the stories are similar for the Ladies Auxiliaries. The numbers are even worse for the youth groups. Statewide, Theta Rho is a mere shadow of what it once was, and Junior Odd Fellows exist virtually in name only.

And that's just California. We know that there are jurisdictions in the USA where the numbers of members are far, far less than in California. We know that there are jurisdictions - quite a few of them - where the sum total of membership is less than 200. In California we have less than



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5,000 Odd Fellows on the books and less than 2,000 Rebekahs. And we have difficulty supporting the assorted branches. How can a jurisdiction with 200 members support the various branches of this Order?

Why do we go through this facade? Odd Fellowship certainly has a history of evolution and change. Dramatic changes occurred in the middle of the 20th Century when the call to join fraternal orders diminished as government and private sector assumed many of the tasks previously undertaken by fraternities (e.g. insurance, hospitals, orphanages, retirement communities, etc.). Another huge change occurred after World War II when fraternal social life took a back seat to television, movies and the electronic age. Everything changed again in the 21st Century, when Odd Fellows opened to women and when the age of membership was dropped to 16. Odd Fellowship must adjust to change or be buried by it. To continue business as usual is simply no longer sustainable.

What is the solution? To me, it's apparent. Within the next five years - hopefully sooner rather than later - we must re-write the Codes and develop the protocols to merge our branches. When Schuyler Colfax, in the 1860's opening Odd Fellows membership to women, developed the Rebekah Degree and the concept of Rebekah Lodges, it was unique and progressive in the fraternal world - for the 19th Century. However, in the 21st Century, the quaint "separate but equal" concept of the "men's Lodge" and the "women's Lodge" is an anachronism and no longer viable in this century. This next evolution of our Order is inevitable. And, inevitably, this change can only be launched at the level of Sovereign Grand Lodge. The change must begin with a merger of the Patriarchs Militant and the LAPM. It must then move to a merger of the Encampment with the LEA. Next, Odd Fellows and Rebekahs must merge. And ultimately, all branches must merge and become one Order, with 9 degrees.

Sovereign Grand Lodge meets this month in Victoria, Canada. The time is now.

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