

The Best of the Best

Allen E. Roberts

Virginia Research Lodge No. 1777

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Editor's Note: Ordinarily, a speaker will provide a written copy of their paper for inclusion in the Lodge minutes. It appears that Rt. Wor. Roberts, who was Secretary at the time, edited his paper to insert comments about the discussion that occurred during the presentation. It is not clear whether he broke for discussion after each point, or held for the end. I am inclined to think the former. His comments appear in italics.

Ten years ago this month the first of what would become a regular column called "Through Masonic Windows" was printed. It appeared in *The Altar Light*, a publication I believed was needed in Freemasonry. It wasn't a "house organ," so those who wrote articles for it didn't have to worry about stepping on toes. From its beginning Macoy Publishing and Masonic Supply Co. of Richmond wanted to publish it as its house organ. For over four years I resisted the temptation to let Macoy, or anyone else, assume the costs and headaches. But I finally succumbed, and have regretted it ever since. For three years I edited *The Altar Light* for Macoy, then the publication was abruptly discontinued.

On the announcement of its demise, Jerry Marsengill, Editor of *The Philalethes* magazine called me. After expressing his tongue-in-cheek sorrow he asked me to continue writing the column "Through Masonic Windows" for *The Philalethes*. As I had been a member of the Society since 1952, and a Fellow since 1963, I agreed. And I've been happy with the non-monetary arrangement ever since. It has "forced" me to keep in touch with what's happening in the Masonic world.

The Best of the Best - Allen E. Roberts

When our Master asked me to pass along to you some of the best items that have appeared in "Through Masonic Windows" over the years I readily jumped at the opportunity. Then came the difficult part - trying to determine the best or the best. I've had to narrow this down considerably, so I've selected a few of those items I think will arouse your approval, your ire, your thinking, and I hope provoke some spirited discussion.

The first of these no one has read yet; it will be in the June column. It concerns a field mentioned in other columns, one I feel strongly about -- censorship.

Unbelievable? The Masonic Home Journal of Kentucky was censured by the Masonic Chronicle, "Official Bulletin of the Supreme Council 33, A&AR" of New York. Why? The MHJ expressed an opinion on the legality of a resolution of its Grand Lodge pertaining to the sale of liquor by the drink. According to the NY paper: "It [the MHJ] possesses no right to express an editorial opinion upon any subject conflicting with the sentiments of a minority, however small, existing in the generality of the Order." Wow! The reasoning: The MHJ is "published by a Masonic charity." Asks the editor of the MHJ: "Pray what opinion can we, or anyone, express that will not conflict with someone's views or sentiments or sentimentality?" The editor further notes: "We have been censured, also, by a number of brethren because we said that profanity was un-Masonic, and that Temperance was a Masonic virtue. What, pray, is our province as an editor?" A good question. Let's debate it. Occasionally one or two members of our Society objects to something that appears in The Philaethes magazine. We've been fortunate, however. The items objected to always bring in dozens of compliments. You be the judge, we'd like your opinion: Should Masonic editors always aim to please 100% of their readers? What should their policy be?

The Discussion was lively and spirited. The consensus was there should be no censorship in Freemasonry, that every subject should be open for discussion. It was noted, however, that there will always be some form of censorship. Editors of publications will always determine what should and should not be published.

Another field I've written about extensively in several columns will again be mentioned in June. This concerns solicitation. Here we have two points of view.

