

150 Years of Freemasons in Truckee

By Judy DePuy

Truckee is celebrating its 150th year anniversary of not only the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad but also 150 years of the continued presence of Freemasons. The importance of Freemasonry to the social and economic life of growing towns like Truckee has been instrumental to the development of the western United States.

To understand the importance of the Freemasons to Truckee, you have to look back to the early Masonic leaders in our town and what drove the need for Freemasons.

Early Freemasonry

Freemasonry is a leading fraternal organization in the world. Its origins are connected and date to the construction of King Solomon's Temple and the events that surrounded the building of the temple. Masonry as we know it today was formally organized in London, England in 1717. As a fraternal organization, Freemasonry brings together men of good character who share a belief in the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of mankind, though they may come from different religious, ethnic or social backgrounds. It is an individual journey towards becoming a better father, husband, friend, citizen and man and is supported by other men at different points on the same journey.

Freemasons live by the principles of Brotherly Love (caring for each other and communities), Relief (assisting those in distress) and Truth (using knowledge and understanding to improve ourselves, our families and communities). During the Civil War there was a huge resurgence of Freemasonry. Though the North and South were fighting for their perceived ideals, there was also a comradery that could not be extinguished between the Freemasons. Northern Masonic Brothers would protect Southern Masonic lodges – and fellow brothers – since they followed the same codes of conduct. This was a time of needed brotherhood.

In the creation and establishment of the expanding western territory, Freemasons helped establish civil order. By building lodges in the new territories, the Freemasons were able to create relationships and fuel business exchange. "The Freemasons have been builders of not only material things but of character and morality," said Joe Aguera, Past Worshipful Master Truckee Lodge No. 200.

Early Truckee Freemasons

Many early explorers were Masons. In 1844, Dr. John Townsend, a member of the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party, helped bring the first wagons through the Sierra Nevada and was the first established doctor in California. Standing on what was to be Truckee's town site, he prophesied that a railroad would pass through here someday.

In 1869, Truckee became an important railroad station, with the golden spike driven to join the rails from the East and West in Promontory, Utah. At the same time a group of Truckee Masons were granted a dispensation by Charles Marsh, Grand Master of Masons in California, to start a lodge. Five months later, on October 14, 1869, Truckee Lodge No. 200 was given its charter. It convened with 35 Master Masons, 1 Fellow Craft and 2 Apprentice Masons. The Truckee Lodge was named after an Indian chief and scout who had accompanied John C. Fremont (also a Mason) on some of his expeditions in the West. The Indian scout told the members of the Murphy-Townsend-Stevens party how to cross the Sierras following the Truckee River to its source at Lake Tahoe.

The Need for Railroad Workers

Due in part to the influence of the railroad on the town, the Masonic membership consisted of many transient railroad workers. It was common during the heyday of the railroads that the opening of the Lodge would be delayed until one of the trains arrived so the Masonic crew members could fill the vacant officers' positions and confer the degrees.

The Masonic affiliation was important to not only the railroad workers but also their families. Working on the railroad was dangerous and injuries were common. The Freemasons have always been family oriented and were a form of early social security system. They never let a fellow Freemason not be fed nor sheltered and more importantly, they never let any of their families be without food, clothing and a roof over their heads. When a family member was sent on a railroad trip, they would wear a necklace that signified that they were part of the Masonic family and if in trouble could ask for help from other Freemasons.

Building the Town of Truckee

A steady group of early Truckee business and professional men helped keep the Truckee Masonic charter open and were recognized as respected, solid citizens of the community. These Freemasons not only worked to build the Truckee community but also carried out the Masonic tradition of always endeavoring to make good men better.

An early Truckee Mason, leading Truckee resident and publisher of The Truckee Republican, Charles F. McGlashan was part of the Truckee Lodge and served as its Master in 1874. He was on the Truckee rolls from 1873 until his death in 1931. McGlashan was a loyal and faithful servant in both his Masonic and civic life.

Another leading Lodge member was Frank Carroll Giffen. Giffen first appeared in the roster of Truckee Lodge #200 in 1877. Prior to joining the Truckee Lodge, in 1869 he joined the builders of the Central Pacific Railroad and moved to Truckee. Being a Freemason, Giffen understood the importance of education and established the first school in Truckee, hiring Charles F. McGlashan as its first teacher.

150 Years of Truckee FreeMasons

Freemasonry has never tried to interfere with an individual's commitment to his faith, family or occupation. Freemasonry is not and can never be a replacement for these important institutions. Instead it is a positive environment that reminds every Freemason of himself, his family, community and the Supreme Architect (an individual's own definition of a Supreme Being.)

For 150 years the Truckee Masons have helped build the town of Truckee. They continue to spread their good work throughout the community and still believe in brotherhood, community, developing men of good character and making good men even better.

Sidebar

The Truckee Lodge was one of the few Masonic lodges that sent meeting notices advising that the next meeting was at a "Regular Meeting on Thursday Evening Next Preceding the Full Moon". This was to help make sure the Masonic members could make it to the meeting since many had to travel 28-30 miles or more by horse to get to town. They also wanted to ensure that the lodge members would have the light of the moon to be able to make it home. Truckee Lodge was one of just several lunar lodges in

the California jurisdiction and remained so until the by-laws changed the meeting to the first Thursday of every month.

Additional Sidebars:

- James Reed was a member of the infamous 1846 Donner Party and a Mason. On October 5, 1846 while struggling up a sandy hill in Nevada, two oxen teams became entangled. James Reed intervened when the teamsters from the two teams engaged in a fight. John Snyder, a teamster, grew more angry and hit Reed in the head with his whip and was about to hit him again. Reed stabbed him in the chest with a hunting knife, killing him. The emigrants decide to banish Reed who, at first, refused to go but then agreed to leave. On October 28, 1846, James Reed was able to make it to Sutter's Fort and worked diligently to get back to his family and the other wagon train survivors to help them across the Sierras. He lived up to the promises made "on the word of a Mason" to return for the children and others.
- For more information and a list of summer activities going on in Truckee to celebrate the sesquicentennial of the Transcontinental Railroad go to <https://goldspike.org> or the Facebook page: Donner Summit-Truckee Golden Spike Celebration.

About the author:

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