

HIGHEST HILLS OR LOWEST VALES

By Keilh Arrington

Tradition has it that in ancient times Masons met on the highest hill and in the lowest vales to secure privacy. The tradition alone has been sufficient to stir the imaginations of modern Masons with the result that Masonic meetings have been held in many "strange and weird places," as one who frowned on the practice put it.

According to Harry Carr's "The Freemason At Work," early Masonic manuscripts tell of Masons meeting in the open air, but in a remote and quiet place. This emphasis on isolation and solitude is illustrated in the "Laws and Statutes" of the Lodge of Aberdeen in 1670: "Wee ordaine Iykwayes that no lodge be holden within a dwelling house wher ther is people living in it but in the open fields except it be ill weather, and then Let ther be a house chosen that no person shall heir nor see us. . ."

One ancient document stated: "A lodge is two interprentices, two fellow crafts and two masters---on the highest hill or the lowest valley of the world without the crow of a cock or the bark of a dog--a day's journey from a borough town..." Obviously, the idea was that the lodge should be far away from any human dwelling--far enough so that a watch dog or a crowing cock could not be heard. In keeping with this, it is recorded that tanners assembled at Crockentor, in the county of Devon, England, in the 17th century. This was a rocky hill rising to a height of 1300 feet, littered with granite boulders, and was a wild and remote spot, ten miles from any town. The spot was a natural amphitheatre where boulders on the rising sides could have provided seats for one hundred or more, while a table and seats were hewn from the moorstone.

A British army major told of a 1935 meeting in what is now Pakistan, near the Khyber Pass. Members of Lodge Jamrud No. 4372 met in the compound of a Mohammedan village, screened by the mud walls of the buildings. Mud heaps provided seats and pedestals; tent mallets were gavels; pick handles were rods. No degree was worked, but lodge was opened on the first degree and closed before dusk.

Dwight L. Smith writes in "Goodly Heritage" that the legend persists that members of Salem Lodge No. 21, chartered in 1822, were forced to meet in a wooded area on a hill. Smith also writes of Indiana military lodges meeting upon the mountain tops and in the valley on numerous occasions.

According to the same historian, a few of the older Indiana lodges are said to have resorted to secluded out-door spots during the anti-Masonic hysteria of the 1830's.

As Masonic groups have eagerly pursued this link with the past, lodge meetings have been held in caves, quarries and gravel pits. Masonic degrees have been conferred in forests, on hills and on mountain tops. From Death Valley at two hundred eighty feet below sea level and the

Carlsbad Caverns, seven hundred fifty feet underground, to Mt. Aylmer, Alberta, at 10,355 feet above sea level, Masons have flocked in great numbers to experience familiar rites in novel settings. Depending on the nearness to population concentrations and the uniqueness of the outdoor scene, crowds have varied from a "good turnout" to more than one thousand.

One lodge, Golden Rule Number 5 of Stanstead, Quebec, made up of members from both sides of the border, was said to have been chartered to meet in a natural lodge room on top of a mountain. In 1857, this lodge was granted a dispensation to open and hold a lodge on the summit of Owl's Head Mountain at Lake Memphremagog. Here, in a great ravine at an elevation of two thousand four hundred eighty feet above the lake, situated due east and west, surrounded by massive rocks that afforded perfect seclusion, is a lodge that "seems as if hewn by the hand of nature for the use to which it is

The rocks offer suitable watch-towers, from which the sentinels can readily observe the approach of any eavesdroppers. As many as two hundred fifty Masons make the difficult ascent to the top, confer a third degree and then descend two hours later to join their ladies for a picnic dinner.

Historic Mammoth Cave, one hundred thirty-five feet below Kentucky's surface, has been the setting for lodge meetings, as have the Carlsbad Caverns of New Mexico, at a depth of seven hundred fifty feet. Since the temperature in the Caverns is fifty-six degrees, those attending have been urged to dress warmly.

