MASONRY IN NEW MEXICO

by W. Peter McAtee

The history of Masonry in New Mexico is in essence the early history of New Mexico in that Master Masons contributed so much. One of the early pioneers was Dr. John H. Robinson, who accompanied Pike in his expedition exploring the West. Dr. Robinson was affiliated with Western Star Lodge No. 107, Missouri, which worked on a dispensation from the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania. On February 7, 1806, Dr. Robinson left the Pike expedition to make his way to Santa Fe. He reached there "after suffering untold hardships and exposure." Dr. Robinson was typical of early Masons coming to New Mexico. One was Dr. Rowland Willard, Junior Warden of Hyram Lodge No. 3, St. Charles, Missouri, who visited New Mexico in 1825. A great many of the early trappers were Freemasons; just how many shall never be known as many of the early records of the Lodges have been lost or burnt.

During the first ten years following Mexican independence a large number of trappers visited the Southwest. Brother Stephen Cooper, a trapper, went through New Mexico in 1821-1822, visiting in Santa Fe and Taos. Another, George C. Yount, became intimately acquainted with Brothers St. Vrain, Bent, Kit Carson and others headquartered in Taos.

In the spring of 1847, a requisition was made for troops from Missouri, and acting on orders of Governor John Ralls, Grand Master of Masons in Missouri, a company was raised for service in Mexico. "The Third Regiment of Volunteer Missouri Militia" reached Santa Fe in September 1847. Ralls assumed Masonic jurisdiction of the territory of New Mexico in the name of the Grand Lodge of Missouri. Lodges in New Mexico remained under that jurisdiction until the organization of the Grand Lodge of New Mexico in 1877.

During the Mexican War the territory of New Mexico and Arizona was taken over by the United States Army under General Stephen Watts Kearny. General Kearny occupied Las Vegas, New Mexico, without opposition on August 15, 1846. Three days later he entered Santa Fe and issued a proclamation taking formal possession of the territory. The proclamation assured the inhabitants of freedom of worship and protection of property.

Before General Kearny left New Mexico, he proclaimed a code of laws for the area known as the Kearny Code. Brother Charles Bent, later Governor Bent, was appointed the first American governor. Brother Sterling Price, Colonel under General Kearny, was left in charge at Santa Fe.

In January 1847 Colonel Price quelled an insurrection at Taos in which Governor Bent was assassinated. Colonel Price was a member of Warren Lodge No. 74, Keytesville, Missouri. We now turn to the Military Lodges. The first was "Missouri

Military Lodge No. 86," chartered by Grand Master Ralls. It held its first meeting in Independence, Missouri. It was called an ambulant or traveling Lodge "holding its communications when called to labor in the movement of troops as occasion permitted." On September 18, 1847, a special meeting was held at Santa Fe and El Paso; also meetings were held at Santa Cruz, State of Chihuahua, Mexico, with the last meeting being held in Santa Cruz, July 5, 1848.

Hardin Military Lodge No. 87 was created at a meeting of Military Lodge No. 86 in Santa Fe, on October 8, 1847. At this meeting a petition was presented for a dispensation of a Lodge which "should be without limit to a particular location but to be itinerant as may best suit the convenience of its members and be only limited in its duration to six months after the close of the Mexican War." This Lodge apparently was attached to First Regiment of Illinois Fort Volunteers. The record shows Military Lodge No. 87 had its meeting in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and Las Vegas, New Mexico. All records of the Hardin Military Lodge have been lost. Next are the two Lodges at Fort Union. Military forts were established throughout New Mexico by the American Army for protection against Indians. The first of these was Fort Marcy in Santa Fe. Next was Fort Union, which became the headquarters of the Ninth Military Department.

Fort Union is important to the history of Freemasonry in the Southwest because it was here that Chapman and Union Lodges were established. Chapman Lodge was first organized as Missouri Lodge No. 95 and Union Lodge as Missouri Lodge No. 480. The first communication of Chapman Lodge was held March 28, 1862. On May 24, 1867, for military reasons, the Lodges were requested to move outside of the Government reservation, the last meeting at the Fort being held on July 27, 1867. Thereafter, Chapman Lodge was permanently established in Las Vegas. It was one of the four Lodges instrumental in organizing the Grand Lodge of New Mexico in August 1877 and was chartered as Chapman Lodge No. 2.

For several years the Masons at Fort Union were without a Lodge and presumably attended meetings at Chapman Lodge some 30 miles away. A petition to organize a new Lodge at the Fort was sought. Union Lodge received its dispensation on May 30, 1874, and was chartered on October 15, 1874. When Fort Union was abandoned, Union Lodge erected a hall at Watrous. Because the activity of the Lodge depended on members living in Wagon Mound, it was decided to remove to that place where the first communication was held June 30, 1919. The first Mason to settle in New Mexico was Charles Bent. This extraordinary man was born in what is now West Virginia. He had a good education, some military training, and some knowledge of medicine. In 1828 Charles Bent and his associates established trading posts along the line extending from the 100th meridian on the Arkansas River, along the river north to its source, to the 42nd parallel, and then west to the Pacific Ocean. The most important was Bent's Fort, completed in 1842, 650 miles west of Fort Leavenworth and to the west of La Junta, Colorado. Bent established a system of safe trade between the United States and Mexico. He was a member of Missouri Lodge No. 1, St. Louis.

