

The Beginning and the End

Tonight I would like to talk about St Johns Lodge No 284, a little of the History and what the future brings to the Lodge and the District. We normally talk about a beginning and an ending in that order but it can also start off with an ending. Tonight will likely be the end of DDGM Official visits to St Johns Lodge #284, Brussels and on 5th May, 2012, under the direction of M.W. Bro Garry D. Dowling, they will amalgamate with Wingham Lodge #286.

Just to go over a little history of what happened in the year 1872;

- Simpsons was formed in Toronto
- John McCrea, who was to write "In Flanders Fields", was born.
- First issue of the Toronto Mail which was to become the Globe and Mail
- Canadian Pacific Railway was formed
- First International Soccer game was held, a zero, zero draw between England and Scotland, "We was robbed!"
- First FA cup final Wanderers-Royal Engineers 1 vs. Bolton 0
- Ulysses S. Grant was elected President of the USA
- John A MacDonalld was re-elected Prime Minister of Canada
- The Toronto Trades Assembly organized a "Workingman's demonstration" on Apr 15th 1872. They marched through the streets with four bands and 10,000 people came out to watch. This was continued through the 70's and 80's and Peter McGuire of the American Federation of Labour observed this in 1882 and proposed Labour Day, which was officially recognized in Canada in 1884.
- The Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Canada was M.W. Bro. William Mercer Wilson (again)
- And finally leaving the best to last.....

St Johns Lodge #284 received its Charter from the Grand Lodge of Canada on July 11th 1872. 139 years ago. They paid \$30 for their Charter. The seven original members were members of Forest Lodge No. 162 in Wroxeter who lived in or near Ainleyville, which was incorporated into Brussels in the same year. The first Worshipful Master was W. Bro W.J.R Holmes a local physician. Since then there have been 107 Worshipful Masters of St Johns Lodge. **That was the beginning.**

The first Lodge room was above a store just West of the present day Lodge building and during the next six years 55 members were either initiated or affiliated. Unfortunately, a fire to the building on April 17th 1878 destroyed the lodge room, including the furniture and records and made the lodge inactive for a few months until they could reorganize. New quarters were obtained in the Holmes building on the West side of Main Street and later moved to 495 Turnberry Street above the grocery store. The room was renovated in 1884 and new furniture was purchased most of which is being used in the present lodge.

Endings and beginnings

In 1920, 19 new members were initiated into St Johns Lodge a record year for the Lodge. By 1932 355 members had joined St Johns Lodge, which at that time had 124 members. **Many beginnings.**

In the mid 1980's under the leadership of W. Bro Fred Thuell the present Lodge building, originally the Brussels, Morris & Grey Telephone, was leased from Bell Canada. And then under the leadership of V.W. Bro Gerald Gibson the building was renovated and finally dedicated on April 4th 1987. **Another beginning.**

A few years later the basement was subleased to the Odd Fellows & Rebecca Lodge. This lasted until 2007 when this Lodge went dark. **A beginning and an ending.**

In 1987, Bell Canada donated two riverside lots to St. Johns Lodge, which they then sold to the Municipality for \$1 with the understanding that a park would be created by the lodge. In 1991 Mr. Murray Long, assisted by V.W. Bro Gerald Gibson and R.W. Bro Bruce McCall, built the miniature Masonic Chapel that now stands in the park. The inside of the Chapel is a replica of Melville Presbyterian Church complete with Alter, Holy Bible, pews and a lectern with guest book all of which were created by V.W. Bro Gerald Gibson. Sadly the chapel has experienced many acts of vandalism over the years. I am sure if some of those individuals who have done this, had been brought up to think like Masons this vandalism would not have happened. On a happier note it has also been used for one wedding, **a new beginning in the truest sense.**

Unfortunately over the last 50 years St Johns has, like many other lodges, suffered a decline in membership, where to this point, they are at a present day membership of 22 with 12 being residents and 10 non-residents. This has sadly meant the decision to close down the lodge and amalgamate with Wingham lodge. A decision I am sure was taken with a great deal of thought and a great deal of sorrow. A decision for the **ending** of the lodge as it now stands.

