

## **Serving the Community During Difficult Times**

**D**uring the Great Depression, La Mesa Lodge was effectively the cultural center of La Mesa. There were meetings every week in the downstairs dining rooms, with meals costing only pennies. Roy Donahoo and his Hillbilly band (washtubs and brooms) provided entertainment. In La Mesa, only the churches had rooms of similar size and capacity. In the words of some, "everyone was in the Lodge." In fact, the Congregational Church held their first meeting in the La Mesa Lodge.

The Lodge brought the community together, and the members of the Lodge were active in the community. Brother Earl Logan, owner of the La Mesa Bakery, served as Mayor of La Mesa, as did Brother Julius Acevious. Brother Emerson James, a realtor, was chairman of the public schools and was active for many years in the school board. Brother Erik Anderson ran a local mortuary and was for many years the Treasurer of the Lodge. Brother William G. Moran worked for him. Brother Quin Adams was Chief of Police.

Worshipful Raymond V. H. Lyles (1930) was the Fire Chief of La Mesa from 1942 to 1965. Born in 1901, in 1920 he operated a grocery store with his father on La Mesa Boulevard.



**Figure 16 Ray Lyles (on the far left) in the Lyles Grocery Store**

In 1922 he joined the La Mesa Volunteer Fire Department and in 1930 was appointed as First Assistant Chief. In 1929, he joined the City's Planning Commission. In 1941, he was asked by the Mayor of La Mesa to accept a salaried



position (including a home!) as Fire Chief. He designed the floor plans for the three fire stations serving La Mesa, retiring in 1965 after 43 years of service.



**Figure 17 Ray Lyles, Fire Chief of La Mesa California (1942-1945)**

He and his wife Erma moved to Yuma Arizona, where he passed away on December 27th, 1979. He called firefighting a hobby, and did it for nothing at first. He helped organize the first La Mesa Demolay Chapter. And he was the first president of the San Diego County Fire Chiefs Association. He was intimately involved in the planning and construction of the current Lodge Hall, which was built during his year as Master of the Lodge,

Worshipful Wayne Fillpot grew up during this period and has remarked on how pervasive Freemasons were in the life of the community.

*As a boy growing up in La Mesa, when I walked home from school to the east end of La Mesa Boulevard, it was difficult to go more than a half block on either side of La Mesa Boulevard without seeing a member of La Mesa Lodge. I would walk past the Lodge to La Mesa Boulevard, and on the corner was the La Mesa Scout newspaper. Mr. Mitchell, a member and editor would be at this desk in the window and waving. Next door was La Mesa Furniture and Percy Daniels, Past Master, was usually near the entrance. On the left was the fire station. Chief Ray Lyles was Master in 1930 when this temple was built. Across the railroad tracks on Spring Street was the two-story City Hall. On the ground floor was City Clerk, Les Freeman, Past Master. Upstairs was the Police Department. Corporal Jim Self who later became a Lieutenant, was Tiler of this lodge for a long time. In 1961 he was installed for the 16<sup>th</sup> time.*

*Next door was the Helix Irrigation Water District and the General Manager was a member of the Lodge. La Mesa Surveying Company,*



*Partner, Leroy Edwards, Past Master; La Mesa Auto Parts, Fred Rector, Past Master. Mid-block on La Mesa Boulevard was La Mesa Paint, Julius Acevez, an active member and City Councilman. Across the street, La Mesa Hardware, Rubin Levy, Past Master. Next door was La Mesa Bakery, the owner Earl Logan, and active member and La Mesa mayor. Upstairs at southeast corner of La Mesa Boulevard and Palm Street, Dr. Carmichael, Past Master and Dr. Roy Vermillion, Past Master. Catty corner was the First National Bank and all three of their officers were members of the lodge. Mid-block was Ken Armstrong's barber shop; across the street was Joe Willitts barber shop with La Mesa Florist next door, owned by Bob Roberson, Dad of the DeMolay chapter. A little further was Drew Motor Company, Elmer Drew was a very active member of the lodge and his service manager, Wallace Todd was Past Master. Across the street, Chet Blanchard, Past Master had his service station next to the Post Office where Jolly Benbrook, Past Master, worked. Where Allison and La Mesa Boulevard bisect was Emerson James Realty, Chairman of our Public Schools Committee; and next door was Erickson-Anderson Mortuary. Enoch Anderson was Treasurer of the Lodge for fifteen years. I turned right to Lemon Avenue and was home. Because of all this network, I knew 45 of the first 50 Masters that preceded me through the chairs.*

