



THE CARNIVALIZATION OF AMERICAN CULTURE AND ITS EFFECT ON FREEMASONRY

John W. Bizzack

If you sense there is much less rigorous analysis about so many things today, trust your senses. We skim a lot. And details surrounding complicated problems get in the way of skimmers.

We do not seem to have a society-wide interest in engaging in historical thinking these days, even though such thinking offers the opportunity to think and reason in more sophisticated ways. Few seem to devote much time or demonstrate personal inspiration to mine truth from the quicksand of inference and innuendo in which our technology engulfs us.

Notwithstanding the positives from the fact that we have a repository of the world's information at our fingertips more than at any time in history, the Internet gives millions of people the opportunity to pioneer, hone, and to largely advance their skimming skills.

Access to the Internet seems to have made our appetite for information bottomless. Hunger for factual information, however, and the rigorous analysis of it, if searched for, is another matter. It was not until the late 1990s that we began to recognize how this technology might also be a mixed blessing—the proverbial double-edged sword.

The Internet's growth enabled the introduction of online communication services such as CompuServe, America Online, and Prodigy. They introduced users to digital communication through email, bulletin board messaging, and real-time online chatting. The 1999 launch of the LiveJournal publishing site Friendster in 2001, then blogging platforms, followed by LinkedIn and My Space by 2006, was eclipsed by Facebook in 2008. Google, Instagram, Vine, Twitter, Redditt, Pinterest, Snapchat, Tik Tock, and live streaming followed, along with a host of other platforms and similar social media service apps.¹ By 2021, Facebook alone boasted 190 million users in the United States and 1.84 billion daily active users worldwide.²

Slow but evident were the effects of social media and advertising revenue. As evidenced by the increase in academic study and research, there has been a growing concern about the social and psychological effects of social media (and the Internet in general) from around 2010 to date. By 2017, social media use was considered so prevalent that it was called social media addiction.³ The Pew Research Center reports that 97 percent of 13 to 17-year-olds use at least one of seven major online platforms, and ages 13 to 18 spend about nine hours on

¹Saqib Shah, *The History of Social Networking*, May 14, 2016, <https://www.digitaltrends.com/web/the-history-of-social-networking>, accessed, June 2022, Maryville University, St. Louis, Missouri, *The Evolution of Social Media: How Did It Begin, and Where Could It Go Next?* <https://online.maryville.edu/evolution-social-media>, accessed June 2022.

² Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/377808/distribution-of-facebook-users-by-device>, accessed August 2022.

³ David Blackwel, Carrie Leaman, Rose Tramosch, Ciera Osborne, Miriam Liss, "Extraversion, Neuroticism, Attachment Style And Fear Of Missing Out As Predictors Of Social Media Use And Addiction," *Personality and Individual Differences*, Volume 116, October 2017.

social media daily.⁴ Social media itself has yet to be declared *the* problem, but rather the way people use it in place of actual communication and in-person socializing.

Casting blame on the Internet and social media platforms for societal woes has become convenient, even without studies and extensive research. The evolving effects of technology in our daily lives are difficult to ignore.

The advantages of technology overshadow the way we have become so accustomed to using and relying on it to substitute for many in-person socializing and finding a quick answer that we often presume is the correct answer to many things. In a world already pretty good at skimming, the sheer volume of all we have found with the Internet and social media in the past decade makes skimming an art form.

Inside that 'art,' we find hidden snags: the extraordinary speed at which falsehoods and misperception are spread, the creation of divisiveness, and the calculated misinformation of poorly thought-out information. We see the consequences of the breakdown of reasoning and critical thinking and an upswing in the notion that every opinion expressed is equal in its validity to fact. Questionable conclusions seem more prone to thoughtless reactions. We find too many wedded to the notion that anecdote is a valuable and stand-alone evidence of anything. It is a skimmer's paradise.

The absence of context and corroboration in much of our skimming world today is painfully illustrated when we find that social media platforms are quoted and cited as uniformly acceptable, reliable, fact-filled, and legitimate sources of integrity-based data. We might argue that everyone is entitled to an opinion. However, we still have to deal with the pesky reality that all opinions are not equally valuable. As we more regularly confuse the difference between opinion and fact and place equal or more value on opinions than facts, the collapse of even simple reason is on the horizon.

