

Fezzes, Sphinxes and Secret Handshakes

What do Mozart, George Washington, J. Edgar Hoover
and Michael Richards of 'Seinfeld' have in common?

Membership in the mysterious, and dwindling, fraternity of the Freemasons

By Peter Carlson
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Down we go, deeper into the weird wonderland. Past the huge stone sphinxes, past the squatting marble Egyptians, past the two-headed eagles whose chests hold a triangle emblazoned with the mystical Masonic number 33.

We enter the Executive Chamber and gaze on the gold-inlaid ceiling and the purple throne of the Sovereign Grand Commander and my eyes behold the Grand Sword of State, which the Grand Swordbearer carries into each session of the Supreme Council of the 33rd Degree.

And now I'm following S. Brent Morris down the marble staircase, deeper into the bowels of the Washington headquarters of the Scottish Rite of Freemasonry -- the building known as the House of the Temple. The place is as hushed as a cathedral, as silent as a sarcophagus. The only sound is the crisp clicking of Morris's heels on the marble stairs.

Morris is 51, a balding, gray-haired man in a gray suit. He's a mathematician who wrote his doctoral dissertation on the science of card shuffling. For 25 years, he worked as a cryptographer for the National Security Agency. But he can't talk about that. It's classified.

He's also a Freemason. He is a Royal Arch Mason and a Cryptic Mason and a Knight Templar. He is a Perfect Elu, a Grand Pontiff, a Knight of the Brazen Serpent and a Master of the Royal Secret. He is a 33rd-degree Mason, and there is no 34th degree. He's also a Masonic historian and the Scottish Rite's director of membership development.

Morris leads me down the Hall of the Scottish Rite Regalia, where the walls are lined with photo-realistic oil paintings of the garb worn for each of the 33 degrees -- the aprons, the caps, the cordons, the baldrics, the jewels, the rings, the gloves. He heads down another hallway and stops at the threshold of a room.

"This is the Burl Ives Room," he says. "When he passed away, his family gave his personal collection to us."

The room is dark but when Morris steps into it, lights automatically pop on, revealing walls covered with the folk singer's pictures, and an Ives song begins to play.

"It senses our presence," Morris says.

"Skip, skip, skip to my Lou," Ives sings. "Skip, skip, skip to my Lou."

Morris steps out of the room. The lights go out. The music stops. He walks down the Hall of Honor, which is lined with oil paintings of famous Masons -- Harry Truman, Gene Autry, Norman Vincent Peale.

"There's J. Edgar Hoover's picture," Morris says. "Have you heard the rumors about J. Edgar Hoover's dress?"

"Sure," I say. I'd read about the Hoover biography that claimed the famous G-man had been seen at a party in New York, wearing a wig, high heels and a fluffy black dress.

"We have a picture of him in his dress," Morris says.

"You do?" I ask.

Morris steps into a room full of Hoover memorabilia. The director's desk is there, along with his chair and his phone. Plus a collection of his Shriner's fezzes. And pictures of Hoover with Jack Dempsey, with Joe DiMaggio, with Shirley Temple, with the Lone Ranger.

"There's the picture of him in his dress," Morris says.

I take a look. It is a shot of Hoover as a baby, dressed in a long baptismal gown.

Morris cracks up. "I love to do that to people," he says.

Goofy Hats and Gruesome Oaths

My long, strange trip through the world of Freemasonry began, like so many odd adventures, with simple curiosity.

I'd driven past the House of the Temple countless times and wondered what it was. It sits on 16th Street NW near Dupont Circle, looking like the Embassy of Atlantis or the Supreme Court of Mars.

It's built on a mountain of stone steps, and more steps rise in a ziggurat on the rooftop. It's held up by 33 Ionic columns, each 33 feet high. Two-headed stone

eagles perch on each corner of the roof and the gigantic metal doors are guarded by two enormous sphinxes, which stare out toward 16th Street, where passing drivers do double takes and mutter, "What is that?"

At least that's what I used to mutter.

Then one day, I wandered over to take a closer look. I climbed the steps and inspected the sphinxes. I approached the huge metal doors and spotted words carved in the marble below my feet:

The Temple of the Supreme Council of the Thirty-Third and Last Degree

Of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry

For The Southern Jurisdiction of the United States

Erected to God and Dedicated to the Service of Humanity

Salve Frater

I had no idea what that meant.

I rang the bell. Nobody answered. The place was shut tight.

Curious, I frisked my brain for everything it contained about Freemasonry. All I retrieved were three vague factoids:

(1) The weird pyramid with the eye on top that appears on the dollar bill is some kind of Masonic symbol.

