



THE OFFICIAL
HISTORY AND LITERATURE
OF
ODD FELLOWSHIP

The Three-Link Fraternity

ILLUSTRATED

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Biography (aus Wikipedia)

Wildey was born in London, England, in 1782. He was left an orphan five years later - and the IOOF pledge to "Educate the Orphan" sprang from his personal childhood experiences. At the age of 14, Wildey went to live with an uncle. After he had 9 years of schooling, he became an apprentice to a maker of coach springs. He joined the British Oddfellows in 1804.

When Wildey emigrated to America in 1817, the British were still unpopular in the States because of the War of 1812. In that year Baltimore was suffering both a yellow fever epidemic and mass unemployment. An outgoing personality, Wildey missed companionship and advertised in the newspaper to determine if there were any other Odd Fellows in Baltimore; he requested them to meet him at the Seven Stars Inn.

On April 26, 1819, Wildey and the four men who responded to the advertisement, John Welch, John Duncan, John Cheatam, and Richard Rushworth, formed the Independent Order of Odd Fellows in North America, dedicating the Order to achieve philanthropic goals. Other Englishmen who were Odd Fellows had grouped in the states along the Eastern Seaboard, and Wildey gathered them all into the newly formed fraternity. He traveled widely to set up lodges in the most recently settled parts of the country.

At the time of his death in 1861, there were more than 200,000 members of the IOOF in 42 states. In the late 19th century and early 20th century the IOOF became the largest Fraternal Order in North America with more than two million members.

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CHAPTER I.

WILDEY, ENTWISLE, AND RIDGELY.

Thomas Wildey, Past Grand Sire. — Thomas Wildey, whose name is inseparably connected with the history of American Odd Fellowship, as its father and founder, was in many respects a most unique and singular character, and one difficult to correctly portray. That he planted the seed from which the present grand Independent Order of Odd Fellows has sprung, and that without him might never have existed, is probably true; but it is equally true that without the help of men better qualified, by education and literary attainments, for putting his crude ideas into shape, it would never have grown into the great agency for good that it has. The Order, in truth, was not created: it was evolved, altered from its original shape, which was that of a mere social and beneficial society, built upon, improved, and made to conform to modern thought and ideas, so that were Wildey, its father and founder, alive to-day, he would hardly recognize his weakly child in the grand Order whose moral code and high ethical teachings, — keeping fully abreast with advanced thought, ever progressing, — are recognized by thinking men, even those not connected with Odd Fellowship, as being among the most efficient agents of the century in the promotion of the civic virtues which tend, next to true religion, to elevate the moral, intellectual, and fraternal nature of man.

It is difficult for one at this time to correctly paint Thomas Wildey

as he existed and appeared to his contemporaries, nor does the history of his life, aside from his connection with Odd Fellowship, contain such incidents as to interest and entertain the student; for he made no mark. attracted no attention, attained no celebrity in any sphere, save as an Odd Fellow. It would seem that one who, by the force of his character, his zeal and energy, and what may be termed the masterfulness of his nature, was confessedly for a long period the head and front of a great organization, would have attained some eminence in other fields; and, naturally, by virtue of the qualities which made him the leader of leaders, have impressed himself upon the life and history of the community in which he lived; but such was not the case, for his life was obscure, and only as it became a part of the history of Odd Fellowship is it of any interest.

Thomas Wildey was born in London, England, on the 15th day of January, 1782, of humble parents, whose names even are unknown, and of whose history he appeared never to have spoken to his friends in this country. He attended a parish school in London for some five years, where he seemed to have acquired the merest rudiments of an education, and at the age of fourteen became an apprentice to learn the trade of coach-spring making, duly served his time, — probably seven years, the usual period, — and at the end was released from his indentures, and was recognized as a skilled workman of his craft. From this time, until the year 1817, when he emigrated to the United States, he probably had steadily pursued his trade, not only in London, but in various towns in England, during which period he appeared to have been a leader among his fellow mechanics, “looked up to” by them, as well on account of his skill in his trade, as of his leadership in their friendly societies, which were then quite numerous in that country, — many distinct and separate organizations of Odd Fellows already being in operation there. With one of these bodies of Odd Fellows, Lodge No. 17, — not the Manchester Unity, however, which was formed later, — Wildey united on reaching his majority, and rapidly advanced to the highest rank in its councils, passing through all the chairs, from the lowest to the highest in less than three years; and so impressed upon the brothers of the lodge the sense of his capacity and zeal, as to be the recipient of a testimonial of their esteem in the shape of a valuable silver medal.