The Grand Lodge Bulletin of Iowa ran a lead article titled "Solicitation or Liquidation -- Which?" At first glance it appeared to be merely another "pitch" for open solicitation. Then we find it was written by an active Past Master who has been a member for 53 years and is the Treasurer of his Lodge. He's also active in all branches of Freemasonry. "Unless corrective action is taken very soon," he writes, "Masonry, as we have known it in the past, will be unknown in another 20 years. We cannot continue our established rate of decline and survive. Remember, as goes the ... Lodge, so goes the York Rite, the Scottish Rite, the Shrine, and all other appendant Bodies. I wonder what these United States will be like in another 20 years when all of these organizations are gone, organizations that once stood for all that was good and right and just in this land of ours." He closed by saying: "I stand for action before it is too late and I stand for solicitation. Let us give it a fair chance to work and to succeed." The Editor, Toni Eggleston who is also the Grand Secretary, reminded the members of the Grand Lodge that they have the privilege of submitting resolutions to amend the Masonic Code of Iowa. He also invited comments on the questions raised.

That is one point and is one of the better arguments in favor of open solicitation. Here's another argument, this one in opposition to solicitation in any form.

The Best of the Best - Allen E. Roberts

The Indiana Freemason printed a paper written by S. Brent Morris, FPS, which he presented at the Northeast Conference in 1983 titled "The Siren Song of Solicitation." Dr. Morris has studied the question of solicitation scientifically and mathematically (that's his specialty). "Certainly non-solicitation is not a Landmark," he said. "It does deter growth, but so do the requirements that petitioners believe in the Grand Architect, that they be educated enough to appreciate our ceremonies, and that they be able to pay our initiation fees." He believes solicitation would tempt many Lodges to accept all petitioners, thereby creating long-term problems. He points out that ritualistic organizations similar to Freemasonry, such as the Odd Fellows, do have open solicitation, yet Odd Fellowship has suffered an 82% decline since 1900! Freemasonry has increased by more than 390% in the same period! Concerning this Brent states: "Unless we can explain why solicitation did not save the Odd Fellows, we cannot begin to hope that it will work for us." There's no "wishful thinking"; no "shooting from the lip," in Brent's analysis. He has presented cold, hard facts. However, many of us don't want to be confused by facts. So, what should we do? Why not stop giving merely lip service to the need for developing Masonic leaders?

The subject of solicitation also provoked a lively discussion. Those present appeared to be opposed to solicitation, but they felt the word should be defined as to what it means - exactly. Attempts to accurately define it proved fruitless. It was noted, however, that solicitation in some form as always been and always would be with us.

For a change of pace let's look at this one because it's something with which any of us could be confronted, especially those who are, or become, leaders in the Craft.

The Cabletow, official publication of the Grand Lodge of the Philippines, reported an interesting legal case. It's worth passing along to the readers of *The Altar Light*. It's officially known as "State vs. Drake. 122 S.C. 350; 115 S.W. 297." D.C. Drake was charged with violating the rules of Freemasonry. In answer to the charges he sent a confidential letter to the Worshipful Master of the Lodge. It contained derogatory statements about the accuser. The WM made the letter public, and Drake was sued for libel and convicted. The case went to the Supreme Court of South Carolina which found: "Drake wrote the letter in confidence to the Master of his Lodge, after he had been charged with violation of the rules of the Order, and threatened with being disciplined by the Order, in defense of the charge that had been practically preferred against him. He did not intend that it should go further than the Master and Brethren of the Lodge; he did not publish the libel, but the Master of the Lodge made the contents of the letter public when he received it. It was a privileged communication to the Lodge through its Master. It was a confidential letter to his brother Masons, in defense of his good name and standing in the Order, and such a letter was confidential and privileged. The Masonic Order has the right to investigate any violation of the rules of the Order, and to discipline its members if found violating its rules. And any member, in his defense, has the right to defend himself, and to regard his communication to the Lodge as privileged and imparted in confidence and secrecy, and not to be made public outside of the Lodge room to others than members of the Order." The conviction was reversed.

In June 1983 we find an item noting the Grand Lodge of Spain had been, at last, been formally constituted. And I added this: "This is excellent news, indeed. For over 40 years there has been resentment in many quarters because Freemasonry was cast along with communism in Spain. Yet the taxes of American Freemasons were being used to help the dictator Franco. May the new Grand Lodge continue to grow strong and spread the principles of Freemasonry throughout Europe."

