

Dow Jones Reprints: This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit www.djreprints.com

[See a sample reprint in PDF format.](#)

[Order a reprint of this article now](#)

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WSJ.com

THE A-HED | OCTOBER 11, 2011

Latest Freemason Conspiracy: Recruiting Younger Bros

Ancient Order Resorts to Facebook, Coed Paintball and Ghost Stories

By **BARRY NEWMAN**

ST. PAUL, Minn.—No self-respecting secret society can get by without a Facebook fan page anymore.

That's transparently true of the Freemasons, renowned for their medieval blood oaths, their often-alleged plot to create a New World Order, their locked-door conclaves of U.S. presidents and power brokers and their boring pancake breakfasts.

A menagerie of 19th-century civic and social brotherhoods, and their attendant sisterhoods, lives on around the globe: the Elks, the Moose, the Lions, the Odd Fellows. Freemasonry is the oldest of all, still the biggest, and—in the public mind—about as penetrable as the mythic crypt beneath the ninth vault of Solomon's Temple.

Secrecy gives Masonry its mystique. Yet the Masons have lately realized that they'd be lost in oblivion if it weren't for the Web.

"I looked for pictures," Matt Gallagher was saying of his Internet search for a Masonic lodge worth joining. "I really wanted to avoid a bunch of 80-year-olds."

It was Thursday evening, almost time for fellowship night at the "very young" lodge he finally did join: Braden No. 168, housed on a shady street in a columned temple the Masons built in 1910.

Mr. Gallagher is 32 years old and between jobs. He was initiated by Braden in 2009, rose to Master Mason and now is lodge education officer.

It's a post that didn't exist for 290 years after Masonry came out of its historical shadows, in 1717, as a London club for enlightened gentlemen. Mr. Gallagher's Masonic tag, if his digital function had one, might be Worshipful Webmaster.



Dennis Severson

Reed Endersbe and Zulu at a Minneapolis officer installation last year.

"I started a blog, Facebook, Flickr," he said, descending a narrow stairway to a faded meeting room with its old pool tables and portrait of brother George Washington. "I want video essays on our site," he added. "People need to know what they're getting into."

Once, a petitioner for Masonic membership didn't know what he was getting into until he had a hood over his head, a rope around his neck and was swearing never to reveal the secret handshake. The handshake is still secret, but now there are so many hints and giveaways about Masonry's hocus-pocus on the Web, television and in the movies that lodges tell petitioners not to peek or they'll spoil the fun.

The order's main manual used to be "Duncan's Ritual," published in 1866. Today it's "Freemasons for Dummies" by Christopher Hodapp, published in 2005. "We've got an explosion of openness," said Mr. Hodapp. "And it started—face it—in a panic over membership."

A generation of joiners, home from war, boosted Masonic rolls in America to four million by 1959.

But in the 1960s, hippies were turned off by establishment mysticism.

When the sons of hippies asked about Masonry's secrets, their boomer dads didn't have a clue. By the mid-2000s, fewer than two million members remained.

Faced with a choice between going extinct and going public, the Masons went public. The order has no central authority, but Grand Lodges in several states put up billboards, ran TV commercials and staged mass rituals, initiating hundreds of men at a time.

Mr. Hodapp calls all that "a travesty." Many initiates never showed up. Many that did, he wrote in an internal paper, found "a desperate group of aging members" and "endless meetings about bill-paying, bad food, and who is going to iron the degree uniforms."

But some of those young apprentices stayed on. Though total membership is down to 1.4 million, losses to death and dullness have eased to 30,000 a year from 80,000. The hook may have less to do with Masonry itself than with pop culture's fascination with it.

Masonic myths often play the lead on the History Channel, in movies like "National Treasure" and in Dan Brown's best sellers, especially his Masonry-laced 2009 novel "The Lost Symbol."

"That book—it was a real catalyst for us," Reed Endersbe said one day at his red-stone temple in Minneapolis. He is 40, program director at a rock station and master of Lodge No. 19, where "a lot of us like that bond with the movers and shakers of the globe."

His lodge has 60 active members, 300 in all, and is adding more, most between 21 and 35. Nobody invites them; they just hit the Web site's "contact us" button. Each pays \$450 for a ceremonial degree (tux required), dues of \$300 a year, plus extra for coed paintball fights, cigar-rolling shows and Scotch tastings.

"The sacred order of the Scotch nights," cracked No. 19's 26-year-old senior warden, Adam Martin, as he and some brothers walked to a pizza place down the street. Mr. Endersbe pushed up a sleeve to exhibit his own devotion to Scotch knights: a Templar Cross tattoo.

The warrior monks of the Knights Templar probably didn't hide as stoneworkers after the pope excommunicated them in 1307; Mr. Endersbe has fun thinking they did.

Then again, his lodge does get petitions from "head cases," as he puts it, eager to enlist in the Masonic-Satanic conspiracy that's so well detailed now on the Web.

"They usually take out a \$1 bill," he says, "and connect the letters in the all-seeing eye to spell 'A Mason.' "

Conspiracists will argue that only the inner-inner circles know what the order is truly up to. But when Matt Gallagher joined Braden Lodge, over in St. Paul, he did it for three reasons:

"I wanted to become a better person, I like retro stuff, and I'm a big believer in guys hanging out and talking with other guys."

Down in Braden's meeting room on fellowship night, a dozen guys had pushed three tables together and were passing a coffee pot. Seven were under 36. They were trying something new: a philosophical discourse. The theme was, "Where do morals come from?"

"If your best friend commits treason, do you turn him in?" someone asked. A discussion followed. Someone else asked: "If Hitler walks in front of your car, do you hit the gas?" More discussion.

Brian Silverain, a laid-off teacher with a tie-dye shop, asked Mr. Gallagher at one point: "Do you like who you are?" Mr. Gallagher replied: "I don't know who I am, and I don't like that."

Cellphones started to ring after two hours—wives wondering where husbands were. "Well, I guess we kicked that morality dog around enough," said Harvie Holmes, who is 52 and sells insurance.

The crowd thinned. After midnight, talk turned to ghosts, then moved on to lutefisk recipes. Potato chips were retrieved from the kitchen. At 1:15, three of the guys were still left in the temple of their ancient and mystic order, still hanging out, still talking.

Copyright 2011 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com