*This temple from day one, was the center of social activities for the members and families of the Lodge and the clearing house of ideas for several civic events. Mayor Earl Logan told me that it was in this banquet room that they decided to build a Youth Center at the end of World War II. It was completed in my senior high school year, 1949.*

*From 1930, when this temple was built and all through the depression this room was "The" place to be. Alice Benbrook (Bethel Guardian) and Jolly, P.M.- Secretary told Mary & me lots of stories of the families involved at that time. The La Mesa Movie Theater was only one block away and during the depression they charged only five cents. But money was precious then and the member families would come here and entertain themselves. Roy Donahoo had a Hillbilly Band. He used a metal wash tub, metal wash board and spoons, pocket combs wrapped with wax paper, a stick with two trash can lids as cymbals, and they performed through 1941. I heard their last performance.*

The minutes of the Lodge during this era noted many visitations between Lodges, conferring of degrees, and furnishing candidates. Many active Masonic clubs, American Legion Post 282 of La Mesa, the First National Bank, the San Diego Police, and other organizations were recorded for their attendance. The La Mesa Legion corps of officers gave all three degrees to Brother R. E. Cassidy.



At the special meeting of September 28th, 1931, representatives of S. W. Hackett Lodge #574 presented to the La Mesa Lodge onyx pedestal tops for the three stations. While the original tops no longer exist, the Warden stations still have white marble tops today.

An unusual occurrence marked the stated meeting of December 3rd, 1934, when Brother Warren Postelle was granted permission to examine himself in the proficiency of the Third Degree. The Mountain Empire Masonic Club attended and took charge of the refreshments.

The Lodge was again saddened in August of 1934 at the passing of Worshipful Master Charles W. Hill (1923). Worshipful Hill was born in Biddeford Maine on September 19, 1848. Graduating from Kent's Hill Academy, he went to college at Bowdoin College, matriculating in 1875. He entered the seminary at Yale Theological Seminary, completing his studies there in 1878. After a short period of service to a congregation in Branford Connecticut, he moved west to Park City Utah, organizing a new Gentile church there in the face of strong local opposition. After four years, he and his family moved to San Jose California, where he built a First Congregational Church. He then held pastorates in Berkeley and Benicia. In 1894, he moved to Hilo Hawaii, where he lived for the next 15 years, serving both as a pastor and as an agent of the Hawaiian Board of Missions. He returned to California in 1909, serving the community of Green Valley for a year. In 1910, he was called to the newly formed La Mesa Congregational Church. He presided over a period of growth for the new church, seeing its membership increase from 18 to 125 by the time of his resignation in 1925. In retirement, he remained active in church work in La Mesa, serving both the San Diego First Congregational Church and the La Mesa Heights Community Church. At his passing, he was 86 years old.<sup>32</sup>

At the stated meeting of November 7<sup>th</sup>, 1938, the interesting and colorful unveiling and acceptance of the unique stained glass scenes in the East, West, and South took place.



Figure 18 East, South , and West Scenes in La Mesa Masonic Lodge

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<sup>32</sup> Obituary of Charles W. Hill, *La Mesa Scout*, August 17, 1934





The East Scene shows the sun rising in the east over Mount Helix, a familiar landmark in San Diego County. The South Scene shows the sun at meridian height over Mount San Miguel, and it may be presumed, the La Mesa Springs for which La Mesa is known. And finally the West Scene shows the sun setting in the west over the Point Loma peninsula, another very famous landmark in the San Diego region.

These scenes were presented to La Mesa Lodge as a memorial to Brother Harold Cahn by his widow. A resolution of acceptance was sent to Mrs. Cahn, a copy spread upon the minutes, and a copy to Brother Cahn's lodge, Fidelity #120, San Francisco. At the same time, it was revealed that the stained glass transparency in the North depicting "chaotic darkness" had been donated to this same memorial by Brothers Percy A. Daniels and Kenneth L. McKinney in token of their friendship for the late Brother Harold Cahn. The same resolution also mentioned these two brethren.

Brother Percy M. Daniels conducted the program of dedication of these four adornments of the lodge hall, with Brother Haslam providing narrative as each was unveiled in turn.

