ABE'S AXE

June 1, 2004

My Brothers,

MWB C. Rolland Lattanner, 1984 Past Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Ohio, has been a frequent visitor to our Lodge and a frequent contributor of Masonic anecdotes. As he was saying his farewells for the season (returning to Ohio after wintering here) he offered to send me some educational materials. I readily agreed and we exchanged mailing info. Sure enough, I was thrilled to receive some materials in the next week. I don't know about the rest of you, my Brothers, but as a relatively new Mason, having a Past Grand Master offer help for these education sessions is a big deal. I guess I should not be star-struck by his past position; we all meet on the level as equals; but, in reality, there is a natural deference to position and experience that makes some men seem more equal than others. We honor them among us, and it is the right thing to do.

Anyhow, he had sent me a Short Talk Bulletin from the Masonic Service Organization. In truth, I was a little disappointed because all new Masons in our Grand Lodge receive them for a year and I've read many more. Feeling a bit spunky, I wrote back to him telling him this (nicely, I hope), and then challenged him to "reach deeper into his bag of Past Grand Master's tricks and mysteries". He did. A few days later he sent me an article entitled, "Abe Lincoln's Axe", and suggested I should think about it. I read it and started thinking about it, and I have been thinking about it, since.

The story goes that a museum director heard that the axe used by Abe Lincoln to split rails was still held by the family that had employed young Abe. The director made his way to the farm and came upon a man chopping wood. Upon inquiry, it turned out that the worker owned the farm and was using the very axe in question. The director nearly fainted and protested that the axe was a national treasure and should be on display in a Lincoln museum. The farmer attempted to reassure the director, telling him that it was a good axe and axes should be used and, anyhow, his family had taken good care of this axe through four generations of use. "In fact", the farmer said, "we've changed the handle twice and the head once." - And that, my Brothers, is the story pulled from deep within the Past Grand Master's bag of mysteries.

Is it the same axe that Abe Lincoln used? Common sense says, no. If the handle is twice different and the axe head is different, then it can't be the same because everything in it that made it that original axe has changed. Then again, it's been in constant use doing its job of chopping wood and splitting rails since Abe handed it back to the farmer's ancestors. Its parts have changed, but it has the same spirit and function. From the farmer's viewpoint, this is still Abe Lincoln's axe and he treasures it as a working tool, even if the museum director has fainted dead away.

The article, written by WB Jim Tresner, Editor of the Oklahoma Mason, goes on to say that Masonry has changed its parts over time but remains the same in spirit, and we can see how that would be true. The lectures and ritual may evolve, and even vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, but the work behind them, the meaning for Masons and their development, is constant. That's a satisfactory conclusion for us; we've seen into the analogy and understand it. With this story, we see that Masonry is more than its parts.

But, in telling me to think about it, maybe the Past Grand Master is hinting at a few more mysteries beyond that, mysteries that his experience has shown him: mysteries about men and their lives and how they grow in Masonry, about how our personal working tools are used, and how we change them over time, how we add and substitute parts but always hold and keep the spirit, how Masonry is not a museum piece, not a ritualized monthly meeting, but a functional and dynamic part of our lives, as necessary to us in our life's work as the axe is to the farmer. And, if in growing and developing as men and Masons, we change the handle or the head a few times on our working

tools, that's OK, we haven't changed their purpose or function. Masonry is more than its parts and so are we.

Our visiting Past Grand Master likes to quip, "You can tell a Past Grand Master, but you can't tell him much!", and I have learned that you should be thoughtful about what you ask a Past Grand Master; you may not be able to tell him much, but he can sure tell you some things. Never, ever, challenge a Past Grand Master to dazzle you with mysteries unless you are willing to think! But, my Brothers, never, ever fail to ask. It is in the asking, of our Brothers and ourselves, that we learn and grow in Masonry.

It turns out that Abe Lincoln's axe still has a fine edge! Thank you, Most Worshipful Brother!

Br. Stephen C. Harrington