Concerns about the magnitude of the troubling condition of limited contextual thinking found in our youth and culture, and the connection between the two, are not answered entirely by the intellectual pandemic that skimming or that the Internet/social media produces. This worrisome aspect is merely an effect of the stunning increase in the technologies that we have come to adore that slowly unravels our general capacity to think and reason. But that is not the sole cause of the loss of widespread rigorous analysis that we see more of each day.

The undoing can be spread to what we see as an increasingly trivial culture preoccupied with feelings driving our perspectives and a craving for distractions, amusement, and, some say, attention. Growing more visible, especially since the turn of the twentieth century, is a blurring of legal, moral, and ethical boundaries that strengthens a climate in which we place great weight on the idea that our feelings supersede all else.

By 2016, research had already determined that despite the great advances made, there were social and psychological effects of Internet use that have a detrimental impact on our lives. These led to various phenomena such as cyberbullying, cyber porn, cyber suicide, Internet addiction, social isolation, cyber racism, etc.⁵ No matter, the genie is out of the bottle. Since this technology is a passion, subduing it will require considerable self-discipline.

⁴ Monica Anderson, Jingjing Jiang, "Teens, Social Media and Technology 2018 (95% of teens have access to a smartphone, and 45% say they are online 'almost constantly') The Pew Research Center, May 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology>, accessed, August 2022.

⁵ Marianna Diomidous, Kostis Chardalias, Adrianna Magita, Panagiotis Koutonias, Paraskevi Panagiotopoulou and John Mantas, "Social and Psychological Effects of the Internet Use," National Library of Medicine, 2 February 2016. doi: 10.5455/aim.2016.24.66-68, Gianluca Quaglio, "How The Internet Can Harm Us, And What Can We Do About It?" Scientific Foresight (STOA) / February 18, 2019, (additional effects identified: lack of sleep, low self-esteem, a fear of missing out, distraction, undue influence on consumers, impacts our ability to communicate, form relationships, access and spread information, and to arrive at the best decision and could be linked to low self-esteem).

How does such a conspicuous loss of careful reasoning and at least a moderate level of rigorous analysis impact the future of Freemasonry?

We are told that learning history endows us with the invaluable mental power we call judgment. But the role of history as a tool for changing how we think about promoting a literacy of discernment, judgment, caution, making choices, and balancing options does not receive prime billing in the public sphere.⁶ In fact, there has been no prime billing for multiple decades, not just recently or because of the Internet. Generally, we have not found anything close to prime billing about these things in the American Masonic Fraternity for decades.

Others have written on this subject. It is not difficult to find consensus among those who actually study our factual history that since the 1960s, a profoundly different set of beliefs and values in America emerged well before the advent of much of the technology we have today. Our technology has just made it more conspicuous.

Achieving mature historical thought depends much on one's ability to navigate the uneven landscape of history. So, those who view the past as usable can see how many discard or ignore vast regions of the past that either contradict their current needs or fail to align tidily with them. Contorting the past to fit the predetermined meanings we have already assigned to them fuels the cultural fog of subjectivity. And that gradually leads to thinking and acting as if one's opinion is just as true as fact.

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The assault on common sense and values brings many things to a crossroads in our society. Thinking that the Institution of Freemasonry and the Fraternity surrounding it are somehow immune is ludicrous. As rational thinking has demonstrated for centuries, no single or neat prescription enlightens everyone about anything. Solutions must be relevant to the problem, which politics in our society and current technology seem to make sure is even more difficult to achieve.

Becoming more central to the debate on the direction of the nation (and Freemasonry) is the slow-coming realization that there is a critical need to find and take a balanced view and not be deflected from a tough, candid appraisal of painful issues.

CULTURAL CASUALTIES

As the list of our larger society's cultural casualties from the 1960s increased each decade, the possible causes dwindled. We are left today to face what the lack of quality in education does to a society that has slowly traded knowledge for forms of inquiry based on our feelings, not facts. This process stresses perspectives and the *social* construction of knowledge. If you do not believe this circumstance has and continues to spill over into the Fraternity, then you have failed to study or understand that the factual history of the organization in our country plainly shows how the internal culture of the Fraternity has always been inescapably influenced by the evolution of American culture.

