

Guarding the West Gate

By Roger W. Peak, DDGM

What does “Guard the West Gate” mean in Masonic practice? Is it colorful, but archaic and empty ritual? Or does it have a practical, even personal, significance in the life of every Lodge? How many of us are taking the proper steps to guard the West Gate and ensure that only the best and most desirable men petition our Lodges? The process should begin when an individual asks for a Petition for Degrees.

Petition for Degrees

Our Petition for Degrees requires two Brethren to vouch for the petitioner. It is preceded by a paragraph that says the following:

- the petitioner has resided for the past year or has Masonic residence in Virginia
- we are well acquainted with the petitioner
- we have read the answers to the questions on the petition
- the answers to the questions are true
- the petitioner is morally and physically qualified
- the petitioner is of good character
- the petitioner has a good reputation

How many of our members, especially recommenders, have **read** this paragraph? How many of the recommenders, especially second line signers, really know or are **well acquainted** with the petitioner? Are we in such a hurry to make Master Masons that we cannot spend a few months (or longer) getting to know the petitioner and his family **before** he petitions our Lodges?

How many recommenders **read** the answers provided by the petitioner? **All** questions should be answered by the petitioner, and if not answered, explained on the reverse. It is not the job of the Lodge Secretary to contact a petitioner to complete missing information on the petition.

After the Petition for Degrees is read for the first time, the Worshipful Master has a duty to form an Investigating Committee. The **purpose** of the Investigating Committee is stated in Section 2.95 of the Virginia Methodical Digest. It states, in part, "The Worshipful Master shall refer the petition to an Investigating Committee...who shall make an investigation...on the moral and physical

qualifications of the petitioner...." Further, Section 2.92 includes a 1962 decision noting that a Lodge has a right to investigate **every** facet of a petitioner's life **before** he is accepted for initiation.

Investigation Committee

The Investigation Committee is formed after a Petition for Degrees is read for the first time. It should **not** include the Recommenders. As noted above, this committee reports on the moral and physical qualifications of the candidate. First, the committee should talk with the Recommenders to find out why they think the candidate would be an asset to the Fraternity. This should be followed by contacting the employer and neighbors to find out more about the candidate.

Moral Qualifications

One thing to consider regarding moral qualifications is sexual deviancy. An excellent source is the sex offender registry maintained by the Virginia State Police. This URL <http://sex-offender.vsp.virginia.gov/sor/index.html> should be studied by one or more members of the Investigation Committee.

Physical Qualifications

It is also important to find out whether the petitioner can perform the degree work. Section 2.92 of the Methodical Digest notes several decisions made by our Past Grand Masters, such as 1984 D-2 in which Most Worshipful William Munford Johnson denied a request for dispensation to ballot on a candidate suffering from claustrophobia. All of the reasons noted are important and should be considered by the investigating committee.

Visitation Committee

How many of our Investigation Committees are nothing more than Visitation Committees? There is nothing wrong with discussing information pertinent to the Lodge, but it should not be done at the expense of excluding an investigation on the moral and physical fitness of the petitioner.

A possible solution is for the Worshipful Master to form an Investigation Committee **and** a Visitation Committee at the time a Petition for Degrees is read for the first time. Again, it should **not** include the Recommenders. This committee visits the home of the candidate to ensure the petitioner understands the Fraternity and is joining for the right reasons. In addition, the committee should discuss specific Lodge details. This committee could include the person who will later be a mentor for the candidate, but mentoring is not the purpose of this meeting. Information passed to the candidate and his family could include the

following topics: whether dinners are held before or after meetings, and if family members and other guests are invited; a discussion of annual dues (Lodge plus Grand Lodge); Life Member in Perpetuity Program; advancement procedures and fees for degrees; dress in Lodge; forbidden topics (politics and religion); a discussion as to whether the petitioner has a belief in deity; a discussion as to why the individual is petitioning a Masonic Lodge, in general, and this Lodge, specifically; stated meeting and Lodge school nights; and District Instructor of Work School nights. This is also an excellent time to probe further into the skills and talents of the individual by asking questions about employment and avocation.

Should the Master appoint a Visitation Committee, this committee should also make a report to the Lodge at the time the Petition for Degrees is read for the second time. The report ought to include some of the information noted in the preceding paragraph. It should be more than the typical general statement that Mr. X will make a good member of the Lodge or Mr. Y will be an asset to the Lodge. It is important to explain why Mr. X will make a good member and how Mr. Y will contribute to the Lodge. Expressed differently, what task, role, or function can Mr. X do that will benefit the Lodge?

Mentoring

In addition to selecting an Investigation Committee and Visitation Committee, it is important for the Master to assign one or more Mentors. A Mentor is not someone who will teach the candidate the ritual, but those individuals who will instruct the candidate on the educational information related to the degrees.

A Mentor should be identified at the time a candidate is elected to receive the degrees in Freemasonry (Mentor's Manual, page 5). At that time, the Mentor visits the candidate and gives him a copy of the booklet, *Taking the First Step*. He also explains his role as Mentor. He should also schedule a second meeting to discuss the information in the booklet. At the second meeting, the Mentor advises the candidate of the date and time of his initiation. Similar procedures are followed after conferral of the Fellowcraft and Master Mason Degrees.

Finally, we are not doing a good job of **mentoring** our candidates and giving them a **task, role, and function** in the Lodge. Why are we in such a hurry to initiate candidates when we are not providing the educational information to help them understand the ritual and our customs? Why are we in such a hurry to make Master Masons when we fail to give them something to do, so they stop attending communications--and perhaps later request a demit?