

The Universal League of Freemasons
A Twentieth Century Experiment in Masonic Dialogue

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ABSTRACT

Founded in 1905 at Basel, Switzerland, in conjunction with an international conference on Esperanto, the Universal League of Freemasons was an experiment in encouraging a dialogue amongst different streams of Freemasonry. Although it never included co-masonry, nor women's freemasonry, it did include lodges and grand lodges that did not, or could not, formally recognize one another. The history of this organization is largely unknown today, but in the 1960's and 1970's it provoked a reaction amongst the mainstream grand lodges in the United States who condemned the organization as clandestine. The story of the American Group of the Universal League of Freemasons also includes the story of its founder, Harvey Newton Brown, who earned the opprobrium of American grand lodges for his pioneering work in understanding the regularity of Prince Hall Freemasonry, and by his insistence that only a true understanding of the origins of modern speculative Freemasonry could lead us toward mutual respect amongst the divided family of Masonic grand lodges.

The author was the last secretary of the United States Group of the Universal League of Freemasons when the organization ceased to function in this country. His research is based not only on personal experience, but on the American archives of the United States Group which are in his possession.

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Freemasonry is an initiatic society. As such, it confines its ceremonies to those who have been selected for membership, and the ceremonies are conducted in the presence of those who are already members. Although the ceremonies may have been made public through *exposés*, the ceremonies are not conducted in public. To do so would be to violate the initiatic basis of Freemasonry.

This fundamental principle of Freemasonry means that there must be some method of deciding who is entitled to be present at the ceremonies, which Freemasonry calls degrees. This decision is obviously in the care of the lodge and its members, but an additional decision is required when those who are not members of the lodge are to be

admitted to the ceremonies of initiation. It is from this decision that the concept of Masonic “recognition” by lodges and grand lodges flows. No lodge can indiscriminately allow just anyone to attend the degrees, or the whole concept of the initiatic process falls to the ground. Over the years lodges and grand lodges have developed rules as to whom they will allow to participate in the ceremonies, or at least witness them. Unfortunately there is little uniformity in these rules, and thus it has come about that lodges and grand lodges do not agree on whom they will recognize as legitimate Masons for purposes of visitation in a “tiled” Masonic lodge.

In 1905 the first international conference on Esperanto was held in France. Esperanto is a manufactured language, the intent of which is to have an international language which is not tied to any particular nation or state. At this conference, a number of those in attendance were Masons. But they quickly discovered that they could not sit in a tiled lodge with each other because they belonged to lodges and grand lodges which did not recognize one another. However, because of the nature of the Esperanto movement, which was designed to promote peace and harmony amongst those “must else have remained at a perpetual distance,” to quote the Masonic Constitutions of 1723, there was a deep desire on the part of some of the Masons in attendance to find a way to talk with one another about Freemasonry even though they could not all sit in the same tiled lodge together. From this simple idea the Universal League of Freemasons was born.

Earlier attempts at creating a dialogue between and among Masons had focused on grand lodges. But these attempts at bringing grand lodges together to discuss the development of a common set of standards by which Masons could recognize one another as legitimate Masons had been unsuccessful. By the end of the 19th century there were deep and almost unbridgeable gulfs between different grand lodges. Some grand lodges insisted that a pre-condition for being a Mason was an acknowledgement of the existence of God; some grand lodges insisted that such an acknowledgement was unnecessary; some grand lodges insisted that only men could become Masons; others insisted that women as well as men could be Masons. Some grand lodges insisted that they must exercise complete authority over all Freemasonry within a stated political jurisdiction, while others insisted that they could exercise concurrent jurisdiction with other Masonic grand lodges. These disagreements meant that Freemasonry was divided, and an institution that had proclaimed itself to be a “center of union” in 1723 was hardly that by 1905.

The Universal League of Freemasons was created to break through these barriers so that Masons could enjoy fellowship with one another in a non-tiled Masonic environment, without the restrictions occasioned by the different rules of “recognition” in the world occupied by lodges and grand lodges. The idea was that Masons could meet with other Masons in a non-tiled Masonic environment and discover that they had much in common with one another without violating their obligations as Masons to the lodges and grand lodges to which they belonged. The initiatic tradition of Freemasonry, in which only those entitled to participate or witness the ceremonies of Freemasonry had, in the minds of the organizers of the Universal League of Freemasons, been protected.

That this idea should be non-controversial may seem strange to Freemasons in the 21st century. Knowledge of Freemasonry is widespread, and even if we exclude the obvious public knowledge of the initiatic ceremonies because of exposés of the degrees, there is still much that Masons can share with and discuss with non-Masons, much less Masons with whom they cannot sit in a tiled Masonic lodge. However, that has not always been so. There is a tradition within Freemasonry that illegitimate Masons should not be acknowledged as such, and be avoided if at all possible. In California the Master of a Masonic lodge under the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons is asked to acknowledge at his installation:

You admit that no new Lodge should be formed without permission of the Grand Lodge; and that no countenance should be given to any irregular Lodge, or to any person clandestinely initiated therein, - being contrary to the ancient charges of the Order.

