

James R. McLachlan- An Unlikely Grand Master?

Jacob W. Thompson, KYCH

Grand Council of Cryptic Masons of Missouri Education Committee

Masonry presents us with many leaders, some cut very much for the role and others seemingly who fell into it. The nature of our vast fraternity is perhaps in its broad possibilities for Brothers to pursue their own interests and serve in varying capacities in bodies that meet such precepts. James R. McLachlan, Grand Master of the Grand Council in 1924 is perhaps one of those great individuals who seemingly fell into a spot, and at the moment, like a deer in the headlights was trapped, and set to his course of labors thereafter- at least in the Council.

James Robert McLachlan was born in Clarmont County, Ohio on January 2nd, 1858. He was raised in a large family and was the last of eleven children born. At the age of 14 McLachlan moved to Kahoka, Missouri to live with his sister and there attended the local schools. Following McLachlan's graduation, he began a 15-year long teaching career and that followed by being elected County School Commissioner for Clark County (served 4 terms.) In 1895 he left education and began working in the abstract business¹. On June 13th, 1894 McLachlan married Ms. Emma Belle Henshaw at LaGrange, Mo. They later had one daughter, Marjorie.

In 1891 McLachlan was initiated, passed and raised at Hiram Lodge No. 362 in Kahoka, Mo. It was at Hiram Lodge that he served as Master in 1894 and 1895. His ritual acumen was noticed and in 1906 he began what would be a 28-year long stint as Grand Lecturer for the Grand Lodge of Missouri. In regards to McLachlan's appointment as Grand Lecturer, the then Grand Master, Algernon Sidney Houston, announced,

I determined that the appointed should be of unsullied character, thoroughly posted in the Ritual, and unswerving in his devotions to the principals for which Freemasonry stands.

As a Grand Lecturer McLachlan was noted as traveling widely to hold schools of instruction and was well regarded as a "splendid exemplar of Masonic teachings." In mid-year of 1934 McLachlan informed the Grand Master, Frank Barnhill, that he would resign at the close of the term. Barnhill would later propose in his Grand Masters Address that McLachlan should be "given the title of Grand Lecturer Emeritus."

Bro. McLachlan received the work of the American (York) Rite beginning at Kahoka Chapter No. 126, Royal Arch Masons, receiving the caputular degrees there in 1906. Interestingly



¹ Dealing with land titles and the examination, processing and recording of land transfers

McLachlan had actually been part of the Chapters formation and served as the conduit for collecting the proper paperwork, making arrangements and securing the needed paraphernalia. Three years after being exalted he was elected High Priest in 1909, and later became a member of the Missouri Convention of the Order of High Priesthood. Companion McLachlan was greeted and passed the circle of perfection in Solomon Council No. 26 in April of 1907, and the next year was Illustrious Master. He later moved his cryptic membership to Trenton Council No. 37 in the wake of Solomon Council's consolidation. Our Companion was knighted and received the orders of Masonic Templary in Memphis Commandery No. 41 in 1906 but in 1914 demitted and moved his membership to St. Bernard Commandery No. 52, in Milan, Mo, where he later served as Commander. McLachlan was also a member of Moolah Temple in St. Louis and undertook the work of the Scottish Rite in St. Louis at its Bodies there in 1908. Further McLachlan was involved in the prominent invitational body of the time existing in Missouri, belonging to St. Chrysostom Conclave, Red Cross of Constantine.

Perhaps McLachlan's highest honor or role beyond Grand Lodge service was his election in 1924 as the Grand Master of the Grand Council of Missouri. McLachlan had been appointed to the Grand Council line as Grand Steward in 1918 by John Pickard (who was also a Past Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Missouri.) McLachlan then advanced regularly and progressed till his election in 1924. McLachlan felt quite unprepared and perhaps even unworthy to be elected and serve the Grand Council as Grand Master, so much so that he expressed it to Ray V. Denslow, telling Denslow,

After his election as Grand Master of the Grand Council, he [McLachlan] came down the steps with D.M. Wilson, and said to him, "I feel just like a great huge joke," alluding to his lack of knowledge of the degrees.

During his term as Grand Master he constituted (or ordered such action) for Bonne Terre Council. His time saw a decline in membership growth, just a net gain of 319 with 847 companions greeted. McLachlan, always the ritualist focused in his address toward the lost rituals being reported by councils and the detrimental nature of such circumstances, the challenges of country councils and engaging and retaining members, and the ever present shadows of suspension for non-payment of dues. McLachlan's appointment to the Grand Line was Henry Elberg (later elected Grand Master of the Council in 1930).

An interesting anecdote related to McLachlan's council labors perhaps shows his less than dedicated understanding of the body in his early moments serving it. Years before his service as Grand Master, in 1918, while serving as Grand Steward, McLachlan was sent to Baltimore, Maryland for the General Grand Council's Triennial Assembly. He was accompanied by David M. Wilson, and at the Grand Council of Cryptic Masons expense. Seemingly seen as more of a trip for fun, rather than fraternal efforts, Ray Denslow notes in his journals that the two brothers arrived, registered, and traveled off to Gettysburg to site see, never attending the meetings.

McLachlan faced various health challenges later in life and died on July 17th, 1944, at his home in Kahoka, Mo at the age of 86. His services were under the joint control of the Grand Council of Missouri and Grand Lodge of Missouri, both of which playing prominent roles in the arrangements. He is buried in Kahoka Cemetery.