

History of Odd Fellowship

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The Three Link Fraternity - Odd Fellowship in California

by Don R. Smith and Wayne Roberts

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WHY THE NAME ODD FELLOWS?

There are several different reasons given for our strange name. One old and apparently authoritative history of Odd Fellowship gives the explanation, "That common laboring men should associate themselves together and form a fraternity for social unity and fellowship and for mutual help was such a marked violation of the trends of the times (England in the 1700's) that they became known as 'peculiar' or 'odd,' and hence they were derided as 'Odd Fellows.' Because of the appropriateness of the name, those engaged in forming these unions accepted it. When legally incorporated the title 'Odd Fellows' was adopted."

Another, similar explanation is that the original Odd Fellows were men who were engaged in various or odd trades, as there were organizations for some of the larger trades.

Modern references state that the true reason for the name Odd Fellows isn't known or documented. Whatever the reason may have been, the unusual name has been the object of public curiosity (and on occasion derision or mirth) for well over 200 years.

THE BEGINNING OF ODD FELLOWSHIP

Although some books claim to trace Odd Fellowship back to Roman times when members of the Roman Legions in England were called "Fellow Citizens", what is said to be the earliest printed record of an Odd Fellows Lodge appears in a reference to a lodge meeting at a Globe Tavern in England, in 1748. This lodge was numbered nine, so apparently there were at least nine associated Odd Fellows lodges at that time.

Other evidence suggests that our origins were in an organization known as the Ancient Order of Bucks which thrived in England in the 18th Century, and had as its emblem three bucks with their antlers intertwined. These men had as their leader a "Most Noble Grand" and met in club rooms and taverns. One of their principal emblems was "a bundle of sticks," familiar to modern Odd Fellows as signifying strength in union. They dropped "Bucks" from the name in 1802. Whatever the origin, solid evidence begins to be found in the late 18th Century. By 1796 Odd Fellow organizations were numerous in England, and each was independent from the others. Fraternal groups such as the Odd Fellows were suppressed in England for a time, but by 1803 the

Odd Fellows were revived by an organization called "London Union Odd Fellows," which later became known as the "Grand Lodge of England" and assumed authority over all Odd Fellow lodges in that country.

Victory Lodge in Manchester declared itself independent of the Grand Lodge of England in 1809. In 1814, the six Odd Fellows lodges in the Manchester area met and formed The Manchester Unity of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, which elected officers and proceeded to standardize degree work of the lodges.

ODD FELLOWSHIP IN NORTH AMERICA

Among the first records of the Order in America is that of five Brothers of the English Order who met in New York City in 1806, and formed Shakespeare Lodge No. 1.

The founders were three boat builders, a comedian and a vocalist - a group befitting the name "Odd Fellows," indeed. The lodge was self instituted, a common practice in those times. Their first candidate was a retired actor who was the keeper of the tavern where they met. Accounts state that lodge meetings were accompanied by merry making and mirth, and that the wares of the tavern were freely indulged in. This lodge was dissolved in 1813 due to poor attendance brought on by controversy over the War of 1812.

Another lodge of which little is known existed briefly in New York in 1816. In 1818, Shakespeare Lodge in New York was re-instituted, in the Red Cow tavern, operated by a former member who had in his keeping the books and papers of the former lodge. They claimed to have received a charter from the Manchester Unity which gave them authority over all other Odd Fellows Lodges in the United States, but this authority was not accepted by other lodges. Several more lodges were founded in the New York City area, and one in Philadelphia, due to the efforts of the Brothers of Shakespeare Lodge.

The Independent Order of Odd Fellows as we know it today began in Baltimore, Maryland, where five members of the Order from England founded Washington Lodge No. 1 on April 26, 1819, by self-institution. One of these Brothers was Thomas Wildey, the first Noble Grand and the man revered as the founder of Odd Fellowship in North America. A charter was received from Duke of York Lodge in Preston, England, in 1820, a year and a half after its self-institution.