(2) It's a secret society that conspiracy theorists believe is plotting world domination.

(3) The geezers who wear funny hats and drive goofy go-carts in Memorial Day parades are Masons.

I wondered: Were the guys in the fezzes trying to take over the world? Did they plan to do it in go-carts? And how did the pyramid and the eyeball fit into the plot?

Back at the office, I turned on my computer and typed one word into a search engine: "Freemasons."

The computer whirred and chugged and revealed what it found: "35,500 matches."

I pointed and clicked. I found Web sites for Freemasons in Canada, Sweden, Japan, New Jersey. These sites touted the generosity of the Masons -- they donate more than \$500 million to charities every year in the United States alone. The sites included endless lists of famous Freemasons: George Washington, FDR, Gerald Ford and Warren G. Harding. Also Ty Cobb, Buzz Aldrin and John Wayne. Mozart was a Mason and he put Masonic imagery in his opera "The Magic Flute."

I kept pointing and clicking. I found anti-Masonic sites that claimed the Masons were devil worshipers involved in crimes ranging from Jack the Ripper's murders to the Kennedy assassination to the Oklahoma City bombing. They said the Masons murdered Mozart because he revealed their secrets in "The Magic Flute."

Those theories were obviously daffy. I went back to the search engine and typed in "Masonic secrets." The computer whirred and chugged and revealed what it found: "8,700 matches."

Within minutes, I read descriptions of secret Masonic handshakes and learned a couple of secret Masonic passwords -- "Tubal-cain" and "shibboleth." I read descriptions of Masonic initiation ceremonies that involved the initiate being blindfolded and having the sharp point of a Masonic compass pressed to his naked breast.

Best of all were the delightfully gory penalties that initiates called down upon themselves if they should ever reveal these secret ceremonies. Like this: "having my left breast torn open, my heart and vitals taken thence and with my body given as prey to the vultures of the air." And this: "having my body severed in twain, my bowels taken thence and with my body burned to ashes and the ashes thereof scattered to the four winds of heaven."

Yikes! And yet somehow the secrets got out anyway.

Intrigued, I kept reading. I learned that Freemasonry is dying out, at least in the United States.

Two hundred years ago, it was a powerful movement that included many of our Founding Fathers. One hundred years ago, it was so influential that it inspired hundreds of imitators. Forty years ago, it reached its numerical peak with more than 4 million members in America.

But now, even its leaders admit that Freemasonry is fading away. Every day, old Masons die and are no longer replaced by a younger generation. Today,

there are fewer than 2 million Masons in America and their average age is well over 60.

I decided to check out Freemasonry while it was still around. I soon found myself in a kind of parallel universe of pyramids and sphinxes, ceremonial aprons and funny hats, Imperial Potentates and Grand Inspectors General.

And mumbo-jumbo. Lots of mumbo-jumbo.

Strange Hieroglyphics

"We're not a secret organization," says Richard Fletcher. "Good lord, we're in the phone book! If we're a secret organization, that's a strange way to do it."

Fletcher is the head of the Masonic Service Association, which means he's the official PR man for Freemasonry. He works out of a modest office in Silver Spring. At 67, he's got a gloriously craggy face. Today he's wearing a white shirt, black suspenders and a colorful tartan tie topped with a Masonic tie clasp. He became a Mason in 1956, shortly after he got out of the Army.

"My dad was a Mason, a 50-year Mason in a lodge in Vermont," he says. "I saw him talking to men I respected and I realized there was a bond there, a camaraderie. When two Masons meet in the street, it's like old home week! They're patting each other on the back and they're instant friends. I saw something there that I liked."

Today, Fletcher has agreed to explain Masonry to me. It's a tough job so he brought along a visual aid.

"I thought this might help you," he says. "It's called the Structure of Freemasonry."

He passes a chart across the table. It's festooned with strange hieroglyphics -- a scarlet cross inside a golden crown, a sphinx's face beneath a shining scimitar, a gold trowel in a blue triangle whose base is broken. Arrows point from one symbol to another. It looks like a corporate flowchart of the occult, as designed by Rube Goldberg.

Slowly and methodically, Brother Fletcher explains it all for me.

First the basics: Freemasonry is a fraternity open to all men over 21 -- 18 in some states -- who are deemed to be of good character. A Mason must believe in a Supreme Being, but his religion is irrelevant. There are Christian Masons, Jewish Masons, Muslim Masons, Buddhist Masons.

Freemasons raise huge sums for charities -- almost \$2 million a day, he says -- but charity is not their main purpose. Their goal is self-improvement through fraternity.

"In Freemasonry, you always hear the phrase, 'We try to make good men better,' " Fletcher says. "We exist primarily to raise the level of commitment and involvement with each other."