Since the advent of television, the overdose of media culture (not just social media as we know it today), along with the instant marketing it created, are where the finger of blame often points. The shift from talking

⁶ Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and other Unnatural Acts*, Temple University Press, 2001.

about obligations and responsibilities now appears consumed with perspectives about rights and privileges. Dulled perception, manipulated desires, the breeding of decadence, insulation of the senses, increase in aggression, encouragement of the superficial, and the demise of plain old good manners had led so many to speak in slogans, catchphrases, emoji, and acronyms, replacing the kind of discourse we remember as conversation.⁷

The parental legacy of this overdose and the cultural casualties stemming from it is traceable to the post-World War II period when society began to more noticeably slide down a long, steep chute into a culture where leisure time is no longer used for self-improvement and the acquisition of knowledge, but instead consumption and more entertainment. A profusion of inflated egos today might be thought of as one consequence. Laissez-Faire attitudes about our appearance and how we present ourselves to others, general courtesies, and the increasing emphasis on the opinion shaped by nonacademic learning have slithered into our interpretation of civic duty, along with a less energetic searching for (much less the understanding of) factual history. We find progressively bastardized definitions surrounding what is and is not evidence. It is absurd and, in some cases, stupid to believe these things do not remodel our thinking and long-held values and change our behavior.

The task of thinking critically and constructively with respect for evidence in the pursuit of wisdom has devolved into a dreadful chore for so many who have yet to find value in self-responsibility in the first place. So, we find fewer in each generation who no longer place a premium on learning about admirable things that are verifiable, as compared to things conjured out of our imaginations. And again, if you do not think this affects the Institution of Freemasonry, think again. In the years ahead, the Institution of American Freemasonry will be pulled to its margins. Some believe the margins have already been reached.

The effect of such a poor education and the curtailing of the value we formerly placed on common sense is self-perpetuating. If a generation has not taught the next generation well, how properly will that next

generation, when it is their turn, teach the next? We see that question answered today throughout society and certainly in the American Masonic Fraternity.

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As intellectual entropy has crept into the generations since the 1960s, the Fraternity has struggled to live off the capital of its past reputation. The notion that somehow Freemasonry will one day again widely appeal to an audience that makes up some imaginary deep pool of qualified candidates that will find their way to the door of Masonry has no legs. While there is nothing wrong with such optimism, this deep pool theory, played against the increase of a feelings-driven society, is misplaced.

No matter, Freemasonry has weathered past eras when its appeal was challenged and its design fiercely attacked by the society and culture from which it must attract members. Still, the *idea* of Freemasonry survives. However, the Fraternity has never faced the kind of societal commotion and upheaval of social values, standards, and rational thinking as it has since the 1960s but in particular, the past twenty to thirty years. And again, if you do not see the wear and tear on the Fraternity, look again.

The Masonic Fraternity, the only organization offering Freemasonry in a just and regularly constituted form, has not been consistent with what it offers for over a century. The core idea of Freemasonry is always present

⁷ Katherine Washburn, John F. Thornton, *Dumbing Down: Essays on the Strip Mining of American Culture*, W.W. Norton and Company, New York, 1996.

and threads through the various doings and practices found in multiple jurisdictions, but *retention*—the holding of the interest of those admitted—has always been a significant problem that tells the tale.

The American Fraternity has allowed too many men into its ranks at different times in its history or has not provided what good men seek. Many Masons might willingly take the hit on the first but not the latter because few accept that what they offer in their Lodge may cause a lack of consumer confidence, as it were, which, in fact, is what the poor retention rate affirms. American Freemasonry has always shown a remarkable tendency to accept accountability for whole or part of the desirable outcomes, like the swelling of ranks, but not the undesirable outcomes, like the decline of the same.

In response to the retention problem and while remaining stuck in a world of the *bigger is better* belief, much of the Fraternity has managed to abbreviate Freemasonry and reshape its brand in exchange for pursuing quantity. Multiple warnings to do otherwise can be found in our own records for those who bother to examine them. Such warnings continue to be sounded by Masonic scholars, academics, other students of Freemasonry, members, leaders, Grand Masters, and most Masonic associations for the past 170 years, but in the main, they have been largely disregarded.

Intoxicated by the way the Fraternity increased membership in the United States to over four million by 1959, a six-decade hangover followed, as did its effects. So, today we find ourselves attempting to attract future members when the Fraternity has lowered admittance standards in a larger society that is mostly unaware that Freemasonry exists. Doing so continues to unmoor the Fraternity from Enlightenment Era values to appease. That has become more of a challenge to the posterity of the Craft than anything since the anti-Masonic years in the United States that took place in the early decades of the 1800s.

