

## “By The Light Of The Full Moon”

V. : W. : Bro. Paul W. Harvey, Grand Historian Emeritus, @1958

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### Highlighting the history of Mt. Moriah #11 of Shelton, and Union City Lodge #27 of Union

Some who read this will be able to remember that one of their childhood chores was to clean lamp and lantern chimneys and trim wicks. It was a sooty and messy job. Yet the development of the kerosene lamp was a great historical advance in the artificial lighting of homes, business establishments, public halls and the paths of people who had to be on the streets at night.

The discovery of petroleum in Pennsylvania about a century ago supplied for the first time in history illuminating oil at low prices. This kerosene, or coal oil as it was called in the early days, was soon sold all over the nation. Its utility as a producer of light was a challenge to American ingenuity. Inventors went to work and fashioned lamp and lantern chimneys of glass, and they patented and improved the kerosene lamp, and later the gasoline lamp, until they reached what was regarded in the last quarter of the 19th century as the peak of perfection.

#### **Electric Lights in 1862**

But the reign of the kerosene lamp was relatively short, and within a score of years the electric light, invented by Thomas A. Edison in 1879, sealed its doom. The first dynamo for electric power in Washington Territory was installed by the Tacoma Mill Co. in 1882 to light its mill and yard. In 1884 Gen. J. W. Sprague and J. H. Houghton established the Tacoma Light and Water Co. and in 1886 they installed a water driven plant and began street lighting in Tacoma. However the first hydro-electric installation had been put in operation in Spokane the year before in 1885, when G. A. Fitch dismantled a 50-horsepower plant from the steamship Columbia and installed it in the basement of the C. and C. Mill there.

The Port Blakely Mill in 1883 installed a generator to illuminate its mill on Bainbridge Island, and the lights could be seen from Seattle, whose progressive residents wondered why their city was without electric lights. The Seattle Electric Light Co. was organized and its plant put in operation March 22, 1886. Seattle soon had 1,200 electric street lights of 16 candle power each.

These were the beginnings of electric power production in Washington that has now reached tremendous proportions, and seems destined for further large growth.

#### **Light a Pioneer Problem**

But Masonry was active in the state before the appearance of the kerosene lamp. Light was a great problem to our pioneers. They used candles, or crude lamps with wicks that burned fish oil, whale oil, mineral oils obtained from the distillation of coal tars, and even lard. Many pioneer woman made their own candles of tallow, beeswax, sperm whale oil and some other ingredients. Gatherings at night were lighted by numerous candles or by smoky oil lamps of various types. Our early Masonic brethren indeed had miserable lighting in their Lodge rooms, judged by present standards.

It was also difficult for Masons to find their way to their meeting places over dark streets that were generally rough and rugged. The only lighting at night was that provided by the light of the moon.

#### **Full Moon Almanacs**

Therefore all over the nation many Lodges held their meetings by the light of the full moon. The practice was so practical and prevalent that the Grand Lodge of Iowa in the 1840s began circulation among its Lodges of a Full Moon Almanac, disclosing the regular appearance of the full moon for a number of years in the future. This almanac was copied by some other Grand Lodges, and the Grand Lodge of Iowa made objection that this was sometimes done without credit.

Saturday was a favorite Masonic meeting day in pioneer times. A century ago one of the early members of Mt. Moriah Lodge in Shelton was recollecting some occurrences at pioneer meetings. He recalled that members would dress up, walk or drive several miles into Shelton if necessary, get a shave, enjoy a hearty dinner and a visit with the brethren, and then go into a Lodge session that often continued far into Saturday night. He said that Mt. Moriah Lodge at its monthly session would transact its business, and occasionally put on all three degrees at a single sitting. [Ed. 7 – 9 hours] He said it was not at all uncommon to put on two different degrees. No one objected to the late hours, he said, as the Masonic Lodge was about the only interest of the members outside their homes and their regular work.

### **Many Full Moon Lodges**

Eleven of the first 30 Washington Lodges gauged their meetings by moonlight and at least 39 Lodges operated by this system some time in their history, for a few or many years. Including Mt. Moriah, No. 11, at Shelton; and Union City, # 27; at Union City. Thirty-four Lodges by 1900 had met or were meeting by the “full moon, and 21 were still doing so.

### **Only Two Remain**

There were still 17 “moon” Lodges in 1912, and Grand Master David S. Prescott didn’t like it a bit. He told Grand Lodge:

“In this age of electric lights, suburban and street railways, automobiles and airships, this method should be discontinued.” The next year Grand Master Frank N. McCandless declared they were antiquated and he said all Lodges ought to set their meeting dates by the calendar. The Committee on Jurisprudence considered this recommendation and concluded that since Masonic meetings have been regulated by the light of the moon for many years, “we do not deem it advisable to interfere, even by suggestion, with the long-established right of Lodges to regulate the times of their meetings, as may best suit their convenience”.

However ‘moon’ Lodges continued to decline. By 1920 only 10 remained, including Mt. Moriah, and, Union City. Eight of those fell by the wayside in the next decade. This left Steilacoom, # 2 and Mt. Moriah, # 11, as the only Lodges in the state that follow a Masonic practice once so widespread. There are many Masons who trust these two Lodges will long continue to hold their stated meetings respectively on the Friday and on the Saturday on or before the full moon of each month as they have done respectively for 151 and for 141 years.

More than 3,000 Lodges throughout the nation have met by the light of the moon in the past. The 1958 count said that about 500 Lodges still so meet in 36 Grand Jurisdictions; though it is probable this number has declined in the last years.

*From “Not Made With Hands Volume I & II”: By: V.:W.: Bro. Paul W. Harvey, Grand Historian Emeritus of The Most Worshipful Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of Washington. Compiled, edited, and time corrected by: Brother Fred Corbett (#11, #27)*