To become a Mason, a man must ask to be admitted -- Freemasons don't recruit, Fletcher says. If accepted, the man must pass through the three degrees of the Blue Lodge -- Entered Apprentice, Fellow Craft and Master Mason -- each with its own secret ritual, handshake and password.

That's as far as most Masons go. But nearly half of American Masons opt to obtain higher degrees. There are two paths to those degrees -- the Scottish Rite and the York Rite.

The Scottish Rite is the group with the otherworldly headquarters on 16th Street. In this rite, a Mason can earn 29 more degrees, from the fourth ("Secret Master") to the 32nd ("Master of the Royal Secret"). There's also a 33rd degree, which is an honor bestowed by the rite's Supreme Council as a reward for service.

In the York Rite, the higher degrees are not numbered but they have equally impressive titles -- "Most Excellent Master" and "Super-Excellent Master" and, at the apex of the York pyramid, "Order of Knights Templar."

Some Masons rise to the top in both rites. Fletcher is one of them.

"They're two branches, each teaching aspects of Freemasonry in their own way," he says. "The degrees are actually morality plays. They're acted out by people in costumes and makeup."

The plays are elaborate allegories, sometimes on biblical themes, and they are designed to teach moral lessons that will help make the Masons who act in them, and watch them, better men. I ask him to describe one. He refuses. They are secret. And, like all Masons, he has vowed never to reveal the fraternity's secrets.

"I don't like the term secret," he says. "I prefer to use the term private. What we do is private. There is nothing sinister about it. There is history and ritual and tradition in everything we do in a ceremony."

"I've read some gruesome Masonic oaths," I say. "If you showed me a secret handshake, would Masons really rip out your heart and feed it to the vultures?"

He laughs. "No," he says. "Every Mason on earth knows those oaths are symbolic. I might not have many Masonic friends after that, but my safety would not be in jeopardy."

History I: Enlightenment Party Animals

The Free and Accepted Order of Freemasons is the oldest fraternity in the world. But it's not nearly as old as some Masons would have you believe.

Over the centuries, exuberant Masons have traced the origins of their brotherhood back to the Crusades, back to Pythagoras and Euclid, back to the builders of King Solomon's temple and the pyramids of Egypt, sometimes back to Adam himself.

Less exuberant Masons -- and independent historians -- have concluded that those claims are baloney. Or, to put it more kindly, myths.

Actually, Freemasonry evolved more than 500 years ago from the guilds of stonemasons who were free to travel from city to city in Europe and build cathedrals. The secret handshakes and passwords were originally ways a man could prove he was a member of the guild in the days before ID cards.

Gradually, the stonemasons invited other men to join their brotherhood and it slowly evolved from a labor union into a fraternity. Printed references to Freemasonry date back to 1390, but it wasn't until 1717, when four London lodges united, that modern Freemasonry was born.

In an age of religious hatreds, Freemasonry was among the world's first nondenominational organizations. It became known as a hotbed of the emerging democratic ideas of the Enlightenment, which made it anathema to entrenched powers, particularly the Roman Catholic Church.

But Freemasonry was also a fraternity and Masons were renowned for their post-meeting forays into taverns, where they offered numerous elaborate toasts, each washed down with a generous belt of hooch. They designed special "firing glasses" with extra-thick bottoms so they could smash them down on the table after each toast in an attempt to approximate the sound of gunfire. These dudes were party animals!

By the mid-1700s, Freemasonry had spread throughout Europe and the American colonies, where it attracted many of the men who later led the revolt against King George -- Washington, Franklin, Hancock and Revere. (And Benedict Arnold, although Masons don't mention him quite as often.)

It also attracted a freed slave named Prince Hall, who was initiated into Masonry by a British soldier in Boston. Hall went on to found an African lodge, which later evolved into a parallel Black Masonic organization called the Prince Hall Masons, which still exists today.

After the Revolution, Freemasons became the quasi-official ceremonial arm of the new American government, providing colorful rituals for the laying of cornerstones for public buildings. President George Washington himself donned a Masonic apron and presided over the dedication of the United States Capitol.

Meanwhile, on October 13, 1792, a group of Masons from Georgetown laid the cornerstone for the White House. After the ceremony, they marched back to Georgetown's Fountain Inn and began toasting and drinking.

After the 16th formal toast -- "May peace, liberty and order extend from pole to pole" -- the Masons stumbled off into the night, having forgotten to record exactly where they'd laid the ceremonial cornerstone.

To this day, nobody is quite sure which corner of the White House it anchors. It's just another Masonic mystery.