While the pool of truly good men now appears to have never been as large as the Fraternity may have believed, the odds of swelling the ranks again to any number close to the 1959 roster is the kind of wager that professional gamblers chase their entire lives.

Careful reasoning should tell us that if the pool from which to draw is small, opening the door wider and lowering the qualification standards is hardly a dazzling solution. But wait. The West Gate was opened wide in the years leading up to and during the Civil War and several decades following that war without concern for consequences. The same occurred during the post-World War I and II years, and we can see how that worked out. The Fraternity's course has been compared to a water hose filling a bucket with a hole in it for a good reason.

As asked by many in the past, even before the steady declines in membership that followed each of the rapid expansion periods, "What's wrong with a smaller Fraternity and fewer Freemasons?" After all, Freemasonry, while seeking to improve men, is not in the soul-saving business, so we cannot rationally claim that a smaller Fraternity of good men means good men who are not Masons are doomed for eternity. In the absence of proof, are we to merely presume that all four million plus members in 1959 had become better men by membership alone? Is that presumption a justification for needing another four million or more under the same practices and mindset of the past that could not retain the vast majority of its members?

While there is nothing wrong at all with optimism but in the case of the fraternity it seems a little misplaced since wide appeal depends largely on the sentiment of those in our larger society from which we draw our members—especially today.

What happens should the Fraternity become a much smaller organization—say, reduced to a few hundred thousand or even less? We do not know exactly. With the assistance of good sense and sound judgment in practical matters, we can speculate, and some speculative outcomes seem easy to forecast.

A smaller Fraternity would herald the disappearance of more Masonic buildings. The reported volume of public charity work by the Fraternity would probably shrink. The membership rosters of Appendant Masonic bodies would decline. It seems that dues and Grand Lodge assessments would substantially increase to sustain a scintilla of hope that the surplus of current Grand Lodge programs might continue close to their present form. And even more, fundraisers would need to be held. Are these things alone enough to spur interest in recalibrating the culture of the Fraternity in a way that would constructively preserve and advance Freemasonry? It might seem such to many, but it is probably more contingent upon the quality of the members who are left standing in the Fraternity should it become a much smaller organization. Will those members fall into the historical pattern of first seeking another all-encompassing plan to just hatch projects to increase membership again? Will they find themselves mostly concerned with merely trying to sustain the construct of the routine and unproductive processes of the past and struggle to become a multi-million-member organization again? If so, will the standard of qualification for membership become even more relaxed? Will widespread public awareness, much less interest in the Fraternity, inexplicably appear?

There are reasons the Fraternity cannot rely on the inexplicable.

WHAT DOES SOME GUY NAMED MCGUFFY HAVE TO DO WITH THIS?

While the pool of truly good men now appear to have never been as large as the fraternity may have believed, the odds of swelling the ranks again to any number close the 1959 roster is the kind of wager that professional gamblers chase their entire lives.

What Mason would say they do not seek or want to select qualified candidates for admittance, develop and choose effective leaders, provide and deliver proficient ritual ceremonies, and initial and ongoing instruction? Is there a Mason who would rather not balance all of the aspects and once widely-recognized rational philosophies of Freemasonry, influence our communities, and serve as an example of what learning and practicing the historical intent of Freemasonry can do for men? What Mason does not want to fill our Lodges with active minds as opposed to just warm bodies?

When we see how easy it is to say that is what we support versus doing it, we also find there is not a vast understanding or deep appreciation of the complexity of the task, much less agreement on a process that can best ensure it is achieved. And to do so in a large culture that has and continues to distance itself from the ideas on which organized Freemasonry was designed seems less likely with each passing decade.

In his July 2019 column, Christopher Hodapp wrote and posted on his popular *Freemasons for Dummies* website, *How the 1960s Really Killed American Freemasonry's Future*. He noted that while it is opined that Freemasonry is not suited to modern man or modern society, those taking that position do not really seem to know why they are right.

As he so adeptly points out, the watering down of Freemasonry by the Fraternity is the effect but not the cause.⁸ The cause Hodapp identifies was the death of the *McGuffey Readers* in America's schools. If you have never heard of *McGuffey Readers* or know about their influence on American education, then Hodapp's entire point is made.