In 1978 *The Altar Light* in its "Windows" column commented on the Grand Lodge of Iowa's attempt to make its annual Communications more attractive. It asked several questions through its *Bulletin*: Would paying higher mileage and per diem help bring more delegates? The article takes it from here:

"If members are going for money they are not really interested in Lodge at all times." "The home Lodge should pay the Master and Wardens for their time at Grand Lodge." "You could increase it to \$1 a mile and still only the ones that usually come will attend." The reply to whether or not a Lodge should be punished for non-attendance brought interesting comments. Many favored some kind of punishment; one disagreed by claiming: "I think you can get more from a man if you pat him on the back rather than kick him in the rear." It would appear the noon meal wasn't enjoyed: "I realize the O.E.S. has gone to a lot of work to provide food for the delegates and are using the opportunity to raise money for a good cause. However, the amount of food and the type of food did not justify the price charged." "I think good meals and plenty to eat means a great deal to men who work and I heard several who didn't think enough was served." The Grand Master met with the Masters and Wardens, and this proved to be a big plus. One brother wisely stated: "I feel a place in Grand Lodge is needed for questions and answers." Another brother made a statement that perhaps should be taken to heart by all Lodges and Grand Lodges: "I come mostly to get some information on how to successfully operate my own Lodge, keep the membership up, keep our finances in good order." And, "I have many questions. I could use some encouragement, some constructive advice, and some basic direction. The Grand Lodge is missing a great opportunity to provide potential Masters and Wardens with real direct leadership and education. By all means, we need to have group meetings to educate and encourage our future leadership. P.S. I bet your attendance would improve." *The Bulletin* ended with "YOU said it." *The Altar Light* echoes that last phrase.

In the column for August 1983 it was noted that the Grand Master of Masons in India was also the Chief Justice of the country. In 1982 he installed a good friend, a lawyer, as head of the Western Region of Masonry in India. The Grand Master offered this advice:

"In order to rule and to administer wisely and well you must eschew all thoughts of popularity with everyone, because in the course of your administration, you will be called upon to make certain hard decisions. Always, when a question arises, first try persuasion and an appeal to reason, but whenever you fail in this, do not hesitate to act firmly and to act swiftly and with determination. This certainly will make you unpopular. Many people will talk against you any way for that is the fate of anyone who is at the head of an organization, whether he be the head of a Masonic organization or of a government. People will keep on talking and some people will talk behind other people's back. You should pay no heed to them. It is also futile to contradict such talk, because people as a rule love sensation. Sensational falsehoods and sensational rumors have far greater attraction than bare unvarnished truth. Also do not try to convince everyone about the correctness of your viewpoint or your case."

He offered this solicitous help: "For all those who talk behind your back, remember again these lines of [John] Dryden, 'But far more numerous was the herd of such / Who think too little, and talk too much.'"

There are many Research Lodges in the United States. Most of them are doing little, if anything, much like this Lodge did for many years. Two, Iowa Research Lodge No. 2 and Missouri Lodge of Research, publish books and give them to their members, selling copies to others. A few publish yearly Transactions similar to ours. One, Southern California Research Lodge, sends out reams of clippings and information gleaned from the Masonic

world. It makes good Masonic books available at a discount to anyone interested. This year it started presenting a book to all newly Raised Masons in California. (Modesty prevents me from telling you the name of the book.) Another is doing what I think all Research Lodges should do, and "Windows" for December 1982 told the story:

Walter F. Meier Lodge of Research No. 281 is going to sponsor a "College of Masonic Knowledge." There will be ten sessions on Saturdays from 9 a.m. 'til noon.... Information about Freemasonry from pre-Biblical days to the present will be covered. They'll discuss several Masonic "firsts," Old Charges, Landmarks, the anti-Masonic period, and several other topics. The course will be concluded by an address by the Grand Master. This is certainly a step in the right direction. Others have done something similar over the years. We even took some of our Masons "back to school" 16 years ago in Virginia. It's something that should be a continuing process - and wide-spread.