So when this amalgamation goes through on the 5th May 2012 is that the ending? I do not believe so, in my opinion it is the beginning. This will be the beginning of a new lodge, or more properly speaking a reconstructed lodge. This new lodge will consist of the original members of Wingham Lodge as well as members from Teeswater Lodge, which also amalgamated with Wingham on the 3rd of June 2003. That was the first amalgamation in North Huron District. This will be the second. They will now be joined by members from St Johns Lodge, Brussels, who have over the past few years work very hard to keep their lodge alive. The fact they have failed in that endeavour cannot take away from the dedication they have all put forth in that effort. That dedication and effort will now be put to the benefit of Wingham lodge, which cannot help but strengthen that lodge for the future.

At that time of the amalgamation of Teeswater Lodge with Wingham Lodge, R.W. Bro. Samuel R Dougherty was DDGM and he stated at that time **"it is sad to see it happen but for every ending there is a new beginning."**

I too believe that this will be another new beginning. The long history of St Johns Lodge No 284 will be joined with the histories of Teeswater Lodge No 276 and Wingham Lodge No 286. The strengths and dedication of the members of these lodges will be joined to make the “new” Wingham lodge a stronger lodge. It is often said that the sum is stronger than the individual parts and I hope that the sum of these lodges will become stronger than the individual lodges themselves. The individual Brethren will not forget their mother lodge and that is as it should be but if we all “Believe in Freemasonry”, as our Grand Master has often spoken about, then we must all believe that this new beginning will be a positive step to the strengthening of Wingham Lodge and of North Huron District.

What we are in the middle of now, the closing down of one lodge to amalgamate with another is something every one of us needs to think about. As we look around our district, like many rural districts, we are in rough times. Small rural towns are losing, if not already lost, the manufacturing businesses that sustained the town and maintained the population. Farming in the areas of the towns has become less manpower intensive, losing another source of potential candidates. We need to reach out to those that are left and more importantly those who have joined and faded into the background. We need to “Believe in Freemasonry” we need to nurture it. The Grand Lodge’s Strategic Plan’s vision is to “Ensure the timeless vitality of Freemasonry in Ontario”. Although this is the Grand Lodge vision it cannot succeed if it doesn’t become your vision. Plants grow from the seeds and roots. The candidates are the seeds and roots and you need to nourish them. Feed them the history of your lodge and Freemasonry in general. Fertilize them with education, education that has a “Wow” factor as the Grand Master stated in his latest DDGM Communiqué. The spark that lights the fire again, may be at the doorstep of the Lodge. If it isn’t, put it there! Another statement from the Strategic Plans states;

“Today, men at the West Gate are looking for truth embodied in an ancient moral framework that can be applied to their personal life. They seek the Strength of group experience and the benefit of access to wisdom from those men who have come before them.... They seek an opportunity to partake in inspiring conversations, marvel at ancient wisdom, share their deepest fears and delight in the simple joy of spending quality time with other good men who are on a similar journey.”

Does your lodge do that? As a district can we provide that? I believe we can and the future of Freemasonry depends on it at every level from Grand Lodge right down to YOU, the individual Mason. Don’t depend on the guy sitting next to you. What can YOU do to make this vision happen? If YOU do your bit and the guy next to you does his, collectively we CAN succeed. We MUST succeed.

I don’t want to finish on a down note and I don’t have to. Yes we have some lodges in trouble with numbers declining but within our district in the past month or so I have attended a first degree in Fordwich, Palmerston, Kincardine and Wroxeter. I know there are at least two more awaiting initiation in Kincardine with two more applications and one due in Tiverton in the New Year.

Fordwich has one awaiting initiation, one awaiting a FC and two awaiting MM degrees plus another application in the works. And I have also heard some other applications put through so we do have some signs of hope for the future. Some **new beginnings**

One of the challenges these lodges will have will be the retention of these candidates.

Tonight isn't the end of St Johns Lodge but it is the last Official Visit of the DDGM to St John Lodge. There will be Lodge meetings happening here for the next four months so please make a point of joining in some of these meetings. Join with the Brethren of St Johns Lodge as, they reminisce about the history of their lodge. Remembering good times, good friends and good Masons. And please make a point of being in Wingham for the amalgamation on 5th May 2012. Be there at the start of a **new beginning**.