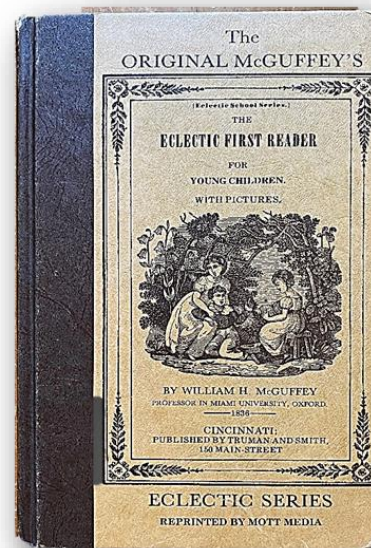
The McGuffey Readers became enormously popular almost instantly. Hodapp writes:

In 1837, an American son of Scottish immigrants named William Holmes McGuffey was teaching in Ohio. A Cincinnati printer asked him to devise a series of books to teach children how to read. McGuffey had worked as a traveling teacher since fourteen and eventually became a theology lecturer at Ohio's Miami University.

Between 1836-37, he created four volumes of graded readers (eventually expanded to six). They were snatched up by American teachers all over the growing nation, coinciding with the explosion of demands in the 1820s and 30s for public education in every new state. McGuffey's method was vastly superior to how the Founding Fathers had learned to read and write by memorizing and endlessly writing proverbs in a copybook.

As a direct result of McGuffey's books and the teaching method that came about, the Americans who fought in the Civil War in the 1860s as twenty-year-olds were the first literate, mass-educated generation in the modern world. That's why Civil War-era letters and diaries from soldiers on both sides of the conflict are so vivid and numerous today compared to previous eras.

Between the first editions in 1836-37, through 1960, more than 130 million McGuffey Readers were sold. It has been conservatively estimated that each copy was read by at least ten students. That's how pervasive they were. And that's why when the McGuffey Readers were yanked out of schools in the early 1960s, it had a direct and arguably corrosive effect on society at large, and for the purposes of this story, on Freemasonry itself.⁹



Hodapp explains how the more advanced *Readers* contained increasingly sophisticated stories and excerpts of what were (and still are) considered the Classics: the Bible, Shakespeare, Dr. Johnson, John Milton, Byron, Charles Dickens, Sir Walter Scott, Washington Irving, and Founding Fathers like Franklin and Jefferson. As children learned to read and the volumes advanced, they were introduced to the great works of literature and taught not to fear them. McGuffey himself was a Scots Presbyterian, a Calvinist at heart, a Biblical scholar, and he taught theology. Consequently, as they progressed, the books instilled his messages of what he saw as universal beliefs, habits, and manners in every student who learned to read using his *Reader*. The Biblical passages were

⁸ Hodapp refers to *effects* as: "reduced proficiency standards, one-day classes, printed rituals, open recruitment, advertising, lowering of petitioning ages to 18, and lots more were all done to address shrinking numbers of petitioners and ongoing participation."

⁹ Christopher L. Hodapp, "How the 1960s Really Killed American Freemasonry's Future," *Freemasons for Dummies*, July 1, 2019, <https://freemasonsfordummies.blogspot.com/2019/07/how-1960s-really-killed-american.html>, accessed July 2019 and May 2022.

used to teach moral lessons, not religious or denominational ones. The non-Biblical readings also taught allegories, explained historical events, or told heroic tales of acclaimed heroes of the past. Poems, tales of excitement and daring, cautionary fables, and countless others became the shared fabric of what "everybody knew" in America.

Additionally, McGuffey's method stressed the importance of speaking properly. Generations of children were encouraged to memorize passages from the books to be recited aloud. This was their first experience speaking in public, along with the mental discipline of memorization. McGuffey's instructions in the books urged students to engage in discussions to understand more fully what they had read about. In this way, children were taught the basics of logic, public oration, and good citizen guidelines.¹⁰

The books were certainly in line with what the founders believed were the absolute founding principles necessary to the success of the American experiment of a democratic republic. And American society could fall apart without a basic moral code that would not be violated when no one was looking.¹¹

Hodapp's entire treatise should be required reading for those earnestly seeking the answer to *why* there is much less rigorous analysis about much of anything in the world today. No generation of American children since McGuffey's books, which were branded as "hopelessly out of date and out of touch with modern society," has shared that common basis of education on such a widespread basis.