However, in Death Valley, California, third degrees have been conferred under the stars on the sun baked floor of the "Devil's Golf Course" near Furnace Creek. These meetings have been limited to other than summer months, when temperatures may reach one hundred sixty-five degrees. On one occasion, forty years ago, "an ample lodge room was marked off and defined by rows of electric lights operated by a portable power plant. All furniture for the lodge was transported over one hundred miles to the site, which was surrounded by such rough salt fields that any approach, except by the road which was fully tiled, was virtually impossible." One observer found most impressive the door from the preparation room, which had been hauled in and set up in the northwest corner of the lodge. He commented, "When that door was opened, it opened to the universe!"

Malheur Cave, Oregon, an unusual formation with an interesting history, has been the site for many annual outdoor meetings. The list of unusual sites chosen for these outdoor meetings would fill a book and only a few typical ones can be discussed here.

In central Wyoming there is a huge granite mass known as Independence Rock, which served as a landmark and way station on the old Oregon Trail. It was here that the first Masonic meeting in what was to become Wyoming, was held on July 4, 1862, by a group of Masons traveling to the west. The rock has become a Masonic shrine and commemorative meetings have been held there periodically.

A comparable meeting has been held in Montana at the summit of Mullen Pass, the first known meeting place of Freemasonry in Montana. The pass is a low divide through the Rockies, once a

heavily traveled military road. The area is owned by four lodges and preserved as a memorial to pioneer Masons of the territory. A stone altar and stone officer's stations have been constructed.

About 1908, the town of Park City, Utah, was destroyed by fire and Uintah Lodge No. 7 was given permission to hold a special meeting on what is now called Mount Masonic, north of town. Later, Kaibab Lodge No. 25 of Utah received permission to hold a meeting in the Kaibab Forest, Arizona. This became an annual event, with the Master Mason degree being conferred. Just at sunset, in the virgin forest, which is a plateau about sixty by forty miles in extent at an elevation of eight thousand feet, "as the star-decked heavens superceded the cloudy canopy, the work was put on with the same form and ceremony as within a regular lodge room. "

Another "high hill" meeting, held in impressive surroundings of natural and simple beauty, is the annual Ft. Hill meeting near Harrisonburg, Louisiana. Here, atop historic old Ft. Beauregard on the Ouachita River, degree teams from various cities have performed before gatherings numbering as many as 1500. The site is still studded with virgin pine timber and has been furnished in a manner carrying out a rustic motif. The original breastworks of the fort, first used by Confederate forces, are still intact.

A small natural amphitheatre, surrounded by timber, was discovered in the historic Amana Colonies of Iowa by a brother who flew over the area in his light plane. "Hiram In the Hills", an annual outdoor degree, is the result of his discovery and his vision. Lodges of two adjacent counties cooperate in sponsoring the early August event in this lovely and peaceful setting. In preparation each year, the grass on the gentle slopes is mowed and the area is sprayed from the air by the discoverer of the site, to eliminate mosquitoes and other insect pests. Entrance to the site is through a gate at the end of a lightly traveled country road, where tilters admit Masons from a wide area, beginning in mid-afternoon. By late afternoon, Iowa beef and roasting ears of corn, cooked in covered pits, are ready for a picnic in a meadow area. After the meal, the men take seats on the grassy slopes or in folding lawn chairs which they have brought along. The natural lodge room is furnished with rustic, simple furniture in keeping with the beauty of the setting. While most of those attending are comfortably dressed in casual attire, the complete corps of Grand Lodge officers, who will confer the degree, are fully attired in tuxedos, embroidered aprons and sparkling collars for their jewels. The proceedings are conducted with impressive dignity and this event is eagerly awaited by the several hundred who annually attend.

The appeal of these outdoor meetings seems to be multiple. First, there is the tradition that it was thus that the ancient Masons met; hence, the desire to recapture the past. There is also the appeal of the great outdoors, even though sitting through a degree is rather passive activity. Perhaps there is something intangible about the open air meetings that can be experienced only by actual attendance. The novelty obviously has great appeal as does the sociability, with the more relaxed atmosphere of the informal setting.

There are many Masons, of course, who do not approve of outdoor meetings. They object to the risks taken of exposing Masonic work to the public eye and they object to the carnival atmosphere which is created.

While many conscientiously believe that these outdoor meetings in unusual spots add to Masonic interest, others see them as closely allied to such things as being married on an elephant's back. While they do attract publicity to Masonry, they do not increase the dignity of the institution, it is argued. Aside from the practical consideration of providing necessary security for the meetings, opponents see these events as "more of a show or entertainment." One Grand Master, in refusing to grant permission for an outdoor meeting, expressed the fear that the public might confuse such an open-air, night-time function with the activities of the Ku Klux Klan.