The Accidental Mason

Down in the depths of the House of the Temple on 16th Street, there's a gallery of oil paintings of famous Freemasons. Bob Dole is there. So are Sam Nunn and Sam Ervin and Douglas MacArthur. And Audie Murphy and Arnold Palmer and John Philip Sousa.

In this august company is a painting of Stephen Joel Trachtenberg, the president of George Washington University. I decided to call him.

"They are a collection of nature's noblemen," he says when I reach him, "some of the sweetest people I've ever met."

Trachtenberg is a 33rd-degree Mason. He never set out to become one, he says, It happened almost by accident.

"When I became president 14 years ago," he says. "I got a courtesy call from some people who introduced themselves as Masons."

The Freemasons have a long relationship with George Washington University, which is, after all, named after their most famous Masonic brother. For years,

they'd endowed a fund to provide scholarships to GW for the children and grandchildren of Masons.

They explained all this to Trachtenberg and then, he says, "they invited me to join."

Wait a minute. I thought Masons didn't recruit and never invited anyone to join. I thought the rule was that you had to ask them.

"Well," he says, "they made it known that they would be happy if I joined."

He wasn't interested. He told his visitors that he was too busy with his presidential duties to attend any meetings. They said that was okay. They promised they'd make it easy for him. So he agreed to join.

"And I'm pleased that I did," he says. "I've met some lovely people who do some very good works and I've learned some things I wouldn't have learned otherwise. And it's been sort of fun."

How did you like the initiation ceremony and those gruesome oaths? I ask.

"I thought it was a little flamboyant, a little robust at times," he says. "But whatever gravity people attributed to the language in an earlier era, it's now largely ritualistic."

Did you learn any juicy Masonic secrets?

"I was sadly disappointed in that regard," he says. "It turns out there are fewer secrets than laymen seem to think."

I hit him with the big question: Is there a secret Masonic conspiracy to take over the world?

"If there is," he says, "they're keeping it from me."

Of course, he couldn't reveal it anyway or they'd feed his heart to the vultures.

History II: 'Murder! Murder!'

After the Revolution, American Freemasons went bonkers for higher degrees and weirder rituals.

After all, why stop with only three degrees when the human mind can conjure up an endless array of elaborate and entertaining rituals?

Soon, there were literally thousands of higher degrees, says Brent Morris, the Masonic historian who took me on that tour of the House of the Temple. And some of the new rituals were very bizarre. In one ceremony, for instance, the initiate carried a human skull while watching a depiction of Christ's death and resurrection. Then he drank wine from the skull, symbolizing "the bitter cup of death, of which we must all, sooner or later, drink."

Such gothic rituals struck many Masons as blasphemous. Soon, preachers began denouncing Masonic rituals as sacrilegious or even satanic. Americans began to wonder what this furtive brotherhood was doing behind the closed doors of its lodges.

And then, one night in 1826, William Morgan disappeared.

Morgan, a disillusioned Mason in Batavia, N.Y., announced that he planned to publish the secret rituals of some of the controversial higher degrees. After that, his printer's shop was torched. Then Morgan was arrested on charges of failing to pay a \$2 debt. That night, a stranger paid Morgan's bail. As Morgan walked out of jail, a group of Masons forced him into a carriage and he disappeared, screaming, "Murder! Murder!"

He was never seen again, dead or alive.

The local sheriff, who was a Mason, instructed his deputy, who was also a Mason, to pack the grand jury with Masons to make sure there were no indictments.

It didn't work. Outraged, the public demanded justice. Ultimately, after three special prosecutors and some 20 trials, four Masons were convicted of abduction. The sheriff got the highest sentence -- 30 months.

The Morgan affair incited a fierce backlash against Freemasonry. Anti-Masons, some of them former Masons, denounced the fraternity as un-Christian and un-democratic -- a secret society that held its own rules higher than the nation's laws.

Masonry, said former president John Quincy Adams, "winds itself around every object of its aversion like a boa constrictor around its victim."

Anti-Masons published almanacs and dozens of newspapers. They founded the Anti-Masonic Party, which elected governors in Pennsylvania and Vermont and won seven electoral votes in the 1832 presidential election.

The effect on Freemasonry was devastating. In Indiana, two-thirds of the lodges closed. In New York, nine out of 10 folded. Masons in Illinois, Michigan and Vermont stopped holding statewide gatherings altogether. Across the country, the fraternity lost nearly half of its members.

But by 1845, the anti-Masonic movement had petered out and Freemasonry began to revive. It regained its membership within a couple decades, but it had lost the status it held in the days when Washington anointed the cornerstone of the Capitol. It also lost its swagger and much of its macho, tavern-rocking bravado.