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As noted in Hodapp's essay, the *McGuffey Readers* are still in print today and used, but on a significantly smaller scale. They remain popular with some private schools and home-school families. Reportedly, around 30,000 copies are sold each year—down from 150,000 sold in 1985 and 120 million copies sold between 1836 and 1960. Interestingly, the source of this information was found on The National Park Service and the United States Department of Interior website two years ago, where a paper titled "William Holmes McGuffey and His Readers" was part of the website. As of 2022, the paper is no longer available at that site. Readers can make of that what they will.¹²

If we follow the premise of Hodapp to its logical conclusion, the Fraternity may have its greatest future among the young men educated in those types of environments. How the Fraternity might endeavor to capitalize on that possibility is yet to be seen, or even if the Fraternity's leadership has seen the wisdom of at least exploring how it might tap into that modest reservoir for the good of the order.

¹⁰ *IBID.*

¹¹ *IBID.*

¹² The source paper, "William Holmes McGuffey and His Readers" written by Harvey C. Minnich in 1993, may still be found at https://www.countryschoolassociation.org/uploads/1/0/0/3/100377070/npsmcguffey_1_.pdf, accessed June 2022, and more about McGuffey and the influence of his book in America that is digitized by the Internet Archive in 2011, funded by the Boston Library Consortium Member Libraries, https://archive.org/stream/williamholmesmcg00minn/williamholmesmcg00minn_djvu.txt, accessed June 2022, and Thomas Perkins Abernethy, and "William Holmes McGuffey and His Readers. By Harvey C. Minnich and Old Favorites from the McGuffey Readers, "edited by Harvey C. Minnich,, also appears in the *Journal of American History*, Volume 24, Issue 1, June 1937, Pages 120–121, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1891385>, <https://academic.oup.com/jah/article-abstract/24/1/120/875310>, accessed June 22, 2022.

Hodapp's well-constructed point certainly ties to the issue of the troubling condition of our youth, our culture over at least the past six decades, and the connection between the two. How the Fraternity will adeptly adjust to the inevitable effects over the next several decades is a matter that will not fade away.

The issue is staring us directly in the face now, but we see little discussion about it. The responsibility to productively face and deal with the issue rests not on the shoulders of elected and appointed leadership but on all members.

CUSTODIANSHIP

The fabric of support that men could traditionally find in the larger culture has become worn, torn, and unraveling. On the one hand, Freemasonry's philosophies and historical design seem to be in a better position than in years past to naturally become a strong contender to fill a void and provide the nourishment needed in our external culture. On the other hand, factual history tells us that that possibility is not a sure bet.

How, as an organization, the Fraternity responds to that which has and will be troubling for the rest of the current generation and into the next is, as it always has been, left in the hands of men of varying talents, different abilities, and understandings of the *idea* of Freemasonry. The call of caution to wisely choose those admitted into the ranks and elected to lead should be much louder today and enforced.

Freemasonry will continue to be, or become, what the great majority of the members think it is, or want it to become. What happens in the absence of proper orientation, instruction, and mentoring of its members about the *idea* of Freemasonry and *all* of its aspects, and the skilled leadership to sustain that labor, is already clear in our records.

When an earthquake strikes, the devastation often depends less on the magnitude of the quake than on the stability of the *structure* affected. The stability of the *structure* of the organization of Fraternity has been tested before; however, the test it faces now is from a different culture—one that, more steadily and with wide-spreading technological influence—continues to separate itself from actual communication and in-person socializing.

Can Freemasonry be learned and practiced if a generation or more of men admitted are preoccupied with increasingly trivial matters, driven by a craving for distractions, entertainment, and amusement? Can Freemasonry continue to unfold constructively if rigorous analysis of its design's historical aim and purpose is weakened even more by the behavior and habits of inartful skimmers?

These questions would make for an interesting discussion at Lodge.

Those who will become custodians of the Craft over the next generation will, of course, come from the influence of today's Masonic culture. What their custodianship will look like will depend a great deal on that they are left by the previous culture and inject into the next.

It might seem that serious-minded Masons would successfully impede or prevent that from happening. On the other hand, our history does not show that happening each time generations bring the external culture with them into the Fraternity.

There is, however, solace in the fact that the *idea* of Freemasonry will continue regardless of the structure of the Fraternity surrounding it. Whether the Fraternity today is strong enough to withstand the cultural quake it has begun to experience and successfully deal with in the future is an altogether different question.

The pervasiveness of McGuffey Readers and their influence over 186 years—ten generations of American life—is found in the saying, “You don’t know what you got till it’s gone.”