A second lodge was formed in Baltimore in 1819, but these two lodges and those in New York were unaware of each others' existence for some time, communications being slow in those days, and there being no reason such information would travel from one city to another except by pure chance.

In 1821, the "Grand Lodge of Maryland and of the United States of America, of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows," was founded. Brother Wildey also served as the first Grand Master/Grand Sire of the first Grand Lodge, for a period of 12 years. Several more lodges were established, and in 1824, the "Grand Lodge of the United States" now termed "The Sovereign Grand Lodge," was separated from the Grand Lodge of Maryland. The Independent Order of

Odd Fellows in North America (United States and Canada) became independent from the Order in England in 1834.

ODD FELLOWSHIP EXPANDS WEST

There were several abortive attempts to establish Odd Fellowship in the Western United States, beginning in the late 1840's.

One of the first occurred when a member, leading a party sailing from Gloucester, Massachusetts, to what he called "the City of Oregon, on the Columbia River," obtained a charter through what was, at best, irregular channels. He had written to both the Grand Sire and the Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of the United States, after which he alleged that they had directed him to obtain necessary papers and authority from a Deputy Grand Sire in Massachusetts. Asked by the Deputy Grand Sire to see the letters, the Brother in question stated they had been packed by mistake, and were now on the ship, about to sail for Oregon.

However, the ship and its party of Odd Fellows reached not the "City of Oregon," but the Sandwich Islands, and established the first Odd Fellows Lodge west of the Mississippi River, Excelsior Lodge No. 1, in Honolulu, Hawaii, with the charter signed by King Kamehameha, the reigning monarch of the Sandwich Islands which were later renamed the Hawaiian Islands.

ODD FELLOWSHIP IN CALIFORNIA

The good works of Odd Fellowship were in evidence in California prior to the official establishment of the fraternity here. The official establishment of Odd Fellowship in California had its birth in the City of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where a short time prior to January 12, 1849, the Most Worthy Grand Sire, Horn R. Kneass, issued a charter entitled "California Lodge No. 1."

Due to the excitement of the discovery of gold at Coloma, in January, 1848, the Port of Yerba Buena (San Francisco) was in a turmoil throughout 1849. Two of the three petitioners left for the gold fields in the "Mother Lode," to seek their fortunes. Everything pertaining to Odd Fellowship was left with James Smiley. He made one or two attempts, within the next three months to organize an Odd Fellows lodge, but with so many leaving for the gold fields, the idea was abandoned.

When some of the brothers returned from the gold fields, he was able to gather a sufficient number of former brothers to assist in making up the complement of charter members, required by the laws under which they secured the charter. On September 9, 1849, one year to the day before California was admitted to the Union as the 31st State, California Lodge No. 1 came into being, in the City of San Francisco, with Brother Smiley instituting the lodge.



SAN FRANCISCO ODD FELLOWS TEMPLE: The Odd Fellows Temple, located on the corner of Seventh and Market Streets in San Francisco, was one of the showpieces in the city. The structure was destroyed during the 1906 earthquake, the Odd Fellows rebuilt on the same site with a comparable building. For many years the Grand Lodge office was located in the San Francisco Odd Fellows Temple.

Several months previous to the organization of California Lodge No. 1 the brothers of San Francisco were at work relieving the suffering, and during a few months they expended over \$100,000. It was not unusual during this period, and for a number of years, to cost a member \$5.00 or even \$10.00 to attend a meeting, for there was no regular means of collecting dues, or paying benefits, and the calls for aid were many.

An interesting feature of California Lodge No. 1 during their formation period was their dues structure. They adopted their first By Laws November 25, 1850, and the initiation fee was set at \$50.00; dues, \$10.00 per quarter in advance; and no benefits were to be paid a Brother who was able to pay his own expenses. Two years later San Francisco Lodge No. 3 was established.