After remaining a member of this lodge for about three years, he determined to spread the Order in another and different part of the city of London; and, entering upon the undertaking with all his intense energy, he succeeded in organizing Morning Star Lodge, No. 38, of which he was unanimously elected its first presiding officer, and continued an active and zealous member for ten years, during which time he was three times selected as its chief. From this it will be seen that he had already

developed in his native land those qualities which came to their full fruition after he reached the United States. In the year 1817, Wildey married, and, later in the year, sailed for the United States, arriving in Baltimore, Maryland, on the 2nd of September. At the time Wildey arrived in Baltimore, business was in a depressed condition and employment hard to obtain, yet he managed to get work at his trade, being recognized at once as a thorough workman, and easily supported himself and family in a style suitable for the station of a skilled mechanic.

With Wildey's disposition and love of company, his position for some time after his arrival in America must have been unpleasant. The country had just emerged from a war with Great Britain, the acerbities of the late contest had not had time to disappear, and a prejudice and dislike was apparent against all Englishmen, as a class, so that a man like Wildey,— who bore upon his burly form, and gave in every accent of his speech, the evidence of his nationality, — made but slow progress in forming acquaintances among the American population of Baltimore. This may have been one of the main incentives which induced him to ascertain if there were any Odd Fellows in the city, and if so to endeavor to bring them together and organize a lodge for their mutual benefit. Among the acquaintances formed by Wildey at this time, was John Welch, like himself an Englishman, and like himself a mechanic, being a house and ship painter. Thrown much together, by reason of their nationality and occupation, they mutually discovered that each had been connected with an Odd Fellows' organization, which fact formed a fresh link to bind them together as friends. After this discovery, the two friends concluded that there must be others in Baltimore who, like themselves, had been Odd Fellows, and who would probably be glad to meet together and form a lodge; so Wildey decided to publish a notice calling for a meeting of all Odd Fellows in the city, for the purpose of consulting together as to the formation of a lodge. This call was published in the *Baltimore American*, the meeting being called therein for March 2, 1819. The notice appeared in several issues of the paper, and elicited responses from only two persons; but, being reinserted on March 27th, three persons responded, who, with Wildey and Welch, constituted a sufficient number to organize a lodge. On the 13th of April, 1819, at the residence of Thomas Wildey, the five persons met, being John Welch, John Duncan, John Cheatham, Richard Rushworth, and Thomas Wildey himself, and, mutually satisfying themselves that each was, or had been, an Odd Fellow, arranged to meet and organize a lodge on April 26th.

This meeting, held on April 13th, was the real commencement of American Odd Fellowship, although the frail craft was not formally launched until April 26, 1819, when, at a tavern known as "The Seven Stars," kept by one William Lupton, the five English mechanics organ-

ized the first lodge of Odd Fellows in America, electing Thomas Wildey, Noble Grand, and John Welch, Vice Grand, the remaining brothers filling the other positions. With a view, possibly, of conciliating the general public and securing its favorable consideration, the lodge was named the "Washington Lodge" of Odd Fellows. Thus, then, was started American Odd Fellowship, it must be confessed under rather unfavorable circumstances; every member of the lodge was an Englishman, all were uncultured mechanics, with no social standing, and in a community where, as already stated, their native country was decidedly unpopular; for, while the recollections of the late war with Great Britain still rankled, to some extent, in the minds of Americans generally, especially was this so with the people of Baltimore, who had heard so recently in their city the booming of British cannon at Fort McHenry, and whose neighboring city of Washington had been captured and partially destroyed by the same foe, which facts made them look with great dislike upon Englishmen.

