

A Half-Century of San Diego Scottish Rite

(This article is a revised version (updated September 2010) of the original, authored by Ill.: Robert D. Haas, 33°. We thank him for his diligent research of our formative years in this Valley.)

Prologue - From Little Acorns . . .

Freemasonry was born in San Diego at a community picnic at George Washington Square in Old Town. It was spring, 1851, and among the men assembled was a small group--perhaps 15 or 20--who discovered each other to be Masons. According to a newspaper report they agreed to meet as Masons and petition the year-old Grand Lodge of California to form a lodge in the dusty little year-old village of San Diego. As a result San Diego Lodge No. 35 was chartered on May 6, 1853 with 14 members.

The first meetings of the new Lodge were held in a small frame building in Old Town.



In 1881 the Masons, in a joint venture with the International Order of Oddfellows, built a Temple on the corner of Sixth and H (now Market) Streets.



By 1887, the Fraternity had grown to nearly 200 members. A few of the members began to work diligently to bring a Valley of Scottish Rite Masonry to San Diego. On the evenings of Monday, May 9, through Friday the 13th, twenty five candidates were communicated the Fourth through Fourteenth Degrees in Constans #8 Lodge of Perfection. There followed in rapid succession the institution of Constans Chapter of Rose Croix, Council of Kadosh, and the San Diego Consistory. By 1920 there were more than 550 members. In 1921 the Supreme Council approved a name change so that all four bodies were named "San Diego."

Growth in the Scottish Rite membership and in the size and numbers of Blue Lodges kept pace with the growing young city. They outgrew the Hall they had shared with the I.O.O.F. for 31 years. On

May 7, 1910, the cornerstone of a new temple was laid at the northeast corner of Ash and Fifth Streets and two years later they moved in.

The burgeoning Craft Lodges and the other Masonic organizations that shared the Temple with the Rite, after another 31 years, found they needed a fourth Temple. Under the guidance of Ill.: Robert B. Watts 33° G.:C., Representative of the Sovereign Grand Inspector General, a new Temple was acquired at Third and Cedar Streets. It was dedicated in April 1942. This multi-storied edifice was expected to serve the needs of San Diego Masonry for years to come.



The Fifties - A Time of Growth

Following the move to 350 Cedar Street the Masonic organizations experienced an explosive period of growth. One hundred years following the charter of San Diego Lodge #35, there were twenty Craft Lodges located throughout San Diego County. By 1950 membership increased to nearly 3100 Masters of the Royal Secret. Many innovative member services marked this period.

In 1952, Tifereth Israel Synagogue instituted a Masonic Recognition Program, inviting County Masons to share in their Sabbath Service. This visitation became an anticipated annual event for Masons of all faiths. As the number of Craft Lodges grew the annual visitations to individual lodges were consolidated into District visitations and became a part of the cement that binds the Blue Lodge to its child, the Scottish Rite.

Short three-day classes were initiated so that many men could join the Rite who did not have the time for the ten week "long class." For many of the old timers, the demise of the Long Class marked the ending of a slower, less hectic pace. As an outgrowth of casual conversations about Masonry on degree nights, the "Forum" became a popular means for Masonic expression, with the participants serving as speakers and the sideliners adding their voices in discussion.

During the fifties, wives and families were invited to become involved in more frequent activities. These were marked by excellent professional entertainment. Evenings of dinner, dancing and parties became regularly scheduled events and were eagerly anticipated.

It eventually became obvious that the Temple at 350 Cedar Street would not serve the needs of the Bodies and tenants in the future. A proposed new freeway was to be built within a few feet of the Temple and Caltrans would also appropriate a large portion of the parking lot. In November, 1959, the

Lodge of Perfection approved the purchase of a block bounded on Third and Fourth between Grape and Fir Streets with the intention of building a new Temple on that location. By January 1960 a sketch of the new building was displayed and in high anticipation everything was set to go. However, for a variety of reasons, the beginning of construction was delayed. This delay may have been the greatest stroke of luck that the Valley had ever experienced.

The Sixties - Another New Temple

The Building Committee, charged with the task of acquiring a site for the new Temple found an ideal location; a fourteen acre plot in the center of Mission Valley. The parking problem was solved forever. A huge bowling alley that was forced to close, as bowling fell out of public favor, was a part of the property. The misfortune of the alley owners became the good fortune of the Valley of San Diego. The Committee was astute enough to recognize the great potential of both the location and the building. The Cathedral Board was authorized to negotiate the purchase, and planning began in earnest. These bold and farsighted men met the challenge and converted the building into a beautiful and useful Scottish Rite Masonic Center that is the envy of many Valleys.

The interior of the building was completely gutted. Unforeseen hurdles plagued the planners at every turn. As each obstacle was scaled, new ones emerged. Eventually the job was done. The lower concourse was converted into three Lodge rooms, an auditorium, a large banquet hall, two small dining rooms and a modern kitchen. There was space enough to house several offices. The upper concourse led to offices, a number of meeting rooms, the Albert Pike Library and to what is now the Childhood Language Center.

