

CALEB B. SMITH

On February 8, 1968, the distinguished P.G.M. and Grand Secretary of Indiana, M. W. Dwight L. Smith, read this essay at the annual meeting of the Blue Friars Society, a group of Masonic writers to which he had just been elected. We are pleased to print, with his kind permission, his "Master's Piece" for that occasion.

Let me tell you about a young man who lisped. He was short of stature--only about five feet eight inches--but what he lacked in height he gained in a bearing that was both striking and commanding. One man who knew him well said he had a "capacious forehead."

His name was Caleb B. Smith. Freemasonry in the State of Indiana owes him a tremendous debt of gratitude, now acknowledged in part by the fact that Indiana's premier Masonic award bears his name.

He was a resident of Connersville, Indiana, in the beautiful Whitewater Valley. A Bostonian by birth, he had gone to Cincinnati, Ohio, with his parents as a child of six. There in the Queen City he went to school, and at the age of seventeen entered Miami University.

Two years later he walked from Cincinnati to Connersville (a distance of about fifty miles) and presented himself unannounced in the law office of a distinguished attorney who later served in Congress. "I have come to read law in your office if you will permit me to do so," he said. Within a year he was admitted to the bar. Then he founded the Indiana Sentinel and became its editor.

By the time he was twenty-five, Caleb B. Smith had been elected to the Indiana Legislature. At thirty-five, he was elected to Congress. Here something happened that was to change the course of his life. A gangling young lawyer from Sangamon County, Illinois, also had been elected to Congress. The gentleman from Indiana and the gentleman from Illinois were assigned seats near each other. A strong bond of friendship between Abraham Lincoln and Caleb B. Smith was forged on the floor of the House of Representatives in Washington.

In 1852, Caleb B. Smith moved to Cincinnati, but he was back in Indiana for the campaign of 1860 when his old friend from Illinois was being mentioned as a possible nominee for the presidency. The man who lisped was made chairman of the Indiana delegation to the Republican national convention in the old "Wigwam" at Chicago. In that capacity he was able to swing Indiana's votes for Lincoln.

When President Lincoln was inaugurated the following spring, he appointed his Connersville friend to his first Cabinet, as Secretary of the Interior. After two years' Cabinet service Secretary Smith resigned to accept an appointment as United States District Judge, but his tenure on the bench was brief. Fate intervened and brought his life to an untimely end at the age of fifty-six.

To this day no one is certain where his mortal remains were buried. But what of that? He needs no memorial of marble or bronze. In Indiana we can see his monument all about us.

For Caleb B. Smith was a Freemason, and it is as a Masonic Brother that we shall think of him on this present occasion. When he came to Indiana in 1827, Connersville was a frontier village with four lawyers, four doctors, four taverns, a drug store, two or three churches, a court house and a Lodge of Freemasons which had been at work only six years.

Just two days after his twenty-first birthday, Caleb B. Smith petitioned Warren Lodge No. 15, and eleven days after he had presented his petition, he was raised to the Sublime Degree. In 1832-33 he was Master of his Lodge, and in 1834 he went to the annual meeting of the Grand Lodge at Indianapolis for the first time - not as Worshipful Master, but as a visitor.

To understand and appreciate the significance of the story I am about to relate, we must know something about what was going on Masonically in 1834.

Eight years before, in upstate New York, the disappearance of a printer by the name of William Morgan and the accusation that he had been murdered by the Masons created tremendous excitement. Like a prairie fire out of control, a great wave of bigotry and intolerance swept over the land, fanned and encouraged by religious sects and manipulated by politicians who saw an opportunity to capitalize on public hysteria.

Local communities adopted a spirit of relentless persecution. Members of the Craft were socially ostracized; mobs broke into Lodge rooms, destroying property and assaulting the assembled members. Charters were stolen; Lodge halls and equipment defiled. Public disavowal of any further connection with Freemasonry was made by thousands. Ex-Masons staged public demonstrations in which they would "open lodge", admit disreputable characters and "confer the degrees" upon them before delighted audiences.

No unit of society escaped the venom; every source of fellowship in the community was poisoned. Families were separated - brother against brother, father against son, wife against husband.

Churches were disrupted; clergymen and laymen alike were driven from worship; the Christian sacraments were denied to members of the Craft.

Schools were torn asunder; teachers and pupils were driven out. The excitement ran so high in some places that little children took it up; boys were beaten and abused because they were sons of Masons; anti-Masonic spelling books and readers were introduced. Efforts were made to deny chartered rights to Masonic corporations and to enact laws to prevent Freemasons from performing their ceremonies, and even from holding their meetings.

Anti-Masonic newspapers were established; anti-Masonic almanacs were printed and circulated; anti-Masonic bookstores and taverns were opened. The ultimate was reached when (according to tradition) anti-Masonic houses of ill repute were maintained.

Eventually, the historian Haywood tells us, "the anti-Masons raided some thousands of Lodge properties, read hundreds of Minute Books, analyzed every word in rites, symbols and ceremonies they could find, and combed through the private lives of hundreds of Worshipful Masters and Grand Masters. When there was nothing left for them to find they admitted (because they had to admit it) that they had made a blunder of epic proportions in a matter of fact, and history will continue to laugh at them as long as they are remembered."