So successful was this experiment it has been continued.

It was noted that for years our Research Lodge did nothing except meet quarterly; that there were two or three members who prevented us from even publishing a quarterly bulletin. It wasn't until Ernest M. Moore, Jr., became Master and determined we would start publishing. He ordered a history of the Lodge to be written and printed. Yearly Transactions followed and have been continued. The discussion indicated that Research Lodges must do something to justify their existence.

Although I wrote an article on this subject for our *Virginia Masonic Herald* I feel it should be repeated because it's part of the history of Virginia Freemasonry. This appeared in the column for October 1982:

The Best of the Best - Allen E. Roberts

While gathering information and writing a book on the beginnings of Freemasonry in the new world, I've found many interesting tidbits. Not the least of these is information I've been seeking for more than 30 years. Soon after becoming a Mason I was told the story of Masons Hall in Richmond, Virginia. It's extremely interesting, but one statement troubled me. It was claimed it was the oldest Masonic Temple still in constant use for Masonic purposes in the United States. I had also heard that Royal White Hart Lodge in North Carolina claimed its Temple was the oldest. I pleaded for information from North Carolina. Always my pleas were answered with a brief pamphlet that proved nothing.

Now the answer is clear. Royal White Hart Lodge No. 2 in Halifax began meeting in April 1765. From 1772 to 1783 there is a gap in its minutes, but most of its meetings were held in William Martin's Ordinary. This is recorded in Dr. Thomas C. Parramore's Launching the Craft, which tells the story of the first 50 years in North Carolina's history. He later adds: "On December 15, 1821, the brethren of Royal White Hart finally convened 'at their new hall'." The brethren of Richmond Lodge No. 10 first met in Masons Hall on July 11, 1786. The Hall has been continuously used for Masonic meetings ever since.

This was added at the end of the column: "If you think I'm biased toward Virginia, let me hasten to predict there are going to be many unhappy Masons in the Old Dominion when my book is published." I should add this concerning Masons Hall; it's the oldest meeting place of a Grand Lodge still in existence in the United States. An item appearing in the column for October 1984 pictures Brotherhood in action:

The Wisconsin Masonic Journal has a brief story of a Lodge that is really making Masonry visible and a good neighbor. Silver Spring No. 337 has been making

The Best of the Best - Allen E. Roberts

contributions to its community since 1978. Gifts have included a wheel chair and blood centrifuge; equipment for the cardiopulmonary resuscitation training program; sponsorship of students. Its latest gift was a computer to the Whitefish Bay Library. It established a special fund in 1972 to administer the charitable activities of the Lodge. What an excellent plan that every Masonic Lodge in the country could follow!

I'm happy to report that a few Lodges did follow the plan of that Wisconsin Lodge. Among them is Babcock Lodge No. 322. Occasionally we find other charitable endeavors sponsored by Master Masons. One of these was recorded in the April 1985 column:

CHRISTMAS, "Are you alone?" read a flyer sent out by the Freemasons of Des Moines, Iowa. "If you have no one with whom to spend Christmas, the bodies which meet in the Masonic Temple ... be happy to have you spend Christmas Day with us. We will serve from 11 a.m. until 5 p.m. or until people quit coming." Five 15 passenger vans brought guests from several nursing homes, group homes, and other places to the Masonic Temple throughout the day. In all, 612 were fed all the trimmings. Fifty-two Masons and their wives volunteered to share their holiday with those less fortunate. The cost? Less than \$1,700, and the leftovers were delivered to the Catholic Workers House, Missions, and other places. It wasn't done for the publicity, but that didn't hurt. Three television stations, '20 radio stations and two newspapers covered the event. "The greatest thing I've seen in 30 years," said a PGM. You can be certain our good editor, Jerry Marsengill, had more than a hand in this affair.