The time for the big move finally came. On April 7, 1965, the last stated meeting was held at the old Cedar Street location. Just a week later the Fourteenth Degree was conferred at the new Temple. The first stated meeting at the sparkling new facility was held on May 5, 1965. Finally, on June 5, the Cornerstone was laid by the Grand Lodge of California, and Masonic leaders from all over the State attended the ceremonies. On April 28, 1969, the Cache which had been recovered from the original cornerstone of the Fifth and Ash building was finally placed in a vault in the new Temple.



The unique double-headed eagle which adorns the entry foyer was hung just one day before the Cornerstone Ceremony. This gift of a brother required special welding techniques to make possible the unusual sculpture. Another one-of-a-kind work of art is the magnificent two-headed eagle rostrum. It was hand carved from Honduran Mahogany by a Master Craftsman who came out of retirement to produce this beautiful piece. His work adorns cathedrals and public buildings throughout the world.

The Valley of San Diego continued to grow. It numbered more than 5400 members in 1968, the fifth largest Valley in California.

The Seventies - Settling In

Even though the building was new, in 1970 the kitchen was refurbished and re-equipped to serve 1000 or more diners at stated meetings and other events. By June of 1971 the Rite counted 5945 members.

In 1973 a forestage was designed to improve visibility in the auditorium. Scenes that had previously taken place on the floor could be elevated. At the same time new lighting fixtures and controls were installed. The new larger library with increased shelving and more comfortable work space was opened at the North end of the upper concourse in July, 1974.

The San Diego Scottish Rite has always supported and sometimes subsidized Masonic and Civic activities at the Center. The first Constitution Day and Naturalization Ceremony was held in September 1970 and became an annual event for a number of years. In June 1977, the San Diego County Officers' Association held its Fiftieth Annual Flag Day Breakfast. That patriotic service has since been taken over by the San Diego/Imperial Past Masters' Association. The breakfast proceeds are donated to the three Masonic Youth groups. The Scottish Rite Woman's' Association celebrated its Fiftieth Anniversary in 1977. The SWRA is a strong supporter of the Rite and neither organization can do without that secure bond of mutual assistance.

As early as March 1971 the Woman's' Association heard, for the first time, a lecture on Childhood Aphasia and its devastating effects on small children. In 1979 the "San Diego Scottish Rite Program for Aphasia" was established to support the Speech, Hearing and Neurosensory Clinic at Childrens' Hospital. At a stated meeting dinner a check for \$5,000 was handed to the Director of the Clinic. The San Diego/Imperial Masonic Fund was also created to assist in raising funds for the Clinic. Their first donation was in the amount of \$10,000.

The Eighties - A New Philanthropy

In the meantime, the Rite decided to establish the "Childhood Language Center" in the Temple. Two therapy rooms, a therapy/conference room and an office/reception room on the North upper concourse were prepared and furnished to house the Clinic. In July 1982 the Clinic opened in its new headquarters. At that time the staff consisted of the director and one full-time speech therapist. The plaque on the West wall of the South Corridor was placed for the Clinic Dedication Ceremony in November 1981 and Grand Lodge presided at the laying of the Clinic Cornerstone in February, 1982.

The first two children were graduated from the Clinic in March, 1983. It has since grown to the present three full-time certified, licensed speech/language pathologists who provide highly professional services to children at no cost to the child's family. The operating budget comes almost exclusively from the generosity of the Masonic family. The Clinic has become a unique service to the community of San Diego with its intense, individualized therapy.

In December 1981 Ill. Jack R. Levitt, 33° was appointed Chairman of the SGIG Advisory Conference for the Valley of San Diego. Again there was a season of improving the Temple and instituting new programs. In January of 1982 a magnificent digital electronic Allen Organ was installed in the Auditorium. This versatile instrument enhanced all of the Rite's meetings and degrees. That same year a state-of-the-art sound system, an improved lighting system, and Director's and Prompter's stations were installed in elevated booths above the floor of the auditorium. At the same time, the Sound Crew upgraded the sound system in the banquet room.

June, 1982 saw the initiation of the "365 Club." Its aim is to encourage annual member contributions of at least \$125.00 to the Clinic. This program proved highly successful and has brought thousands of dollars to the Clinic each year. Shortly following the "365 Club" the "Century Club" and the "Million Dollar Club" were created for those who wished to make larger contributions.

Another great source of income to the Clinic is the Scottish Rite Jewelry and Regalia store which was incorporated and opened in February 1984. The low overhead non-profit store generates funds while catering to the needs of area Masons for a place to shop for a large selection of Masonic oriented items.

The "Golden Eagle Club" was formed in the mid-eighties to award top-line signers for new candidates. A distinctive lapel pin is awarded after the fifth candidate and a diamond was embedded in the pin for each additional five Candidates.

