

Tall Cedar's History: Whence Came We?

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Before going into the history of Tall Cedarism, I would like to quote the Preamble of our Constitution, which is not only adequate, but sometimes fills a need for those men who are our brothers through the great Masonic fraternity in which we progressed from the apprentice, fellow craft, and Master Mason Degrees.

"It is to promote wider acquaintances and friendship among men already bound together by fraternal vows, to perpetuate itself as a fraternal and social organization, and to provide for its orderly government." In the good book it states "in the beginning." And thus it is with the Tall Cedars of Lebanon — there was a beginning, just how and where is a moot question and a lot of it is conjecture, but some facts do come out of the wood (Cedar wood, i.e.).

Apparently it all started in 1843 with some very energetic and imaginative Master Masons who dreamed up the idea of a Tall Cedar Degree, and in those days the degree was called "The Ancient and Honorable Rite of Humility." The name "Tall Cedar Degree" does not reveal itself other than the possibility of a somewhat shorter title than the aforementioned, and this was to remain as such until we adopted the title of "Tall Cedars of Lebanon of the United States of America" upon incorporation in 1902.

It was some time around 1846, after the meetings of the Grand Lodge and some of the Blue Lodges in the Pennsylvania and New Jersey area that they would have the Tall Cedar Degree performed, and from what I can gather, it was a form of hazing in which the candidates for the degree were gotten from those willing to receive it, and it was put on by those who had already received the degree. However, there was a great lapse of time and nothing was heard about this degree until the early 1850's when a Dr. Thomas J. Corson from the New Jersey area started conferring the degree, as he had received it in Philadelphia.

As you well know, around that time your only means of travel was the horse and buggy, and the train, so this degree was not performed often, but rest assured, whenever they had a good gathering of Master Masons, the Tall Cedar Degree was put on. It was always so much clean fun to see someone get the works, even as it is today. Some "Old Timer" spoke of a jury of men being housed in the hotel in a town in New Jersey that heard the Tall Cedar Degree was to be performed. The Deputy Sheriff being a Mason took those that were also Masons to see it performed and after it was over brought them back to the hotel. It must have been really something to go to all that trouble.

Upon the death of Dr. Corson in 1879 the Tall Cedar Degree was continued by Dr. Stevens, who organized the first regular degree team and went to several cities and towns throughout the New Jersey area performing the work.

It seems that Glassboro, New Jersey, was the focal point for the performance of the Tall Cedars

Degree, for whenever they had enough candidates the work was put on. In 1887 Dr. Stevens and his degree team came to the town and conferred the degree on Frank W. Bowen, Orlando M. Bowen, and thirteen other candidates. I mention the names of these brethren because they were part of the charter group that formed the Tall Cedars of Lebanon. Even today, the Pitman Masonic Club in Pitman, New Jersey is where the 34th degree is performed, and perhaps is the aftermath of the Tall Cedar Degree.

In similar manner as the 34th degree is now conferred, at Pitman Masonic Club on May 24, 1901, fifty-four Master Masons who had received the Tall Cedar Degree met in Glassboro, New Jersey, to watch and confer the degree on 53 candidates from Glassboro, Clayton, Williamstown, Manuta, Woodbury and Philadelphia, with the following as officers. They were Grand Mogul Frank W. Bowen, Vice-Mogul Jacob Bibb, Treasurer T.C. Allen, Secretary Dr. F.A. Stanger, Conductor S. Stanger Iszard, Assistant Conductor Charles W. Wood, Inside Announcer W.H. Jones, Outside Announcer B.T. Ferrell, Preparer of the Forest Bresier Westcoat, Jr., Chaplain Rev. John H. Algar.

I mentioned above officer's titles to give you an idea of what comprised Tall Cedar Degree Team. It seems that the library of the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania has a manuscript in its archives written in 1864 by Brother William H. Adams, Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge, recording the secret work, and a description of the degree.

Four Master Masons who received the Tall Cedar Degree later became Supreme Tall Cedars. They were Frank W. Bowen, and Orlando M. Bowen in 1887, David H. Lukens in 1888, and John S. Broughton in 1889. The above brethren along with several others (fifteen in all, charter members of our organization) assembled in the State Capitol of New Jersey, in the City of Trenton, on March 18, 1902 for the purpose of establishing a fraternal order to be known as the Tall Cedars of Lebanon of America for fun, frolic, and fellowship. These brethren felt that since this form of friendship and sociability occurred so infrequently and had little form, that by incorporating they could eliminate the haphazard, disorganized methods of conferring the Tall Cedar Degree and thus stabilize and preserve a worthwhile ceremony.

I honestly believe that in the Prologue and Royal Court we have one of the most beautiful ritualistic works, and we are indeed thankful to Rev. George S. Gassner who was instrumental in making up the ritual. It comes directly from the first book of Kings, Chapter 5 verses 1 through 10, and the second book of Chronicles, Chapter 2 verses 8 and 9. Of the two passages, the first book of Kings, Chapter 5 is more specific. It revolves around the building of the Temple of Jerusalem, and that King Solomon had to rely on the help of King Hiram of Tyre who sent his Hewers of Wood into the forest of Lebanon to strike down and shape all the tall cedars for use in the Temple. Thus the Tall Cedars of Lebanon have a biblical background, and performance of the Tall Cedar Degree in the Blue Lodges at the conclusion of their meetings brings us closer to our Masonic forbearance.

Thus, from March 18, 1902 to 1971, we are known as the Tall Cedars of Lebanon of the United States of America. However, on November 13, 1971, in our 70th year of existence, we instituted a Forest in Canada, and became known as the Tall Cedars of Lebanon of North America. While our strength of membership lies in the eastern section of the United States, we're slowly expanding westward.

All down through the years the Tall Cedars of Lebanon had, in one way or another, on occasion contributed to worthy causes. However they really became of age when they decided that “no organization could continue to prosper unless it had a definite uplifting objective for the benefit of humanity.” These were the remarks of the Most Worshipful Grand Master Harry Campbell of Washington, DC in 1933. After years of investigation and research, in 1951 they found not only a worthy cause but one which desperately needed support—muscular dystrophy. Up until 1972 we supported the Metabolism Unit on the tenth floor of the Research Center in New York City through our Contributions and Life Fund Memberships in the National Charitable Objective.

When the Metabolism Unit of the Research Center was closed in 1972, the Supreme Forest was advised that the Muscular Dystrophy Association and the Muscular Dystrophy Association of America were going to submit monies in the form of research grants to various universities and colleges in the search and cure for muscular dystrophy, and they would welcome our support in this endeavor. It was decided that the Tall Cedars of Lebanon of North America would become a part of this project with the Jerry Lewis Tall Cedar Day Camp in the summertime. Thus while one aspect of our National Charitable Objective fades away another one comes into the forefront, with the possible finding of a cure for the dreaded disease through the project and to provide for a little bit of fun for these children in the summertime.

Before I close I would like to leave this thought with you. Should you meet a Cedar wearing a pyramid upon his head, greet him, for he is always glad to extend to you the hand of friendship for he carries in his heart compassion, friendship and love for his fellow man—that is why he is a Tall Cedar.

Bibliography

1. Bullen, J. Edward. “Whence Came We?” Tall Cedars History. The Supreme Forest Tall Cedars of Lebanon of North America. 26 Oct. 2008. <<http://www.tallcedars.org/information/history.htm> >.

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