

### **REPORT OF THE GRAND HISTORIAN**

When M.:W.:Bob Van Zee appointed me to be Grand Historian, he gave me a specific task. That task was to investigate the reasons that Lodges had consolidated in the past ten years and to find out what made some of the consolidations successful, which others did not seem to be successful.

The first thing I did was to come up with a list of attributes that would show that a consolidation had succeeded. I determined that Lodges that had gone through a successful consolidation would have the following characteristics in common:

1. Attendance at meetings improved.
2. Members of both Lodges (pre-consolidation) elected or appointed to officers positions in the new, consolidated Lodge.
3. The Lodges that consolidated would be in better shape financially.
4. Traditions in both Lodges would be continued.
5. The Lodge more visible in their community
6. Members of both Lodges feel at home and welcome in the combined Lodge.

Between June of 1991 and June of 2002, seventy-seven (77) Lodges consolidated, not counting Lodges in Alaska. Those consolidations resulted in a net loss to the Grand Lodge or thirty-seven (37) Lodges. The reason that the numbers aren't even is that two Lodges consolidated with more than one other Lodge, one with two Lodges and one with three Lodges.

There was not any discernable pattern in Lodge Consolidations, as far as geographic location. Some Lodges that consolidated were in large cities such as Seattle, Tacoma, and Spokane; some were in small or very small towns. Some Lodges met in the same building as the Lodge they consolidated with, some were large distances apart; in a few cases more than 40 miles.

My first task was to find out from the Lodges the reasons that they consolidated, if attendance increased at meetings, if the Lodges were better off financially, and if members of both Lodges were participating in the combined Lodge. The best way to gather this information would have been to visit each Lodge and talk with the Brethren. Unfortunately, I could not take the time off of work to visit each of the Lodges. Therefore, the method that I chose was to develop a questionnaire and send it to the master and secretary of all the Lodges that merged with a request that they pass it on to other members of their Lodge. By doing this, I hoped to get several different points of view to the questions. Only a few of the masters and/or secretaries chose to pass the questionnaire on to other members of their Lodge, but I did receive answers back from a large majority of Lodges.

Actually, I had two questionnaires: one for Lodges that consolidated with Lodges close to them and one for Lodges that consolidated with a Lodge more than 10 miles away. The difference between the two questionnaires was that I added two questions on how the distance between the Lodges affected the consolidation.

The first task was to determine why the Lodges chose to consolidate; was it because of a lack of membership attending meetings in one or both of the Lodges? Or a decline in the membership of one of the Lodges to a point where it was impossible to get enough participation to fill the officer ranks? Or was it financial in nature; one or both of the Lodges didn't have the money to continue to maintain their building, pay taxes, or to pay their rent? Or perhaps it was something other than the above, in which case I asked what that was.

By far the biggest reason for consolidation was a lack of membership attending meetings, either at one of the Lodges (58%) or both of the Lodges (23%). Approximately 42% of the Lodges said that the reason they merged was that it was getting to be impossible to get members to take offices, either elected or appointed, in their Lodge. Financial problems were only mentioned as a cause for consolidation by three Lodges. Several of the Lodges said that it was both a lack of membership at meetings and a lack of members willing to hold an office that caused the merger. In a few cases, one Lodge had a lack of membership turning out at meetings while the other Lodge had few members who were interested in holding office.

How have the consolidations worked? Are there more members attending the new, combined Lodge than were attending the Lodges before merger? Unfortunately, more than 60% of the Lodges have not seen a significant rise in the number of Brethren attending their meetings since the consolidation. Most of the remaining Lodges showed increases of 5% to 10%; however, one Lodge reported an increase of 25%, one of 50%, and one of over 100%, going from 8 - 10 per meeting to over 30 per meeting. These last three results are the kind of response that I believe Lodges are looking for when they consolidate.

Some Lodges reported that very few, if any, members of one of the Lodges participated in the new Lodge. However, the majority of Lodges reported that members of both Lodges that merged were participating in the new, combined Lodge. The members that have stopped participating in Lodge activities are almost exclusively from the Lodge that lost its name and/or number.

Most of the Lodges reported that at least a few of the members of the merged Lodge have taken office, either elected or appointed, in the new Lodge. In some cases, only one or two of the members from the merged Lodge have taken office, in other cases members from both Lodges have taken leadership rolls in the new Lodge. Those Lodges also are the ones that have had an increase in membership attending meetings and other Lodge activities.

As far as the finances of the combined Lodges are concerned, almost all of the combined Lodges reported that their finances have improved. One Lodge in particular has not only been able to remodel their building but has a budget that is covered by interest from its investments. A few (3) said that their finances had only improved "a little." No Lodges said that they are worse off financially since the consolidation.

About half of the Lodges reported that there was no increase in its presence in the local community. Of those Lodges, about 40% said that they were already very well known in their community and the merger did not affect their presence. In some of the smaller communities the loss of the local Lodge has reduced the Masonic presence in that community to almost zero because the combined Lodge is in another town and there are no activities in the town that lost its Lodge.

The Lodges that have increased their presence in their community have done so in many different ways. Several Lodges report that they have increased scholarships to local schools and other charitable contributions. In some of the smaller communities, the Lodges have added more schools to their scholarship programs. Some Lodges have joined the Chamber of Commerce, had programs to honor local fire and police personnel, started supporting Operation Outreach, hosted school award programs, supported community programs, Armed Forces day programs, and have donated the use of their facilities for community programs. Other Lodges have made improvements to their building, fixing up both the exterior and interior, increasing lighting, put up larger signs on the building, etc.

