

# J. Leon Codd As I Remember Him

George B. Yeates

Virginia Research Royal Arch Chapter No. 1753

September 8, 1984

*Editor's Note: The material in this paper was originally presented at the first meeting of J. Leon Codd Council No. 99, Allied Masonic Degrees in Portsmouth, Virginia, on 20 April 1974. The paper has been edited and had minor revisions for this presentation to Virginia Research Chapter No. 1753.*

It was a warm afternoon in early fall. Miss Robertson's class in ancient history occupied a room on the top floor of three-story Wilson High School. In a class composed mostly of seniors, there were several freshmen who had dared to sign up for it. (One must have a year of history, so why not get it over with was freshman reasoning. Why wait until your last year as the seniors had done?) The school year was only a week old, sophisticated seniors knew their school, but the first-year folks were still genuine neophytes. The class was just settling down after roll was taken, when coming from out in the hall, through the closed door, was heard the sound of running feet. Down the corridor they came, skidded around the corner, and then the sound faded as the runner dashed down the nearby flight of stairs.

Then, to freshmen, an unusual sound. A shrill, high-pitched tin whistle was heard. It was accompanied also by the sound of running feet. True, the steps were not as nimble sounding as the first set had been, but the runner was making good speed. The tooting whistle and the footsteps followed the first set down the stairs and out of ear shot.

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An inexperienced freshman asked his neighbor, an upper classman, "What was that?" All in the room, except the first-year people, were smiling or laughing. "That was Jake chasing some poor cuss who was out of class." "But who is Jake?" and the reply, "Oh boy, you must be dumb, that was Mr. Codd, the principal. He blows a whistle to get your attention. Boy, have you got a lot to learn."

My first experience with Mr. Codd was thus vicarious. A second-hand encounter. I had not even seen him. But I knew I did not want many encounters with a whistle tooting principal who was Willing to run after (and usually catch) offending students.

Let us skip several years. Some funny happenings have occurred at Wilson High. On one occasion, all the male students were ordered to assemble in the auditorium. It seems that there was more tomfoolery going on than Mr. Codd would tolerate. Too many going to the snack shop that was adjacent to the school. Too many people going across High Street (a real No-No) to the hot dog stand. Way too many boys cutting classes and going down to the nearby swamp to sneak a smoke.

Mr. Codd avowed that it would stop and stop immediately or all of us would be expelled and would not return unless our parents came to school with us and earnestly solicited our reinstatement. These rugged pronouncements were met with awed silence. Then, one hardy soul, with more intestinal fortitude than the rest of us (he was seated way in the rear of the auditorium in the area under the balcony and thus clothed in darkness and unidentifiable) shouted with a loud voice those immortal words, "Give me liberty or give me death!" Boys laughed and clapped. Mr. Codd became excited and when Mr. Codd became excited, he stuttered. He fumbled for his whistle and had difficulty in located it. The laughter grew louder. Then the blasting of the whistle finally quieted the boys. "Who-who-who", stammered Mr. Codd, "said that?" Whereupon our raucous advocate of liberty

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thundered back, "Patrick Henry!" The place exploded with laughter. It would seem almost that Mr. Codd would have a stroke. He was purple with rage. The boys did not usually get the better of him in an exchange of wit. He was nonplussed. He could only toot his whistle and try to quiet us down. We were finally quieted and permitted to leave the auditorium, one row at a time. I have always hoped he had a good laugh after he returned home that day.

The students were often very unkind to Mr. Codd. Someone once put sugar in the gas tank of his automobile. At one time, stink bombs were popular as Codd irritants. These were pretty little red glass balls filled with some compound that stunk to high heaven when smashed. The favorite trick was to catch Mr. Codd in the hall with a crowd of students during change of classes. Someone would smash one of the bombs in the hall so Mr. Codd, during his travel, would pass through the gas. Woe be to the culprit if caught, but that stinking gas would really get Mr. Codd worked up and many a student was filled with enough devilment to take the chance.

J. Leon Codd was born in Portsmouth, Virginia, on the 31st day of January in 1875 and died in the same city over seventy-five years later on December 12, 1952. His impact on the citizens of that city was perhaps greater than that of any other person. During his long tenure as Principal of the High School from 1907 to 1941, he probably was in personal contact with 75% of the young people of the town. He was a firm disciplinarian, but had a heart of gold. He did not permit his students to violate the law and rules of his school without having to pay the penalties, but he did promote fun and frolic, plays and movies, dances and parties. Baby Day for seniors was great fun. The Seniors dressed as toddlers and babies and made a great to-do eating lollipops and Suckers. He was a faithful supporter of the athletic teams and was as proud as punch of his outstanding players such as Al Casey and Ace Parker.