In May of 1938, the Darius Chapter of Royal Arch Masons filled the chairs in the La Mesa Lodge to confer the 3<sup>rd</sup> Degree on Brother Clarence Wagness. In July 1938, Brother Joe H. Barker was raised to the sublime degree of Master Mason by a corps of officers from the civilian employees of the Naval Air Station. On September 24<sup>th</sup>, 1938, in a very special event, Brother James Eastman was raised to Master Mason with both his father and grandfather present to witness the event.

As the decade wore on, the Great Depression began to weaken its grip on the country. La Mesa began to feel the impact of the improved economy through an increase in population. Pressure rose to accommodate the families of the local citizens in all things, especially in terms of space for children to attend school. In January 1939, the La Mesa Grammar school rented the Masonic Temple for classes. This began an association with the local schools that has lasted till the present day. All through the years of World War II and into the early 1950s, the La Mesa Spring Valley School rented the banquet hall for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade classes. The School also rented a room in the Lodge (the current secretary's office just inside the Date Street entrance) for classes in Music, and the current Stewards area (located behind the kitchen) for a Teacher's lounge.



A social club of masons, their wives, members of the Order of the Eastern Star and their husbands, known as the "Mesa Social Club" held its first meeting on Saturday May 12th, 1940, with a dinner and dance in the banquet hall.

At the stated meeting of August 5th, 1940, the Order of the Eastern Star was given permission to place a star in the center of the Lodge room ceiling. On October 7th, 1940 a motion was made and passed to have the Lodge pay to have the oven repaired. On December 9th, 1940, to celebrate the repaired oven, a "homecoming" dinner, at fifty cents a plate, was well attended by "old-timers", after which some of the old minutes were read and entertainment furnished by Brother Ray Donahoo and his hillbillies. At the Stated Meeting of December 2nd, 1940, Brother Kenneth L. McKinney gave a report of his trip to Grand Lodge. This report included a movie that included footage of a polar bear fight.

Worshipful Lester Freeman (1941) moved to La Mesa in 1926. A World War I veteran, he served for 30 years as the City Clerk and as the Deputy Treasurer for 28 years. He was best known for having cleared up the bonds from the Great Depression. He was also known for saying that he "just liked people."

At the stated meeting of January 5th, 1942, the Lodge expressed approval for the work done by the Brethren in the Armed Forces. At the stated meeting of March 2nd, 1942, Worshipful Master Wallace A. Todd appointed Brothers Reuben M Levy, Dale Griswold, and John Haslam to act for the duration of the war as the Committee for La Mesa Lodge for Civil Defense. At the Special meeting of September 17th, 1942, Brother Kenneth L. McKinney appeared in his new Navy uniform. He was the Master of the Lodge in 1943 and wore his uniform for his Masters portrait. He is wearing the rank of a Petty Officer First Class and the rating is that of a Fire Controlman.



In 1942, the La Mesa Civilian Defense Council requested that the Temple be available as an emergency hospital in the event of an air raid, or some other catastrophe. The Temple Association readily agreed.

During the war years, many servicemen stationed in the area attended meetings at the lodge as their duties permitted. Brother Rahlan Wilson was in the United States Marines...he was assisted in completing his proficiencies prior to shipping out to "ports unknown" by excellent coaching. He received all three degrees in one week in October of 1942.



Worshipful Hurlburt died in 1942 at the relatively young age of 45 from a burst appendix. A veteran of the Navy during World War I, he was the commander of the Local American Legion Post. He operated a service station at the corner of La Mesa Boulevard and 4<sup>th</sup> Street. His record of public service included membership on the La Mesa City Council, various city commissions, and the La Mesa American Legion. He was a long time Postal employee, and was so well liked that his obituary observed that had he requested a public funeral service the entire city of La Mesa would have closed.

By 1944, the influx of servicemen's families and defense workers caused the public schools to become overloaded. At the Stated Meeting of October 1st, 1944, the Lodge agreed to allow the use of the downstairs reception room by the La Mesa Grammar School as a classroom. At this same meeting the fees for degrees were raised to \$100.00.

Beginning in 1944, Brother Fred Mounts was the installing officer at each year's installation of new officers. Brother Mounts was known for a "beautiful voice" and was an accomplished ritualist. He did the annual installations until the early 1960s.

Today's Building Association (the successor to the Temple Association) can sympathize with the issues confronting the management of the building during the war years. Temple Association minutes from the war years record difficulties with the ventilation system (not much has changed since then), and concerns that the roof was sagging. During the war years, materials were hard to get, and there was comprehensive rationing of important supplies. The relative youth of the building was a good thing.