In Sacramento an association was organized by a Texas Odd Fellow, A. M. Winn, later the founder of the Native Sons of the Golden West. The brother published a notice in the "Pacific News" calling all Odd Fellows together. More than 100 three linkers assembled on August 20, 1849, to organize a relief association. They had no authority to organize and adopt the Odd Fellows name but the necessities of the times demanded prompt action. Brother Winn was elected President, and he was authorized to call upon any member to nurse the sick free of charge, when nurses were receiving \$16.00 a day for such services. The Odd Fellows were joined by the Masons in establishing the first hospital in California, and within a few months had expended some \$30,000.00 in relieving distress. Shortly thereafter Sacramento Lodge No. 2 was instituted and the following year Eureka Lodge No. 4 was formed. Odd Fellow relief associations were also organized in Stockton and Marysville, soon followed by the institution of Charity Lodge No. 6 in Stockton and Yuba Lodge No. 5 in Marysville. In addition to San Francisco, Sacramento, Stockton and Marysville, many Odd Fellow lodges were soon established throughout the Mother Lode area of the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

In time, Odd Fellowship spread throughout the state. The list of lodges once included almost every city, town or hamlet, in the "Golden State". At one time, lodges in the Oregon and Washington Territory, along with those in British Columbia, were under the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of California.

INTERNATIONAL ODD FELLOWSHIP

The early day Odd Fellows in California played an important part in the spreading of Odd Fellowship to other countries when Templar Lodge No. 15 of San Francisco by unanimous vote appropriated \$1,200 to establish the Order in Germany in 1869. Wuerttemberg Lodge No. 1 of Stuttgart was instituted the following year by John A. Morse, a Past Grand Master of California. From Germany the Order spread to many other countries and territories throughout Europe. The Order is presently located in Australia, Austria, Belgium, Chile, Cuba, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Labrador, New Zealand, Norway, The Netherlands, Peru, Puerto Rico, Sweden, Switzerland, Uruguay, and Venezuela. Due to recent political changes in Eastern Europe and the Balkan countries, Odd Fellowship has already been re-established in Leipzig, Germany. The ground work is being laid to establish lodges in other parts of the former Eastern area of Germany, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, and Hungary, under the leadership of the Odd Fellows in Europe.

A series of short historical articles in an 1988 issue of The Illinois Odd Fellow, from which some of these notes were taken, mentions that in 1827 the fourth lodge in Maryland, William Tell Lodge No. 4, was chartered to work in the German language. Eventually, many jurisdictions had German-speaking lodges, and German Rituals were provided. In California, Harmony Lodge No. 13, Concordia Lodge No. 122, and Hermann Lodge No. 145 were all established in San Francisco in the 1850's and 1860's, originally working in the German language as did lodges in other California cities. Likewise lodges working in the Italian, Swedish, and French languages were instituted, and today Franco-American Lodge No. 207 is still a bilingual French speaking lodge in California.

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Thomas Wildey **Founder of North American Odd Fellowship**

Thomas Wildey, founder of Odd Fellowship in North America, was a man of immense vitality, humor, and warmth.

Thomas Wildey was born in London, England, in 1782. He was left an orphan five years later - and the Odd Fellow pledge to "Educate the Orphan" sprang from his personal childhood experiences. At the age of 14, Wildey went to live with an uncle. After he had 9 years of schooling, he became an apprentice to a maker of coach springs. He joined the Odd Fellows in 1804.

When restlessness brought Thomas Wildey to America in 1817, the British were still unpopular in the States because of the War of 1812. In that year Baltimore was suffering both a yellow fever epidemic and mass unemployment. An outgoing personality, Wildey missed companionship and advertised in the newspaper to determine if there were any other Odd Fellows in Baltimore; he requested them to meet him at the Seven Stars Inn.

On April 26, 1819, Wildey and the four men who responded to the advertisement formed the Independent Order of Odd Fellows in North America, dedicating the Order to achieve philanthropic goals. Other Englishmen who were Odd Fellows had grouped in the states along the Eastern Seaboard, and Wildey gathered them all into the newly formed fraternity. He traveled widely to set up lodges in the most recently settled parts of the country.

At the time of his death in 1861, there were more than 200,000 members of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows in 42 states.