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Mr. Codd was a long-time educator. My uncle loved to tell of having him as a teacher at old Elm Avenue school in Portsmouth. Seems Mr. Codd was of a very quick temper and at that time in his life was prone to throw anything that came handy at offending students. Uncle Frank was a proverbial Peck's bad boy one day and Mr. Codd's closest missile was an ink well. Unfortunately the cap was off and the ink splattered all over the room as it flew through the air, much to the merriment of the students and the consternation of Mr. Codd. This occurred about 1896. In 1907, Mr. Codd was promoted to principal of the Portsmouth High School which was then located in the old Green Street School. He moved to the new High School on Washington and King Streets in 1909 and to the brand-new Wilson High on High Street and 4th Avenue in September 1919. He remained at Wilson High until his retirement in 1941. Thirty-four years as principal of the city's main secondary educational facility is no mean impact on his community. Thousands of lives were affected by his care and guidance and thoughtful consideration. Thousands of our today's elder citizens – let's face it, those who graduated from high school as long ago as 1941 (43 years ago) are in the realm of older adults – were influenced during their formative years by this man.

I have often said, that during my four years at Mr. Codd's high school, I thought him to be mean, cranky, irascible, sometimes down right hateful. But the longer the number of years grew from the time I left the school, the more and more I grew to admire, and appreciate, and like him, and came to realize the truly tremendous task he had had before him in teaching and training young people to become worthwhile citizens.

Mr. Codd's wit was sometimes quite caustic. As a poet once said, "A bunch of the boys were whooping it up."<sup>1</sup> It was in study hall, the teacher was absent from the room, we boys – about fifteen of us – were laughing, tussling, throwing erasers, tossing books, pushing chairs, all those things that playful boys do. Suddenly, the door opened and Mr.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Service, "The Shooting of Dan McGrew"

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Codd was standing there. To the boy who happened to be poised to throw an eraser, he asked, "What is your name?" The reply, "Floyd Williams." Next question, "What is your father's name?" The answer, "Mr. Williams." "Oh," replied Mr. Codd, "I thought it must be Smith or Jones or Brown." Mr. Codd demanded to know who were the culprits. "Who threw the book down the air shaft?" No one would talk. So, we all received sentence of indefinite hours in the detention hall. An hour after school until we got old, or told who threw the book, or confessed.

My mother felt such group punishment was unfair and prevailed upon my father to intercede with Mr. Codd on my behalf. Dad was very reluctant but mother insisted. After the interview, Dad reported to the family at the dinner table. "Yes, he had talked to Mr. Codd. Yes, the meeting was very pleasant." Mr. Codd had conducted him on a tour of the school and had explained the whole educational system to him. "No, George was not relieved of his sentence and still had to serve in detention hall." Mr. Codd had explained that Mr. Yeates was to run his awning business as he saw fit and Mr. Codd would run the High School as he best knew how to do it and all would turn out fine.

J. Leon Codd was a graduate of the College of William and Mary. He was a member of the Phi Beta Kappa honorary scholastic society which speaks very highly of his abilities both in his Studies and in campus leadership. An unconfirmed droll story about his undergraduate days is amusing. He is reported to have painted a statue on the campus a beautiful green. Back in 1935, the rumors had it that some of the paint still remained. The story could be true or it could be a figment of someone's imagination. It does make him appear to be a warm human being, participating in college pranks just as you and I did. Our newspapers have told us of college students swallowing goldfish or going on panty raids, or, as some students did, go streaking. Whether or not Jake really did paint that statue would be nice to know. But somehow, such a prank fits in so well with the

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wit, the willingness to stand up and be counted, the vitality, the humanness of the man, that I would prefer that it be true.

Subsequent to his retirement from the field of education in 1941, Mr. Codd entered politics. As a Democrat, Mr. Codd was elected to the Virginia House of Delegates replacing Mr. Claiborne H. Walton, a long time Mason – Royal Arch Chapter, Commandery, Shrine. Brother Walton served from 1938 to 1945, dying in October, 1945. Serving also as delegates to the Assembly with both Brother Walton and Brother Codd was Mr. William Hazzard Wigg Cassell, an active VFW and American Legion member and lawyer by profession.

In November, 1945, Mr. Codd handily bested his opponent in the election for delegates to the Constitutional Convention. The vote was very light. In the City of Portsmouth, Mr. Codd polled 365 votes to only 109 for his opponent, Mr. R. R. Triplet. He carried all ten local wards. Also giving him a majority of the ballots were the voters in South Norfolk and in Norfolk County. South Norfolk's precincts went two to one for Codd with a 34 to 20 vote.