As many of you know, I was in Des Moines a year ago last December to speak at Iowa Research Lodge No. 2, while you were meeting here. I was amazed to see the pile of

candy, toys, food, and other items stacked up in the Masonic Temple waiting for the Christmas dinner. That year, 1985, over 1,400 people were served and over 800 children received candy and toys. Last year the number again doubled. Most notable, many Catholic churches insisted in sharing in the fun. This interesting item appeared in the February 1985 column:

The New Zealand Freemason tells us about a new television series. It's titled "A Beginners Guide To" It will cover numerous subjects to help the viewing audience better understand what's going on around him. What makes this newsworthy for us? One of the programs will be "A Beginners Guide To Freemasonry"! The producer isn't a Freemason, but he's receiving the support of the Grand Lodge leadership. A well-informed Brother has been selected to answer the many questions posed. The producer noted: "The programme is no more than an introduction to the subject but it should whet the interest of people and it may remove some misconceptions. Even if it only scratches the surface it should provoke some questions and this is healthy. The public is ignorant about Freemasonry for the simple reason that the traditions and principles of the Order have been locked away for so long." Bravo!

Contrast this with this item that appeared in December 1983:

Shortsighted? You be the judge. The producers of a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation radio show about Freemasonry to be aired in October went in search of legitimate information. Their first stop was in Canada, naturally. There they interviewed the Master of Quatuor Coronati Lodge No. 2076, Wallace McLeod. They made an appointment to interview an American Masonic author (me) a month later, then left for England and Scotland. The Grand Lodge of Scotland cooperated by giving them the grand old Scottish Masonic historian George Draffen. The United Grand Lodge of England refused to let any Freemason be

interviewed. Exposés and erroneous information about Masonry by previous audio-visual producers was the excuse. However a couple of non-Masons who had written about Masonry were suggested! They were interviewed. The Canadian producers weren't happy about the arrangement. Can they be blamed? And if legitimate and knowledgeable Freemasons can't, or won't, tell Freemasonry's story, should we complain when the exposure is unfair? Should we be surprised and disturbed when Freemasonry is frowned upon as a secret association? Or should we be proud that the United Grand Lodge of England, or some influential officer in it, prevents the truth about the Craft from being told?

Regrettably there wasn't enough time to read and discuss the above.

Another item I've covered over the years in the column might also be classed as "shortsighted." This concerns the penalties in our Obligations. There are those in our leadership who have bowed, or want to bow, to the critics of Freemasonry by wiping out the penalties that millions of us have not found objectionable for over 200 years. Recently I've been asking this question wherever I've spoken: "Did you feel uncomfortable when you agreed to the penalties as pronounced in the three Obligations of Ancient Craft Masonry?" To date I've found only one man who was. Now I would like to ask you the same question. Were you, and are you, uncomfortable with the penalties?

The discussion was spirited and mixed. It appears that only one man was disturbed when he recited the penalties, but several felt they should be modified. The consensus appeared to be, however, that they should be changed only because Freemasonry wants to change them and not because our enemies say they are barbaric.

Let me close with one more item from "Through Masonic Windows." This appeared in the December 1986 column:

"Masonry in Action" is the title of a heart-warming item in the *Masonic Light* of South Carolina. Scottsville Lodge No. 426 of Illinois wanted to assist the drought-stricken farmers of South Carolina. Its plan was to send one truck load of hay to help feed the starving cattle. When it learned the gesture would be welcomed, this little Lodge of 60 members loaded four trucks instead of one and sent them to the Greenville area. The truck drivers, not Masons, were accompanied by their wives and four Scottsville Masons. A non-Mason paid for their accommodations and meals. Because of this Brotherhood in Action, 2,000 bales of hay saved many of the hungry cattle. Three television stations covered the event.

I ended that item by saying: "Wonderful!" It's what I say whenever I come across a story that proves that Freemasonry is alive and well; whenever Master Masons put Brotherhood into action.