Another step forward in cementing the Rite to the families of its members occurred when the Maundy Thursday Dinner and "Extinguishing of the Lights" and the Easter Breakfast and the "Relighting of the Lights" Ceremonies were opened to the public.

Ill.: Levitt announced his retirement at the April 1988 Stated Meeting and welcomed Ill.: Jack R. Evans, 33° (then KCCH) as Chairman of the SGIG Advisory Conference.

The first Albert Pike Award was presented in 1988 in recognition of the time and effort donated by the cast and supporting workers who act in and stage the degrees and who make our presentations among the best in the State. A bust of Albert Pike is awarded to outstanding members who are selected by a panel of judges.

It has always been a goal of the San Diego Scottish Rite to help the Craft Lodges in their quest for new members. At the Del Mar Fair in June 1984 the first Freemason Information Booth was set up between the food slicer/dicer/apple corers and the miracle rug cleaners. It displays Masonic artifacts and dispenses brochures from all the coordinate and affiliated bodies of Masonry. The booth was manned by knowledgeable Masons who are prepared to answer questions. Requests for further information were forwarded to appropriate neighborhood Lodges. Articulate and knowledgeable members of the Scottish Rite Speakers Bureau also disseminated Masonic information to concordant and affiliated bodies, as well as to service clubs and civic groups who wanted to hear more about Freemasonry.

The Nineties - Reestablishing Ties

Since 1992 each city Police Department in the County of San Diego, the Sheriff's Department, the Harbor Police, and the Highway Patrol have chosen an officer to be a candidate for "Officer of the Year." One officer is selected from among the candidates for the honor by a committee of Scottish Rite members. This program is one of three excellent public showcases for Freemasonry in San Diego County. The second program is the "Teacher of the Year" awards. Since 1995, the Valley has annually recognized a superior teacher from among candidates selected by their respective school districts. These award programs are attended by large numbers of civic dignitaries, families and friends of the awardees. It is a happy coincidence that several teachers selected for this award went on to be selected for additional honors by the State of California. In 2005, a third program was introduced, "Military Recognition Night". Each year, five active military personnel are recognized for their individual accomplishments as well as acting as representatives for each of the Armed Forces.

During the seven year term of Ill.: Evans, 1,517 members joined the Scottish Rite. He retired as Personal Representative of the Sovereign Grand Inspector General in March, 1995.

Ill.: Robert E. Winterton Sr., 33° (then KCCH) was appointed as the next Personal Representative for the Valley of San Diego. Three goals, stated when he was Venerable Master in 1990, form the nucleus of his philosophy. First, find ways to give satisfying jobs to members; second, increase attendance and third, improve degree production. His expertise in business management and his dedication to the team approach and to delegated authority assures continuing progress in the Valley.

An organizational chart was established delineating the duties of six divisions and more than 50 committees. Each Division Leader is responsible for seeing that the tasks assigned to his committees are carried out. In quarterly meetings of the SGIG Advisory Conference every member has an opportunity to be heard and to report his accomplishments. The plan is fluid enough that it can be fine-tuned as needed change is indicated.

Renewed attention to and continuous emphasis on the needs of the Blue Lodges remain a high priority. A successful Scottish Rite program to assist Craft Lodges in finding new members began in 1997 with the initiation of the county-wide Masonic Information Night. Impressive crowds of Masons, non-Masons, and prospective candidates twice yearly enjoy a fine dinner and hear an excellent presentation of what Masonry is and what it is not.

The annual Scottish Rite picnic was expanded to become the "All Masonic Family Picnic". It has been a highly successful event with several hundred attending this summer picnic for a day of fun, food and games, all as guests of the Valley of San Diego. The family oriented picnic offers still another chance for Masons to bring non-Masonic friends to see us at play.

The Valley of San Diego expanded its efforts to unite all Masonry by including frequent references to the York Rite and Shrine as well as the Craft Lodge. It annually honors their leaders at stated meeting dinners. To further promote cooperation, the Valley of San Diego and the Al Bahr Shrine combine their respective Reunions and Ceremonials twice annually.

The First Aid Committee, as a necessary adjunct to Masonic functions, was revived in 1998. Members receive CPR as well as AED and first aid training which, with the equipment on hand in our building, prepares them in the event of emergencies at our Degrees and other meetings.

Epilogue - Giant Oak Trees Grow

A New Decade, a new Century, a New Millennium lies before the Valley of San Diego and it is prepared to meet the challenge. We are told that the past repeats itself. That expression is used by the pessimist to express a belief in the repetition of war, pestilence, doom and disaster.

Through more than 120 years of dedicated toil in the quarries of Freemasonry, a host of far-sighted men with positive attitudes brought the Rite from that humble beginning in 1887 to the threshold of a spectacular future. The San Diego Scottish Rite can look back at its history and see only a bright future. The Scottish Rite in the Valley of San Diego is its own history.

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