As a member of the House of Delegates, Mr. Codd was a member of the following committees: Labor; Federal Relations and Resolutions; Chesapeake and Its Tributaries; Counties, Cities, & Towns; and Manufacturing and Mechanical Arts.

Mr. Codd was a member of the Methodist Church holding membership in Central Methodist Church on Washington Street. He was married to Julia A. Green of New York State, who survived him by many years, dying March 2, 1972. He was the son of William J. Codd and Sarah Rebecca Hunt. A brother, William J. Codd, was younger than he. Jake and Julia were the parents of two daughters, Marjorie, who like her father is an educator

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and was head of the History Department at Wilson High, and Sarah Rebecca, who as an eminent artist practiced her art in Philadelphia. In the Codd home today are two very excellent portraits of J. Leon and Julia Codd painted by their daughter. The Codd ancestors came to this country from Ireland, which accounts for the flashing, piercing eyes, and ready, quick wit that characterized him so well. William J. Codd, Mr. Codd's father, built the home at 231 Hatton Street in 1901 and the family has lived there ever since.

J. Leon Codd was initiated into the mysteries of Freemasonry in Portsmouth Naval Lodge No. 100 on December 8, 1900. Five days later on the 13th, he was passed to the degree of Fellowcraft, and on the 27th of the same month, he was raised a Master Mason. Even for a young man of only twenty-five, this is excellent progress through the learning of the catechisms. To add to this impressive start, he was elected Junior Warden of Naval Lodge on June 3, 1901; Senior Warden on June 2, 1902; and installed as Worshipful Master of Naval Lodge on June 24, 1903. Previously on September 2, 1901, he also had been elected a Trustee of the Lodge. He was elected Treasurer on December 6, 1920, but resigned the office after a short tenure on June 6, 1921. He was presented a Past Master's jewel by his Lodge on June 2, 1922. In ceremonies at his Lodge he was presented a fifty-year veteran's emblem on January 4, 1951, and in February of that year was elected to honorary membership in Naval Lodge.

J. Leon Codd was elected High Priest of Mount Horeb Royal Arch Chapter No. 11 in Portsmouth on September 13, 1915. He was Commander of Portsmouth Commandery No. 5 in 1906. He was a Past Potentate of Khedive Temple, A.A.O.N.M.S., in Norfolk and was elected Grand High Priest of the Grand Royal Arch Chapter in Virginia on October 27, 1926.

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On October 27, 1920, Grand High Priest E. Fenno Heath appointed Jake Leon Codd as Grand Master of the First Veil for the Grand Chapter of Virginia, starting him on the journey to become Grand High Priest seven years later. In those days the elected officers of Grand Chapter were the Grand High Priest, Grand King, Grand Scribe, Grand Treasurer, and Grand Secretary; the other Station officers were appointed. A resolution was presented in 1921 to elect the officers commencing with the Grand Master of the First Veil but the 1922 Grand Convocation did not approve the resolution. Jake was appointed Grand Master of the Second Veil in 1921, Grand Master of the Third Veil in 1922, and Grand Royal Arch Captain in 1923. During that year the Grand King Russell S. Bucker died and the Grand Scribe H. C. Gilmer dropped out of line. On October 29, 1924, Jake was elected to the office of Grand Scribe. At the Grand Convocation held October 28, 1925, a resolution was Passed to elect the Grand Line officers from the station of Grand Master of the First Veil through that of the Grand High Priest. This same year J. Leon was elected Grand King. At the Grand Convocation of October 1926, all Station officers were for the first time elected.

Jake Leon Codd was elected and installed as Grand High Priest Of Royal Arch Masons in Virginia on Wednesday, October 27, 1926. Installing him was Most Excellent Companion William Chapman, Past Grand High Priest and a Past High Priest of Mount Horeb Royal Arch Chapter No. 11, Mr. Codd's home Chapter. Excellent Companion W. W. Sturdevant, then High Priest Of Mount Horeb Chapter, presented him with a beautiful vase of chrysanthemums. Most Excellent John T. Cochran, a name well-remembered by Virginia Royal Arch Mason's elder citizens, was Grand Lecturer. J. Gus Hankins of Washington Chapter No. 9 of Richmond was Grand Secretary.

Jake spent a busy year as Grand High Priest, visiting Chapters and Districts in Roanoke, Blacksburg, Dillwyn, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Petersburg, Lynchburg, Front Royal, Staunton,

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and Charlottesville. He attended the annual stated convocations and installed the officers of Mount Horeb, Port Norfolk, Ionic, John Walters, Petersburg Union Chapters.