"When it got back on its feet, it was a much more circumspect organization," says Morris. "After the anti-Mason period, the party animals left the organization. Masonry became very sober, very serious, very pious, very prim and proper."

'A Rare Glimpse at the Inner Chamber'

A guard stands at the door of Temple Noyes Cathedral Lodge No. 32 on Wisconsin Avenue in upper Northwest, holding a curved sword that must be three feet long.

He says he's a lawyer but he won't reveal his name. Tonight, he's serving as "tiler" -- the Mason who stands outside the meeting keeping non-Masons away -- and he's not happy about it. He'd rather be inside, he says, but he was given this dull duty because he's missed a lot of meetings lately.

He opens a little round peephole in the lodge door and peeks inside. There's a lot of laughter going on in there.

This is a special night at the lodge. Hamid K. Toossi will be officially installed as Worshipful Master, the highest rung on the lodge's ladder of seven officers.

Toossi, 48, is an Iranian immigrant, a graduate of Drexel University, the owner of a construction company in Gaithersburg. He's a short man with thick graying hair. For this ceremony, he's wearing white tie and tails, plus a blue Masonic apron.

He became a Mason in 1999, attracted by simple curiosity. "For me," he says, "my curiosity started when I was 12 or 13 years old."

That was back in Iran, during the dictatorship of the shah. Toossi heard rumors about Freemasonry. He heard that it was banned by the shah. He also heard that the shah's prime minister was a Freemason.

"It was this mystery," he says.

Nearly 25 years later, Toossi was living in Maryland and a lawyer friend mentioned that he was a Mason. Toossi asked him a question that Masons hear all the time: Is that pyramid with the eye on top that decorates the dollar some kind of Masonic symbol?

"He laughed and said, 'It's the all-seeing eye of Freemasonry,' " Toossi recalls. And he said, 'If you're interested, we have some open socials.' "

So Toossi attended a social and met some Masons and liked them. He joined, became a Master Mason, then went through the 29 degrees of the Scottish Rite.

Tonight, after serving in the lodge's six lesser positions, Toossi will be installed as Worshipful Master. Unlike nearly all lodge rituals, this ceremony has been opened to outsiders and a couple dozen friends and relatives of lodge members have come to watch.

"It's a rare glimpse at the inner chamber," Toossi says.

Now, the tiler lowers his sword and opens the door for the visitors.

Inside, the lodge looks like hundreds of others across the world: a solitary room on the second floor of a building, with a stage at one end. On this stage are five throne-like chairs. In the center, there's an altar topped, as always, with a Bible and the Masonic square and compass. Around the sides of the room, lodge officials sit in their ceremonial chairs.

"Okay, I think we'll get the show started now," says Keene Taylor Jr., a local real estate agent and past master of the lodge, who is presiding over the ceremony. Standing onstage in a tuxedo and a top hat, Taylor tells the "brother master of ceremonies" to bring Toossi forward.

The master of ceremonies, who is sitting onstage in a tux, rises. Carrying a ceremonial silver baton, he marches slowly around the room, then stops where Toossi stands. He takes Toossi's elbow like an usher at a wedding and the two men march around the room, pivoting sharply at each corner, until they are back at the stage. There, Taylor reads a long list of promises the Worshipful Master must make.

"One: You agree to be a good man and true. Two: You agree to conform to the laws of the country in which you reside. Three: You promise not to be concerned in plots and conspiracies against government . . ."

Toossi stands at rigid attention as Taylor keeps reading:

"You agree to hold in veneration the original rulers and patrons of the Order of Masonry . . . You agree to avoid private piques and quarrels and guard against intemperance and excess . . . You agree to promote the general good of society, cultivate the social virtues and propagate knowledge of the arts . . ."

Finally, after 15 increasingly elaborate promises, Taylor asks Toossi: "Do you submit to these charges and promise to support these regulations as masters have done in all ages before you?"

"I do," Toossi replies.

Taylor steps forward and slips a necklace over Toossi's head. At the end of it is a carpenter's square, symbol of the Worshipful Master's office. Toossi removes his old apron and dons one that symbolizes his new office.

Taylor recites a lecture on the meaning of Masonic symbols: "The square teaches us to regulate our actions by rule and line . . . The compass teaches us to limit our desires in every station . . ."

He finishes and hands Toossi the master's gavel and the charter of the lodge.

"Brethren of Temple Noyes Cathedral Lodge No. 32, behold your master!" Taylor says. "Worshipful Master, behold your brethren!"

Everybody cheers.

I think, Gee, that wasn't too bad. But it's not over. Not even close.