Indiana had a comparatively easy time during that period in contrast to the New England and Middle Atlantic States. In neighbouring Michigan the Craft went into complete eclipse. When the first effects of the movement began to be felt in Indiana about 1828 there were thirty-three Lodges. Fourteen years later when morning began to break there were eighteen. The low point came in the period from 1835 to 1837, when only twelve Lodges remained. Ten Lodges went down in 1833 alone; ten more went out of existence in 1835.

The climactic point came on Wednesday, December 10, 1834, when a little handful of Brethren meeting in Grand Lodge in Indianapolis with only four Lodges out of twenty represented, seriously considered giving up and dissolving the Grand Lodge. A committee was appointed to talk it over and bring in a recommendation.

For the decision to keep the light of Freemasonry burning we shall be eternally grateful to the four Brethren who constituted that committee. They were Daniel Kelso, a lawyer of Switzerland County; Dr. Shepherd Whitman, a physician of New Albany, John C. Walker, a saw and grist mill operator of Shelbyville . . . and the Chairman (you have already guessed it) was the lisping young man with the large head who was sitting on the sidelines as a visitor: Caleb B. Smith of Connersville.

It is generally conceded that Caleb B. Smith was the one who wrote the stirring report which caused the Brethren of Grand Lodge to take heart and keep going. But the report itself does not appear in the printed Proceedings. It was "sent out to be printed," the minutes tell us.

For more than a hundred years all historical accounts of the incident assumed that the report was lost. But it was not. About 1890 Brother Albert H. Kaiser, the historically-minded Secretary of Harmony Lodge No. 11 at Brookville, gathered up many valuable old papers and pasted them in a scrapbook. The report which was "sent out to be printed" in the form of a four-page circular was among the priceless items. It is a thrilling document to read. I shall not take the time to repeat it except to quote these few sentences. Listen to the eloquent words of the lisping young man from Connersville:

"That Masonry is in a languishing condition in this State, your committee are fully apprised. This, however, they believe to be entirely owing to the apathy and indifference into which the members of the fraternity have generally fallen. A want of interest or feeling in its success had induced them to remit that exertion which is essential to its prosperity. This feeling, however, they trust will not continue, and they confidently entertain the hope that the fraternity in this State will yet become animated with that zeal for the prosperity of the institution which is so ardently to be desired by every Mason.... They would therefore recommend to the members of this Grand Lodge and of the subordinate Lodges, a perseverance in the customs and usages of

our ancient order, a renewed exertion for its prosperity and the prompt and active exercise of all those duties enjoined on them as Masons."

Remember, those stirring words came from a young man of twenty-six who had been a Mason only five years. Three years later he was Grand Master of Masons in Indiana.

Moreover, this was the man who brought the Ancient Accepted Scottish Rite to Indiana. You will recall that in the eighteen-fifties he lived in Cincinnati for a time while serving as president of the Cincinnati & Chicago Railroad. In 1858, at the age of forty-nine, he received the Scottish Rite degrees at Cincinnati. When he returned to Indiana a year or so later, he was the only known Scottish Rite Mason in the State. Thus he became one of the seven charter members of the Scottish Rite bodies in Indianapolis, and served as the first Thrice Potent Master of Adoniram Lodge of Perfection.

Caleb B. Smith had some strong convictions about the duties and responsibilities of a Mason. In June, 1863, while serving on the Federal bench in Indianapolis, he was invited by the Grand Master to go to Muncie on the Feast of St. John the Baptist and lay the cornerstone of a new Masonic Temple. Although a case was scheduled for hearing in Judge Smith's court, he announced that his court would be adjourned on June 24, for, he explained, no court can be held on the Sabbath, and St. John's Day was his "Masonic Sabbath". Accordingly, the court room was dark on June 24; Past Grand Master Smith went to Muncie and proudly identified himself with the Masonic Craft.

What a priceless heritage our distinguished Brother has left us - he who, when lesser men would have called retreat, put the bugle to his lips to blow the charge!

One hundred thirty-three years have passed since he stood in that tiny third floor Masonic hall on the old National Road in Indianapolis and fired his Brethren with determination to carry on. The times are different today, and yet how strangely similar they are!

"That Masonry is in a languishing condition in this State, your committee are fully apprised," he said, and then went on to clinch the nail by asserting that the condition was one which might be attributed to "the apathy and indifference into which the members of the fraternity have generally fallen."

It sounds as if Caleb B. Smith might be speaking to us today, for he was saying only what many of us have been saying in recent years - that if Freemasonry is having troubles these days, we have only to look at Freemasons to find the cause.

And what was his recipe for a resurgence of Masonic interest and activity? Nothing radical; no departure from established principles. Simply this: "A perseverance in the customs and usages of our ancient order, a renewed exertion for its prosperity and the prompt and active exercise of all those duties enjoined on them as Masons."

This is the story of the young man who lisped; the young man who arose from the sidelines, put the bugle to his lips and blew the charge; the man whose memory among Freemasons in Indiana is kept fresh and green through the Caleb B. Smith Medal of Honour.

OUTLINE for a SHORT TALK

I. Caleb B. Smith's Life A. Background B. Professional and public service C. Friendship with Lincoln

II. His Masonic Life A. Lodge membership B. The "Morgan Excitement" and its effects

III. Caleb B. Smith's Masonic "Summit" A. Indiana's 1834 Grand Lodge B. The special committee C. His "challenge" D. Consequences: e.g., Grand Master

IV. His Masonic Convictions A. Illustrated by actions B. Their application to us today