October 26, 1927, saw Claude W. Fletcher of Mount Vernon Chapter No. 14 installed as Grand High Priest and Jake joined the ranks of a long line of Most Excellent Past Grand High Priests. Then as now, these Companions are the guiding lights, the senators, the bulwarks, the fuglemen, the Sagacious elder statesmen of Royal Arch Masonry. Most Excellent E. Fenno Heath, the man who had first appointed him to the Grand Line eight years Previously, presented him with a Past Grand High Priest's jewel.

The Royal Arch Schools of Instruction are held each summer at various locations in the state. Companion Codd was a faithful attender, serving the companions in any capacity he was asked. But when daylight faded, the studying ceased and fellowship took over as the order of the day. Jake loved to participate in penny-ante games. Poker was his favorite card game. He was a clever player and would often play until the wee hours of the morning. His prowess as a poker player rivaled that of his ritualistic ability.

### THE WHISTLE

Of course we are a brave lot,

Each boy and girl up here,

But there's something bright and shiny

That we mortally do fear.

No gas attack or liquid fire,

No submarine or bomb

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Could keep us from obeying it,  
No matter what would come.

First thing in the morning  
It thrills out loud and clear,  
Then at recess and dismissal  
Thru-out the live long year.

Oh! how often in between time  
It turns us cold and hot  
When we are skipping, listening or giggling  
It stops us on the spot.

Two or three times to our knowledge  
It's been lost or gone astray,  
But "a bad coin always turns up,"  
And it's found within a day.

It's Mr. Codd's tin whistle,  
And when life in heaven dawns,  
We bet ten cents to a jitney  
That it's used as Gabriel's horn.

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Sounds very appropriate does it not? The poem was composed in 1918 by Miss Emily Nichols, one of Mr. Codd's students. Perhaps you would better recognize her as Mrs. Emily Spong, long time member of Portsmouth's Schoolboard and mother of former United States Senator, William (Bill) Spong.

The City of Portsmouth constructed a new high school in 1955 on Willet Drive. The name of the new facility was transferred to the new site from the old one on High Street and thus the new school is named Woodrow Wilson High School. The fine new gymnasium in the school was named for J. Leon Codd. In ceremonies on the 22nd of November 1955, Companion Codd's longtime associate in education, Robert L. Sweeney, for years the assistant principal under Mr. Codd, and then upon Mr. Codd's retirement, the principal of Wilson, paid tribute to his friend. Mr. Sweeney recalled that one of Mr. Codd's dreams was to have suitable playing fields for the Wilson teams. When the old Portsmouth High School was located at Washington and King Streets, the teams had to walk from there to old Sewanee Stadium on Washington Street near Lincoln Street. The school site on High Street was almost completely surrounded by Scott's Creek on the east and houses on the west. Mr. Codd undertook the task of having the creek filled in so as to provide a playing field. Sweeney said Mr. Codd was sympathetic to the lowly, proud of the studious, and ashamed of the incorrigible.

An editorial appearing in the "Portsmouth Star" on December 13, 1952 had in part these things to say about our beloved Jake:

"Thought with Mr. Codd was never a cold process, but always accompanied by emotion that gave it additional color and force. He was warmly sympathetic to the unfortunate, exploded in righteous anger against any form of cruelty and took a fierce pride in anything to which he had given his unbreakable pledge of loyalty.

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Mr. Codd could be a formidable fighter for the things in which he believed, but he could also approach a student's problem with a father's tenderness, and tears would spring to his eyes when he congratulated a former pupil on some achievement.

All men sometimes make mistakes, but few are big enough to admit it voluntarily in any given instance, Mr. Codd was one of the few. Rarely does one encounter a man so willing as Mr. Codd to revise a decision upon the presentation of new facts or so eager to rectify any possible error. Surely the trait is one of the elements of greatness.

In recent years, Mr. Codd took great delight in the annual Wilson High School homecomings, riding in the parade and blowing the famous whistle which had once been his symbol of authority but now was a trademark beloved by those who used to tremble at its warning treble.

At homecomings stretching far into future years, Wilson Alumni will miss the white-haired man with the piercing eyes, the look of distinction and the warm heart. The many people who came to know and admire him throughout Virginia will not soon forget this man of integrity who had such a marvelous 'talent for friendship'. Here in Portsmouth there are people of every degree who will always remember him with affection, and who will regret that association with him cannot be part of the heritage of their own children. Thus we come to a close on the life of Jake Leon Codd — Educator, Mason, Father, Legislator, influence for good in his community."

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A poem that Florence Hall sent to the family at the death of Companion Codd fittingly sums it all up:

He was a friend whose heart was good

He walked with people and understood

His was zeal we love to see

Which wavered not; that asked no fee

For kindness or service done.

And now that he has journeyed on

PS The good he wrought will never end

For it will live in the hearts of uncounted friends.

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