

Traveling Elder, Traveling Mason

A. Gene Cobb Jr., 32

Joining the Lodge of his grandfather becomes the highlight of a United Methodist Pastor's Masonic life.

Many years ago, they called Methodist preachers traveling elders. They rode the circuit to preach at many stations, often covering large geographical territories. Today, Methodist preachers continue that practice though not on horseback and not to the same extent as with earlier circuit-riding elders.

I was carried into a Masonic Lodge for the first time on my grandfather's shoulders. The Lodge was open to the public that day. Governor Dan K. Moore was also in Halifax, North Carolina, for a special celebration. The little town of 300 people was buzzing. I was almost six years old. Although I didn't understand anything I saw, I knew it was special to my grandfather. He told me that it was a special place to him that he hoped I would understand one day. "Let's go in without any fear," he said. I agreed. A year later, I saw a group of men standing around my grandfather's grave. They had come to perform Masonic funeral rites for a Past Master of Royal White Hart Lodge No. 2.



As I advanced in years, I always felt my grandfather's absence. The impression of our visit to the Lodge that day was indelibly engraved upon my memory. So was the scene at his grave. I grew up and did very well in school, scouting, athletics and, of course, the church. I preached my first sermon when I was 14, and by the age of 16, I felt called to preach. The Bishop appointed me, at age 18, as a pastor in the United Methodist Church. After finishing school at the University of North Carolina--Chapel Hill, I went to Seminary at Duke University. My traveling as a United Methodist preacher has taken me from Hawkins Chapel United Methodist Church in Halifax County, North Carolina, to Northampton, Wake, Vance, Warren, Edgecombe, Nash, Alamance, Montgomery, and Wilson Counties. I even had a friend once give me a plane ticket to preach Holy Week near Richards in the southeast corner of Virginia, and in Tuolumne, California. I guess you could say, I traveled quite a bit.

In my travels as a clergyman, I have met many wonderful people. I met a man named J. C. Robbins in Montgomery County. He was chairperson of the Administrative Board of Zion Church where I was the Pastor. I will never forget or cease to love and respect him.

We were talking about scheduling a meeting. I kept, unknowingly, trying to set a meeting on the night the Masonic Lodge met. He kept telling me "That night might be in conflict." Finally, I asked him what the conflict was, and he told me that first and third Tuesdays were Masonic Lodge meeting nights. Memories of being carried into Royal White Hart No. 2 as a boy flashed within me. I told Brother Robbins that all my life I had wanted to know more about being a Mason, but that no one ever asked me about joining. He replied, "No one ever will." Suddenly, I saw his sheepish grin and understood. Within 105 days, thanks to many Brothers, especially my coach Bro. Kenneth R. Fritts, 32, K.C.C.H., I was a Master Mason in Blackmer Lodge No. 127 with a proficiency card. A great emptiness in my life was beginning to be filled. The Lodge was four blocks from the parsonage, and I traveled there every chance I had.

Three months later, I attended a one-day Scottish Rite Reunion in the Greensboro Valley and became a Master of the Royal Secret. I began traveling from Montgomery County to Guilford County in pursuit of as much Masonic light as I could get. I met and made many friends among the Brethren there. When I presided over my first Master Mason's Degree, Most Worshipful Brother William H. Simpson, 33, the late Ill. Bro. James Whitely, and others traveled to Blackmer Lodge No. 127 to observe.

Their presence drew me even closer to Greensboro. I offered myself in service to the Valley and have been blessed ever since, especially at Reunion time when I get to work with Ill. Bro. Victor S. Dowd, 33, giving the lectures and communications of the unexemplified Degrees. Twice a year, unless prevented by necessary functions of the Church, I travel to Greensboro for Spring and Fall Reunions.

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Most people know that Methodist preachers move. That didn't prevent Blackmer Lodge No. 127 from electing me Senior Warden in 1994 and Master in 1995. Wouldn't you know it? In June of 1995, the Bishop moved me from Montgomery to Wilson County. Three hours of asphalt separated me from the Lodge where I served as Master. I traveled, not becoming weary, the remainder of the year and completed my year as Master of the Lodge. The Lodge had entrusted too much to me for me not to be faithful to my trust.

During the final six months of 1995, my wife battled breast cancer. The new church, our five children, and the cancer were constant concerns upon me until my wife completed chemotherapy and got a clear report. The strength and support given to me across the miles from Mount Gilead and Greensboro and new friends and Brothers in Wilson helped see us through the difficulty. When the Grand Lodge of North Carolina installed Most Worshipful Bro. William H. Simpson as Grand Master, he asked me to pray the prayer of installation and serve as Assistant Grand Chaplain. To that point, it was the highlight of my Masonic life. I traveled to Raleigh for the ceremony.

In June of 1996, my wife and I joined the Eastern Star in Wilson. In September of 1996, I became a York Rite Mason. I traveled back to Mount Gilead on just three occasions, and each trip I realized that I could not give back as much as I had been given. I also traveled to several Lodges, one of which was Royal White Hart No. 2 in Halifax. Since becoming a Mason, I learned that the Lodge in Halifax is the site of the Joseph Montfort grave. In a document issued on January 14, 1771, by the Grand Lodge of England, Bro. Montfort was appointed "Provincial Grand Master Of and For America."

Brother Montfort died in 1776, and an inscription on the headstone on the grounds of Royal White Hart Lodge No. 2 where he was reburied on February 13, 1911, includes the warmly contested statement that he was "The first, the last, and only Grand Master of America." (Denslow, 10,000 Famous Masons, vol. 3, p. 218) Royal White Hart Lodge is also the site of one of the oldest original Masonic buildings still in use in the world. When I visited, I noticed a picture on the wall of a familiar person. It was of the man who carried me on his shoulders into that very Lodge for the first time, my grandfather.

On March 4, 1997, some 34 years after I rode on my grandfathers's shoulders into that Lodge, I became a member at Royal White Hart No. 2 in Halifax. While driving home to Wilson, I called my aunt Sybil, granddaddy's only surviving child, to tell her what I had done. She was very happy, but so was I. Joining the Lodge of my grandfather became a new high point in my Masonic life.

Methodist preachers are supposed to travel where Bishops send us. I have always tried to do that. Masons are led places, too. For some strange reason, I feel like my travels have led me to where I am now. I went in without any fear. I have so much more to learn and so much more traveling to do, but at least I think I am beginning to understand.