

Masons enjoying renewed interest

By Scott Dunn, Sun Times, Owen Sound

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Raymond S. J. Daniels' distinguished grey moustache and beard, receded hairline and gentlemanly manner lend him an air of majesty.

His ceremonial dress includes white gloves and tie, black tails and the Masonic all-seeing deity's eye in a pyramid, hung from his auspicious gold chain.

He heads a fraternal order that traces its origins at least as far back as the 14th-century English stone Masons and adopts their symbols and religious pillars.

He is the Ontario Grand Master of the Grand Lodge Ancient, Free and Accepted Masons of Canada, and he looks like he just stepped out of a storybook.

He acknowledges the Masons - so besotted by mystical symbolism, rituals, secrecy and confidential handshakes - represent an "anachronism."

And he's proud of that. Their old-fashioned ways will help ensure their survival, he said in an interview Saturday during a trip to Owen Sound.

Even fiction writer Dan Brown's latest book, *The Lost Symbol*, which presents an action-packed and exaggerated peek behind the doors of the Masonic temple, should help too, Daniels said.

The married, retired Kitchener high school history and music teacher and trained classical musician said what goes on behind lodge doors stays there, to be sure.

But he thinks Masonry will survive not because of its mystic trappings, though they're important, but because Masonic teachings build character, he said.

There have been serious membership declines over the past 40 years and the Masons are trying to adapt to the times without changing fundamentally.

They're on the web, at www.grandlodge.on.ca, they're doing more media interviews to tout what they have to offer and they use teleconferencing.

There are now Masonic demonstration sites at Black Creek Pioneer Museum, Fanshawe Pioneer Museum and at Upper Canada Village and there will be a centre of Masonic studies at Brock University, Daniels said.

Annually, about 1,300 men join Masonic temples across Ontario. Five new members joined North Star Lodge last year. There are more than 50,000 Masons at more than 570 lodges province-wide.

But more than 5,000 men per year poured into Masonic lodges annually between 1946 and the 1960s, Daniels said.

Then they wanted to recapture the camaraderie and male bonding of the war years, Daniels said.

Membership in the Masonic fraternal order also used to signify attachment to an influential social and political force.

The last Canadian prime minister who was a Mason was John Diefenbaker and the last such U.S. president was Gerald Ford.

Friday night, Daniels attended a pub night at the Owen Sound Legion, then a lodge meeting Saturday afternoon and a dinner that night to celebrate the city's 135-year-old North Star Lodge.

It is the slightly younger brother of Owen Sound's St. George's Lodge, which is more than 150 years old.

Today, new members are looking for order in a chaotic world, Daniels said.

Some new members "have been disappointed in their business career," or "somebody's let them down somewhere," he said. "This is what they're telling me."

"The world is not providing much stability. It's not providing much continuity. It's not providing . . . the same role models that I grew up with," Daniels said.

"Business, industry, even the church - not always providing the ideal role model that we used to have."

Through self-education by earning ascending Masonic degrees and support from fellow Masonic "brothers," Masons build better members of society, Daniels said.

"If we are an island in a sea of chaos . . . maybe that's the role of a fraternity like this. Where a man can find stability," Daniels said.

"We believe that when I give you my word, that's my bond. We believe that a handshake is sincere," he said.

"Yeah, we are an anachronism in so many ways. But we're damn proud of it."

Note: At the time of publishing, this article was available on the web at the following address.

<http://www.owensoundsuntimes.com/2009/10/25/masons-enjoying-renewed-interest>