The master of ceremonies recites some ritual words, and then Taylor launches into some mumbo-jumbo: "Consider the great luminary of nature, which, rising in the east . . ."

Then Toossi performs his first official act as Worshipful Master: He reads the lodge charter.

It's a very long charter, written in 1907 and packed with archaic, bureaucratic language, and Toossi reads every word. As he drones on, the master of ceremonies yawns. A cell phone rings. From somewhere in the darkened room comes the sound of gentle snoring.

And there are still six more officers to be installed.

To be a Mason, I'm learning, requires a heroic ability to tolerate tedium.

History III: 'A Nation of Joiners'

The names seem absurd today, random compendiums of pretension and pomposity:

The Order of the Heptasophs. The Independent Order of Odd Fellows. The Improved Order of Red Men.

The Knights of Pythias. The Knights of Columbus. The Ancient Order of the Knights of the Mystic Chain.

The Loyal Order of Buffaloes. The Loyal Order of Moose. The Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks.

For 60 years -- from 1860 to 1920 -- literally hundreds of fraternities arose in America, nearly all of them featuring elaborate rituals stolen from Freemasonry.

It was, as journalist W.S. Harwood wrote in 1897, the "golden age of fraternity."

In a nation of 19 million adult males, fraternal groups that year claimed nearly 6 million members. The Masons and the Odd Fellows were the largest, each with about 750,000 members, followed by the Knights of Pythias with about 500,000 and the Red Men with 165,000. Many men belonged to several groups, and when they died their multiple affiliations were recorded in their obituaries like medals of honor.

Why, Harwood wondered, did so many men join?

There were many reasons: Businessmen used fraternities to network. Immigrants used them to assimilate. Poor men used them to get life insurance and burial benefits. Husbands used them to get away from the wife and kids. But the main appeal, Harwood concluded, was ritual. American men loved the ceremonies, the secrecy, the costumes, the grandiose titles.

For Americans, Harwood wrote, ritual exerted a "strange and powerful attraction."

Historian Arthur Schlesinger Sr. agreed. America was a "nation of joiners," he wrote decades later. "The plain citizen sometimes wearied of his plainness and, wanting rites as well as rights, hankered for the ceremonials, grandiloquent titles, and exotic costumes of a mystic brotherhood."

Rituals derived from Freemasonry were so popular they popped up in the ceremonies of all kinds of nonfraternal organizations -- from the Mormon Church to the Ku Klux Klan to the Knights of Labor to the Grange.

In a nation awash in grandiose rituals, goofy garb and pompous titles, it was inevitable that some jokers would create a parody. Ironically, the jokers turned out to be Masons.

In 1872, Billy Florence and Walter Fleming, two Masons from New York City, invented an organization they called the Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine. It was, of course, not ancient nor Arabic nor mystic. The Shrine was a parody of Masonry complete with its own passwords, ceremonial hats and an array of pompous titles.

The Shrine's initiation ceremony was a bawdy burlesque of Masonry's solemn ritual. Initiates were stripped and blindfolded, they crawled around while Shriners barked like dogs and pretended to pee on them by squirting them with warm water.

Open only to higher-degree Masons, the Shrine was an immediate success because it provided the party atmosphere that had been missing from Masonry since the Morgan scandal. Thousands of Masons donned the Shrine's red fez and gathered to drink, parade, drink some more and kiss any females who wandered within range. They also liked to carry rolls of toilet paper down city streets, yelling like newsboys: "Evening paper!"

For over 40 years, the Shrine was devoted solely to bacchanalian revelry. But in 1920, American puritanism reasserted itself and the Nobles voted to begin funding hospitals for crippled children. Today, the Shriners raises tens of millions of dollars annually to support 22 hospitals. And they don't party quite as hearty as they once did, perhaps because most members are now over 60, perhaps because times have changed.

"Over the years that has died down," says Bill Miskovic, past potentate of the Almas Temple, Washington's Shrine. "We still party, but nobody gets out of hand. Nobody in the organization wants anybody bringing bad publicity."

The 'Seinfeld' Connection

"From Harold Lloyd to Oliver Hardy to W.C. Fields -- throughout my business, I've seen illustrious performers who were Masons," says Michael Richards. "I wanted to know why. What is Masonry. What the heck is this all about?"

Richards is the actor who played Kramer, the bug-eyed nut job neighbor on "Seinfeld." He's also a Freemason.

I met him at the Scottish Rite convention in Charleston, S.C., where he'd come to receive the 33rd degree and deliver a speech. I asked him for an interview

and he agreed. A few minutes later, a man walked up to me and introduced himself as Richards's Masonic "mentor." He said Richards would talk only about Masonry -- no questions about "Seinfeld" or showbiz.