Another distinguished pioneer Freemason was Dr. David Waldo, also a member of Missouri No. 1. Dr. Waldo engaged in the fur trade with a store in Taos. He was an uncle of Henry L. Waldo, later Chief Justice of the territory of New Mexico and Grand Master of the Masons in New Mexico in 1878. In 1869 when Bent Lodge No. 204 was chartered by the Grand Lodge of Missouri, Dr. Waldo deeded the site for the Lodge Hall.

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Ceran St. Vrain, known as Colonel St. Vrain, came to New Mexico about 1830 and became one of the most highly respected and influential citizens in the state. He was possessed with good education, fine natural abilities, highest style of courtesy, and very good energy in enterprise. He engaged in merchandising and manufacturing. His upright dealings and fairness and courteous treatment of any whom he came in contact with won him a host of friends. St. Vrain was raised in Montezuma Lodge No. 109 on January 25, 1855, and demitted in 1860. It was probably he that procured a warrant from the Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Missouri to constitute Bent Lodge No. 204, Taos, August 4, 1860, of which he was Treasurer and Christopher Carson was Junior Warden. When the Civil War broke out, St. Vrain helped organize the first New Mexico Calvary and became its Colonel with Kit Carson as Lt. Colonel. After the end of the Civil War, St. Vrain moved to Mora, near Fort Union, then a principal military base in the Southwest. He died there October 28, 1870, and was buried with Masonic services.

Christopher "Kit" Carson was raised in Montezuma Lodge No. 109, December 26, 1854. When Bent Lodge No.204 was chartered, Carson demitted and became its first Junior Warden. Carson was born in Kentucky, December 24, 1809. At the age of 15, he was apprenticed to a saddler but ran away from home and joined a party of hunters in Santa Fe, New Mexico. In 1851 Kit decided to settle down and become a rancher. He and Lucien Maxwell established a settlement on the Raydo, 50 miles east of Taos, to raise hay and grain for Fort Union.

Brother Carson was appointed Indian agent because of his long experience in dealing with the Indians. When the Civil War came, his services were welcomed by the government and to him fell the command of the New Mexico regiment as Colonel. In 1865 he was breveted Brigadier General for his achievements.

Other pioneers include Ferdinand Maxwell, the merchant prince of the trail; Jacob Houghton, New Mexico's first Chief Justice under the American rule; Kirby Benedict, Chief Justice from 1858-1866. As the first Masonic Lodge chartered after the Territory of New Mexico was organized under the United States, Montezuma Lodge represented the Grand Lodge in sponsoring other Lodges and aiding in their organization. At this time the Territory of New Mexico included the present area of Arizona. The District Deputy Grand Master was Joab Houghton, Master of Montezuma Lodge, 1855-1856.

New Mexico, in effect, joined hands with the Union during the Civil War. Confederates occupied the Territory in an effort to form an alliance with Utah in the hope of the conquest of California. The South needed the gold which came from California and a safe route to transport it. John R. Baylor and 600 Confederates took Fort Bliss and proceeded up the valley toward Santa Fe. On August 1, 1861, Baylor proclaimed all of New Mexico south of the 34th parallel as the new Territory of Arizona. He proclaimed himself temporary Governor. The battle which returned all of New Mexico to the Union was at Glorieta Pass on March 28, 1862. New Mexico became the last frontier and a refuge for lawless elements. A new group of restless cattlemen from western Texas drifted into the Territory. Colfax County became a favorite retreat for the criminal element moving in from the Colorado region, ahead of the railroad. Outlaws ranged the plains and mountains; attacking travelers, stage coaches, and wagon trains.

In 1879, after many difficulties and delays, railroads finally reached New Mexico, converging from three directions: the Southern Pacific from the Pacific Coast; the Texas & Pacific from the southwest; the Atchison-Topeka & Santa Fe from the Missouri River. The first passenger train entered the Territory at Otero, February 11, 1879.

An interesting event occurred in the life of Brother John Lemon, a prominent leader in his lifetime. He was captured by the Confederates at Mesilla. They escorted him to a nearby tree, to hang him. He made the Grand Hailing Sign of Distress, whereupon the Confederates, after a short conference, spared his life. At this time, a German named Applezoller was with

Lemon, and realizing that he was about to lose his life, he excitedly made some signs exclaiming he belonged to the same Lodge. He was not believed and was hanged, but someone rushed in and cut the rope, saving his life.

With the beginning of the Spanish-American War, Masons from all over New Mexico responded to the call of their country. In 1898 when the call went out for volunteers for the Rough Riders to fight in the Spanish-American War, New Mexico men responded. After the successful completion of the war, the attention of New Mexicans was again directed to the long struggle for statehood. This 60 year effort was finally ended successfully when, on August 11, 1911, the Enabling Act was approved by Congress, and signed by President and Brother Taft. On January 6, 1912, New Mexico became the 47th state to join the Union.

Statehood did not, of course, solve all of the problems of the area automatically. Troubles with Mexican bandits under Pancho Villa came in 1916, and members were called upon to participate in the Mexican Border Service.

Many participated in World War I. Captain Joe Quensenberry from Las Cruces was commended by General Pershing for setting the esprit de corps for the American Army. He was the leader of the first American unit to capture German prisoners and a German machine gun.

It is fitting for us to remember and honor the pioneer Masons of New Mexico. Reprinted from Masonic Americana, 1976, pages 144-145 From the Southwest...

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