In the earliest days of the premier grand lodge in London there was a concern that Masons were being made for the price of a meal. Called “Leg ‘o Mutton Masons,” these irregularly made Masons were the source of this prohibition against countenancing any irregular lodge, or “any person clandestinely initiated therein.” The term “clandestine”, comes from the Latin *clandestinus*, and originally mean “conducted in secret.” Of course all Masonic initiatic ceremonies are conducted in “secret,” so the term is a pejorative one applied to those Masons who were considered to have been illegitimately made Masons, often by those having no authority to make them Masons, and often for mercenary reasons.

Lodges and grand lodges therefore have a long tradition of avoiding Masons whose legitimacy of origin is suspect, and from the beginning the Universal League of Freemasons had to deal with this problem. They resolved it by accepting as members Masons who were from lodges and grand lodges which only admitted men as members, but who otherwise had some claim to Masonic legitimacy or historical origin. Note that the League did *not* allow women Masons to become members. That barrier continued to exist throughout the active life of the organization.

At a later time the League was organized along national lines, called “groups”. There was a United States Group, with a secretary to conduct correspondence, but not much else in the way of organizational structure. The ULF was brought to the United States by a Mason who had been Raised a Master Mason Hiram Lodge No. 25 on December 8, 1924. His name was Harvey Newton Brown, and he was one of the most controversial figures in American Freemasonry before his death in 1999.

I have in my personal files correspondence with Bro. Brown which began in 1965. The earliest letter is dated April 10, 1965. At the time I was a young graduate student in political science at UCLA, working on my master’s degree in that subject. I had first come across the Universal League of Freemasons while living at the UCLA Chapter of the Acacia Fraternity – a Masonic-related college fraternity. Materials from the League

had been mailed to the chapter house, and I read them with great interest. I wrote to Bro. Brown, and thus began a long a fruitful friendship which lasted until his death. It was not without pain. Bro. Brown did not suffer fools gladly, as I was to learn much to my chagrin. But with his prodding I began a lifelong commitment to truly understanding this marvelous institution which we call Freemasonry. And along the way I have had to come to grips with a definition of Freemasonry that fits all the facts, and not just a prejudice that I may have previously held. My involvement in the Universal League of Freemasonry, although brief from an organizational standpoint, was the seminal experience which shaped all my subsequent research and study into the nature of Freemasonry. And that was perhaps the genius of the Universal League in the first place. If we meet others who claim to be Masons, what evidence will we accept to confirm that they are, indeed, Masons? Are there any limits, any boundaries beyond which a person *cannot* be considered a Mason? What are the essential characteristics of a Mason, and what are the accidental characteristics? What are the characteristics which may be temporary in nature or historically conditioned, and which are universal characteristics without which a person cannot logically be construed to be a Mason? And would a discussion of these things amongst those who call themselves Masons be valuable in helping to clarify these questions? The Universal League of Freemasons encouraged the asking of these questions, and for me that was of inestimable value for the growth of my understanding as a Mason.

This short paper cannot go into the detailed history of the Universal League of Freemasons, nor the United States Group, which I served as secretary for two years until forced by my grand lodge to cease my membership and participation. A longer and more detailed history is in the process of being written, much of it based on the original records of the organization which came into my possession when I became its secretary. These records include copies of *La Heroldo*, which was the organ of the international organization, and a collection of newsletters of the United States Group, all of them written by Bro. Brown when he was National Deputy.

I will close with a quotation from Socrates to Meno, written circa 400 B.C., and quoted in the December, 1972, issue of the U.S. Group Newsletter:

“That we shall be better and braver and less helpless if we think that we ought to enquire, than we should have been if we indulged in the idle fancy that there was no knowing and no use in seeking to know what we do not know; -- that is a theme upon which I am ready to fight, in word and deed, to the utmost of my power.”

By the 1980's the Universal League had disappeared, and today there appears to be no trace of it. Few Masonic publications make any reference to it, and it is as if it disappeared from the pages of history. But its story still needs to be told, and it is my hope that I will be able to write that story at sometime in the future. For now, let it be known that there was once a twentieth century experiment in Masonic dialogue which may well have had more influence on the progress of the history of Freemasonry than we imagine. Today we meet with Masons who remain at “a perpetual distance” to

discuss what we have in common, and to explore what we do not. The spirit of the Universal League thus lives on. I am proud to have lived to see the day when this would be considered the norm and not the exception. *So mote it be!*