If both Lodges owned the buildings where they met, one of the buildings was sold (or is in the process of being sold) after the merger. In most cases, the furniture and jewels of the Lodges were combined, with duplicate items being either sold or given to other Lodges, both of our Grand Lodge and to some local Prince Hall Lodges. Historical items such as pictures of Past Masters, books, trophies, etc., were absorbed into the combined Lodge. In some cases these items were placed on display; in other cases they were stored.

As I said earlier, some of the Lodges that merged met in the same building. In other cases there was a large distance between the Lodges, especially in Eastern Washington, but also, to a lesser extent, in the smaller towns in Western Washington. In some cases this distance included travel over a pass so that in winter it was hard for some members to make the trip. Some of the Lodges reported that the distance did not make any difference in attendance because members of both Lodges made efforts to help brothers who had trouble driving at night to come to the meetings by arranging car pools and making other efforts to get members to meetings. Other Lodges reported that the distance between the towns meant that the members from the Lodge in the town that closed its Lodge were not able to attend meetings. The main reason that the members who had a long distance to travel couldn't or didn't attend meetings was the difficulty of finding members who lived in the distant community who were able or willing to go to meetings and to give rides to brothers who couldn't drive. A few Lodges didn't seem to care that members of the Lodge that merged with them who lived twenty to fifty miles away were having problems getting to meetings.

So, what makes a consolidation work?

After a merger, the most important question about the feeling of members towards the combined Lodge is, "Do members of both Lodges feel welcome at the combined Lodge?" The way I phrased it in my questionnaire was, "Sometimes when Lodges combine, the members of the Lodge that was absorbed feel resentment toward the other Lodge, even if those members know that the only other choice was to go extinct. Have you observed any such feelings?" I had hoped that the answer to this question would have been a resounding no! I also asked how the Lodges had handled these feelings if the answer to that question was yes.

In several of the combined Lodges, there seemed to be a great deal of animosity between the members of the Lodges. This took the form of resentment towards the surviving Lodge, members of the Lodge that lost its name and number not attending meetings, and the feeling by some of those members that they were not really welcome as members of the combined Lodge.

In trying to determine the reason for these feelings I discovered that the attitude of members of both Lodges before, during and after the merger had a great deal of influence on the feeling after the merger. Unfortunately, some members of some Lodges don't want anything to do with other Lodges because it might mean change.

Based on some of the answers I received, it seemed that if the members of a Lodge did not feel that their Lodge had to merge with another Lodge to survive, the attitude of the members of that Lodge was, OK, you can merge with us, but it will be on our terms, we will not change our name or number, and you are welcome in the Lodge, but don't try to make any changes.

In one or two cases, promises were made to the members of the Lodge being absorbed that were not kept, or that were kept in a grudging manner. Attitudes like this did nothing to increase harmony between the members of the two Lodges.

Nobody wants their Lodge to merge into another Lodge if anything can be done to avoid it; but there comes a time when even the most ardent member realizes that the only other choice is for the Lodge to go extinct. Hopefully, Lodges can merge with other Lodges whose members realize what a traumatic event the merger is for the members of the Lodge that is closing.

Conversely, in some cases the mergers went very well. Attendance at meetings improved and members of both Lodges have been elected and appointed to Lodge offices and efforts were made to keep all members active. The brethren of these Lodges actively encouraged members from both Lodges to attend meetings, went out of their way to make the brethren of the Lodge that merged with them welcome, and continued traditions from both Lodges. They made the best of the situation and the combined Lodge emerged from the consolidation stronger, more active, and better able to face the future.

To quote the secretary from one of the more successful Lodges, "The merger was great for Masonry... The Lodge has flourished with many new members and an increased exuberance. The line-ups have continued without a Past Master having to be installed in the East. We have taken two fair Lodges and made one great Lodge."

Some of the successful Lodges changed either their name, incorporating the other Lodge's name in the new Lodge name or kept their name but took the lower number of the other Lodge. In several cases the Lodge changed their name after a period of time, ranging from a few months to several years after the merger. Some of the Lodges changed the name of the combined Lodge to something different than either of the pre-consolidation names. This willingness to make changes helped the members of both Lodges develop an ownership in the combined Lodge.

Another good idea from a Lodge secretary was that he had new nametags for all of the brothers attending the first meeting of the combined Lodge with their names and the name of the Lodge on them. By going out of his way to make the brothers from the other Lodge feel welcome he headed off feelings of resentment and illustrated the fact that all of the members of both Lodges were brothers and belonged to a Lodge that cared for its members.

The difference between a successful merger of two Lodges and an unsuccessful merger is the attitude of the brethren in both Lodges. If the brethren have a bad attitude towards the merger, it most likely will not be successful; attendance at meetings will not improve, there will be conflict between the Lodge members and the Lodge will not grow and become an important part of the community.

On the other hand, if the attitude of the Brethren of the Lodges is positive, the Lodge will attract members to meetings, continue traditions important to both Lodges, become better known in the community and will serve as good examples to us all, demonstrating what can be accomplished by brothers who are living examples of what Masonry is supposed to be.

In conclusion, a positive attitude, a vision of what the future can be for the combined Lodge, a willingness to change, adopt new ideas and to remember that we are all Masons and are linked together by Brotherly Love will make a merger successful.

Let us hope that in the future, when two Lodges merge the members of both will have a good attitude and work hard to be successful both for the future of our beloved Fraternity and for the good of the community in which we live.

Respectfully submitted,

Charles R. Davis  
Grand Historian