Fine by me, I said.

So now we sit in an empty auditorium and talk about Masonry. Richards wears a conservative blue blazer over a bright Hawaiian shirt and chomps on a gooey health food bar.

"I've been sort of impressed by the spiritual side of Masonry," he says. "I've always been sort of a student of religions, of psychology, mythology, symbolism, that sort of thing. Well, gee, right here in my own country, there's a fraternal organization that incorporates much of that thinking. So I decided to see what it's about. I'm very curious. Like the Kramer character, I barge into things to see what they're like."

Richards became a Mason a few years ago, about the time "Seinfeld" shut down. He decided to take some time off, read some philosophy, do some reflecting. Becoming a Mason was part of that introspective process. The elaborate morality plays of the Scottish Rite degrees contain, he says, some interesting philosophical ideas.

"I've read Jung, I'm interested in archetypal psychology," he says. "I see it as a useful tool to understand the nature of symbols. Masonry utilizes a lot of symbols that offer insights into the human condition."

Masonry is supposed to "make good men better," I say. How has it made you better?

"Consciousness makes a person better," he corrects me. "How you get that consciousness is a personal endeavor."

He glances at my tape recorder. "Can you stop that for a minute?"

I turn it off. He says he isn't feeling well. He says he has low blood sugar. He says that is why he isn't more articulate. Then he says I can turn the machine back on.

I figure I should lighten up a little, so I ask him what he thinks about wearing Freemasonry's famous funny hats.

"People wear funny hats all the time, whether they have a hat on or not," he says, looking very serious. "People wear metaphorical hats -- whatever gives them a sense of definition, a sense of identity and rank."

He says he's been reading *Morals and Dogma* by Albert Pike, the 19th-century Masonic philosopher and former Sovereign Grand Commander who is buried in the House of the Temple. It's a famously dense book and he admits that he found it tough going.

"I don't fully understand it," he says, "but I have an intuitive understanding of what it means."

What does it mean? I ask.

"It's the proclamation of self," he says. "It's a work that's done when one is endeavoring to understand" -- he pauses, searching for the right word -- "life. The life that one is. It's a collection of all the perennial teachings of the world. It's a deep study of all these symbols, these archetypes that make up the human condition. That's in the book. But then you have to deal subjectively with your spiritual constitution, the nature of your position in life, what God has in store for you."

I am stunned. I am speechless. My mind fails to produce a follow-up question.

I thank him for his time. He looks at his watch and hustles off. A limo is waiting outside to take him to his massage appointment.

Fading Away

The Sovereign Grand Commander marches into the Charleston Convention Center on a carpet of royal purple, accompanied by the Grand Sword Bearer, who is bearing a grand sword, and by the Grand Standard Bearer, who is bearing the flag of the Supreme Council of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry.

Behind them, marching in slow procession to the stately strains of organ music, come the rest of the Supreme Council, men clad in tuxedos and robes, ceremonial caps and golden necklaces -- the Grand Minister of State, the Grand Secretary General, the Grand Almoner, the Grand This and the Grand That.

On this October day in Charleston, the Freemasons are going for maximum pomp. Several thousand strong, they've gathered to celebrate the 200th birthday of the Scottish Rite, which was founded, not in Scotland, as a non-Mason might assume, but in Charleston.

Down on the purple carpet, somebody -- maybe it is the grand master of ceremonies -- begins to introduce the foreign dignitaries:

"Sovereign Grand Commander, with pleasure I introduce to you the Sovereign Grand Commander of Spain."

The Spanish honcho marches in, escorted by a cadet from the famous military school the Citadel, who holds a Spanish flag. They stop on the purple carpet, pivot to their left, march a few more steps, stop again, pivot to their right, and march to the spot where the Spanish Sovereign Grand Commander can shake hands with the American Sovereign Grand Commander.

One by one, the honchos from every other country make the same grand entrance -- Venezuela, Portugal, Mexico, Russia, England, Finland, South Africa, the Philippines, the Ivory Coast, and many more -- all of them marching, pivoting, shaking hands.

It is, I suppose, an impressive display of Masonic internationalism, but it is also deadily dull. The problem with ritual is that it's the same damn thing done over and over again.

Bored, I leave my seat and wander around the hall. A lot of bored Masons are wandering around, too. They wear caps of various colors -- black, white, red, blue -- each indicating a different Masonic rank. But they all have one thing in common:

They are old.

Some of them are very old. They lean on canes or hobble on creaky legs. They huff and puff as they climb the convention center's steep stairways and some of them look like they might not make it.