Grand Lodge approval must be obtained, of course, to move a charter to a sylvan glen, a quarry or to a mountain top for the purpose of opening a Masonic lodge. Careful selection of the site to ensure maximum security is a prerequisite. Elaborate arrangements for tiling have sometimes been found imperative. At a rock quarry in Indiana, an Old Settlers reunion was attended by eighteen hundred Masons in 1967. Here forty-five tilers were stationed around the rim of the cavernous opening to guard against the approach of eavesdroppers. At one Oregon meeting, tiling was accomplished by a sheriff's posse, which was composed entirely of Masons.

Tilers on horseback have been used at a Marietta, Ohio, quarry site, each in turn shouting from the rim of the quarry to report.

One Grand Lodge committee, in studying the propriety of open air meetings, found that there had been such meetings held which did not appear to have been carefully and adequately tiled, but conceded that much of the same laxity occurred in meetings held inside buildings.

Other preparations for these events vary greatly from place to place. The choice of site should be the most important consideration. Probably the site should suggest the activity, rather than the reverse. The setting is important to create a proper atmosphere of dignity compatible with that of the Masonic institution. Thought should be given to accessibility, natural beauty, adaptability to Masonic usage, and the comfort of the audience. For instance, a quarry may be excessively dusty and, if the affair is held in mid-day with the sun bearing down, the heat may become unbearable.

In some locations more or less permanent outdoor lodge rooms are established and maintained from year to year. Lodge furniture is constructed from natural materials found on the location. At Marietta, the furniture was made from rough cut tree trunks or limbs, lashed together. Stone altars have been constructed at some quarry and mountain sites. At other sites, this may not be possible and lodge furniture is hauled in for the occasion.

A recent British Masonic magazine featured on its front cover a photo of the Master of a Texas lodge in ten gallon hat and short sleeved sport shirt, seated in a folding chair at a pedestal for an outdoor meeting. With two micro phones at his station, two more folding chairs close by and a car in the background, nothing else was visible except miles and miles of Texas plains.

A lodge at Ely, Montana, dedicated an open air lodge room on Mount Lebanon. Here the forest service had built a road to within one hundred yards of a lodge room, which was described as being very unique, atop a beautiful mountain, with a rock and concrete altar.

A rustic Middle Chamber, complete with pillars and winding stairs, was set up at a country site in Indiana in the 1930's. Here, on a tree encircled hillside, one of the degrees--often the second--was conferred annually.

The location may even indicate the time of day for the meeting, if this has not already been set by local practice. An Indiana quarry lodge was held at five a.m. on July 4. Certainly, early morning before the heat of the July day hit the quarry would be ideal. Evening hours, with closing before lights become necessary, may be more desirable at some locations. If access to the site takes considerable time, a mid-day hour may be necessary. Two features of these meetings which are commonly observed; food and degree teams. While some meetings are preceded by a meal at the lodge hall or a restaurant, more often a picnic in some variation is provided. Degree teams are often imported from another area to provide additional interest.

Once established, these meetings tend to become annual affairs, some continuing for many years. The Marietta quarry meeting is being revived in 1981 after thirteen years of inactivity.

Lodge leaders, constantly seeking ways to interest the membership and to find some way to get more attendance at meetings, are becoming more interested in any such novel and different activity as this. Success in one open air meeting invites attempts at copying elsewhere. However, those who have succeeded are quick to caution that a successful outdoor meeting does require much work and advance planning. The printed program for the open air degree put on by Harmar Lodge Number 390 at Marietta lists a general chairman and fifteen committees. They caution that the ambition and desire of those in charge is a must. Without enthusiastic and dedicated leadership, there is no guarantee of success, even though the idea may be fresh and untried in your area.

Editor's Note:

For many years, Brother Keith Arrington served as the Assistant Librarian for the Grand Lodge of Iowa Library, where he served as a "fount of knowledge" for scores of Masonic students. He has had many articles printed in Masonic journals. We thank Brother Arrington for this discussion of open-air meetings.