

OHIO SUPPLEMENT



SK R. Thomas Starr, KCT
Right Eminent Grand Commander
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In my response to the Christmas Toast offered by our Eminent Grand Prelate in December, I referred to the last Ohioan elected president of the United States, Warren Gamaliel Harding, on the centennial anniversary of his election in circumstances eerily similar to today's.

Warren G. Harding was born near Marion, Ohio, on November 2, 1865. As a youth, according to his *Wikipedia* biography, he worked at the newspaper his father owned. Apparently, the newspaper business appealed to Harding because, at the tender age of 18, he formed a partnership and purchased a failing paper called *The Marion Star*. He turned the paper into a successful venture and while covering politics for the publication, eventually became a candidate for office himself. Though he lost his first race for Marion County auditor, he ran for and was elected to a term in the Ohio Senate in 1899 at the age of 34.

Harding worked his way up through the Republican party ranks, was elected Lieutenant Governor in 1904, survived inner-party strife that haunted Republicans for the next dozen years, and was ultimately elected to the United States Senate in 1914. There his political and media savvy served him well, and he positioned himself as a potential presidential candidate by 1920. As America emerged from the World War and the Spanish flu pandemic, the nation was ready for a steady direction. Warren G. Harding, who was nominated on the 10th ballot at his party's national convention, promised a "Return to Normalcy". His theme appealed to the American people, and while running the famous "Front Porch Campaign" giving speeches to audiences from the porch of his Marion home, Harding was elected with a record-setting 60% of the popular vote over another Ohio newspaperman, Democrat James Cox.

Harding's inauguration would be March 4, 1921 – inaugurations were not moved to January until 1937 – but something else would occur just before he left for Washington.

The Annual Proceedings of the Grand Commandery of Ohio from 1921 devote several pages to the knighting of President-elect Harding on March 1, 1921, calling it "the outstanding event of the Templar year and one which commanded the interest of Knights Templar(s) everywhere...". On the evening of March 1, just three days before he would take the oath of office as president, Harding was knighted in Marion Commandery No. 36.

"The fact that he himself showed an earnest desire to receive the Order of Christian Knighthood and was willing to give the necessary time during those few busy remaining days, was indeed a rare compliment," reads an account of the event from the Proceedings. The Grand Master and other officers of the Grand Encampment were in attendance as were most of the officers of the Grand Commandery of Ohio. The Order was characterized as "dignified and impressive, the distinguished pilgrim traveling the same road that all others seeking admission to our Order have trod before him." The candidate was knighted by the Grand Master and it was noted that several lifelong friends participated in the Order giving "an intimate personal touch" to the proceedings.

Harding himself was apparently moved by the occasion. Addressing the Sir Knights afterward, he said, "If I have had a thought that I believed was my own, in all the sincerity of a man's soul I believe that I have had the thought of approaching my great responsibility in humility and faith, and I come tonight to the temple of this splendid Knighthood and find it teaching me and emphasizing those things that I have been thinking."

Harding's presidency was short - he died on August 2, 1923, of cardiac arrest while visiting San Francisco – and his administration and his personal life were not without controversy. His Marion tomb, a circular Greek-temple inspired design – remains a popular attraction.

One hundred years later, we too hope for a "Return to Normalcy" soon. As we contemplate the meaning of our Orders to each of us, know they were important enough to one man that he would avail himself to receive them on the eve of assuming our nation's highest office.

In Knightly Courtesy,

R. Thomas Starr

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