I look around for anyone who appears to be under 40. No luck. Under 50? Maybe one or two. Despite the Kramer factor, the TV generation just isn't there.

Which is precisely the problem for American Freemasonry today. It is getting old. It is fading away. It is dying out. It's gone from 4.1 million to 1.9 million members since 1959.

"It's been declining 4 percent a year for 40 years," says Dudley Davis.

Davis is a Mason and a Maryland-based management consultant. For the past 12 years, he has worked for 17 different Masonic groups who want him to tell them why they're losing members.

He thinks he knows the reasons. They are, for the most part, the same reasons cited by Harvard professor Robert Putnam in *Bowling Alone*, his famous study

of the decline in membership in many organizations: Americans work longer hours. They spend more time commuting. With both spouses working, men spend more time in child rearing and housework.

And then there's television, the entertainment box that keeps Americans cocooned at home instead of out at community meetings.

America is no longer a nation of joiners. Instead, says Davis, "we have become a society of home-based people."

But the decline of Masonry, Davis says, is exacerbated by another factor: Americans no longer enjoy rituals. The ceremonies and the secrets that thrilled us in the golden age of fraternity now seem silly, corny, absurd.

Davis hired a research firm to poll men on why they did or did not join organizations. "Not one man in a thousand said he was interested in pomp, circumstance and ritual," he says. The men hated elaborate initiations and special garb and they detested secret ceremonies: "They just blasted that one."

It's hardly surprising. For decades, American comedies from "Amos 'n' Andy" to "The Honeymooners," from "The Flintstones" to "The Simpsons" have mocked the absurdities of men's lodges.

Once so important to American culture, Freemasonry now seems profoundly out of step. Masons love formality, ornate architecture, grandiose titles, fancy clothes. But America has become a land of informality, utilitarian architecture, first names, casual clothes, casual Fridays.

Davis thinks he knows how to revive the fraternity: Masons should spend less time in their lodges performing secret rituals, and more time doing hands-on charity work in public, where they can be seen by men who might be inspired to join.

"They need to be where the action is," he says, "and it's not in a closed hall doing -- I hate to call it mumbo-jumbo but it is mumbo-jumbo. And when the meeting is over they go downstairs and eat the same old pie with the same old guys."

For over a decade, Masons have paid Davis for his advice, but they haven't acted on it. The problem, he says, is that they really love the mumbo-jumbo. It's what Masonry is all about.

"I've worked my [butt] off to try and save this organization," he says. "I've made good money at it but they won't act on it. Talk about your head in the sand."

The Secret Piercing of the 33rd Degree

Way down, far below the two-headed eagles that perch on the roof, below the sphinxes that peer out at 16th Street, below the Sovereign Grand Commander's purple throne, way down in the basement of the House of the Temple, past the Hall of Honor, past the Burl Ives Room, past the J. Edgar Hoover Room, sits Brent Morris's little office.

It's very quiet down here, as quiet as a crypt.

Morris is the Mason who took me on a tour of this place, who fooled me with his joke about Hoover's dress. But giving tours is just a sideline. He spends most of his time on his job as director of membership development for the Scottish Rite.

It's a tough job, maybe an impossible job. The rite has lost a third of its membership since 1979.

"One of the dilemmas we have," he says, "is that the people who are the most active and the most involved are really satisfied with the way it currently exists -- otherwise they wouldn't be active. So if we make changes that appeal to Generation Xers, then we drive off our most active members."

What changes would appeal to Generation Xers? I ask.

He sighs. He admits that he doesn't have the foggiest idea. Then he starts thinking out loud.

"Certainly the music we'd offer would have to be different," he says. He doesn't look too happy about the prospect of Masonic metal or Masonic rap or Masonic techno.

"I think Gen Xers would be turned off by the baroque titles we have," he says. He doesn't look too happy about that either.

"Maybe you could invent new titles," I suggest. "How about Dude and Major Dude and Heavy Dude?"

He smiles. Then he starts thinking. You can almost see the gears churning inside his bald head. A moment later, he comes up with a suggestion of his own -- Masonic piercing.

"We could have piercings for each degree," he says. "By the time you get to be a 33rd-degree Mason, you'd have so much metal you couldn't get into an airport."

He smiles. "And of course the 33rd-degree piercing would have to be a very private piercing," he says. "Only 33rd-degree Masons would know where that piercing occurs."

He bursts out laughing and his laugh echoes off the thick stone walls. Then he stops laughing and it gets quiet again, quiet as a crypt.

He sighs. "We really don't know," he says softly.

Peter Carlson is a writer for The Post's Style section. He will be fielding questions and comments about this article at 1 p.m., Monday on www.washingtonpost.com/liveonline.

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