Under the circumstances, it is not strange that the Order did not increase with any great rapidity, although by the earnest efforts of Wildey, seconded by his four colleagues, ten persons joined the original five within the three weeks next after the organization of the lodge. So much for the story of Wildey's connection with the organization of Washington Lodge, No. 1, with which organization begins the history of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows. On the 5th of February, 1821, another lodge, Franklin, having been irregularly instituted, and differences having arisen between the two lodges, the details of which it is unnecessary here to relate, a committee of past grands met in Baltimore, to consider the propriety of establishing a Grand Lodge, and at this meeting it was resolved that it was expedient and necessary to separate the legislative from the operative portion of the Order, and to institute a Grand Lodge. To complete the organization of such a lodge, the meeting proceeded to the election of grand officers, when Thomas Wildey was unanimously elected Grand Master of the newly created "Grand Lodge of Maryland and of the United States." Several sessions of the Grand Lodge were held during the year 1821, as its rights, duties, powers, and officers were not clearly defined, and it was necessary to fix them definitely. So at its session on November 22, 1821, a constitution was adopted, which set forth clearly its prerogatives and fixed the terms of its officers, the Grand Master's being four years.

During this period, the Order continued to grow, and Wildey labored with all his ability to further advance its interests, until, finally, the membership having spread over several states, it was deemed advisable to separate the existing lodge and create a distinct "Grand Lodge of the United States." In accordance with this idea, the last communication of the "Grand Lodge of Maryland and of the United States" was held

November 24, 1824, when steps were taken to organize the "Grand Lodge of the United States," leaving the parent body as the Grand Lodge of Maryland. At this session it was

Resolved, That Thomas Wildey be presented with a medal, as a small token of our respect for his eminent services, his indefatigable zeal in spreading the Order of Odd Fellowship throughout the United States, and his unexampled assiduity and attention to its best interests while Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Maryland and of the United States."

In conformity with the arrangement made by the Grand Lodge on November 24th, the Grand Lodge of the United States was formally organized January 15, 1825, representatives or proxy-representatives being present from New York, Maryland, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania; and Thomas Wildey was unanimously elected Grand Master of the body, which position he held until the session of 1833, when he retired from office, being succeeded by James Gettys, the title of Grand Master having been changed to Grand Sire about the year 1826.

At the session of the Grand Lodge held September 5, 1833, it was

Resolved, That a committee be appointed to procure and present to Past Grand Sire Wildey a piece of plate of at least five hundred dollars' value, as a mark of the respect and regard in which this Grand Lodge holds his services to the Order."

This testimonial was richly deserved by Wildey, as he had for years sacrificed his time and spent his money in spreading the Order. Besides visiting England in the interests of Odd Fellowship, the various reports and addresses issued and delivered by Wildey show that during his term of office, as Grand Master of the Grand Lodges of Maryland and of the United States, he had organized the Grand Lodges of Pennsylvania, and the District of Columbia, made numerous journeys to New York and other points to organize lodges, and that during the year 1832, while Grand Sire, undertook a long and tedious journey through the West and South for the same purpose. This journey, which would be a mere trifle in these days of fast express trains and palace cars, was at that date of some danger and great fatigue. It lasted from November 22, 1832, until February 21, 1833, during which time Wildey visited the cities of Pittsburg, Cincinnati, Louisville, and New Orleans, being received everywhere with high honors by the membership, instituting subordinate lodges and encampments, and organizing the Grand Lodge of Louisiana. This tour was productive of much good to the Order, and planted it firmly in the West and South.

During the summer of 1833, at the request of the Grand Lodge of the United States, Wildey visited the Grand Lodge of New York to settle some differences which had arisen as to its relations to the Grand Lodge of the United States, which by his exertions and personal influence were put in the way of an amicable settlement; he, also, visited a number of

lodges in Rhode Island and Massachusetts, reviving their zeal and energy, and, finally, on the 3d of August instituting, at Trenton, the Grand Lodge of New Jersey. This work was accomplished in a trip which occupied from June 5th to August 15, 1833.

Notwithstanding the fact that Wildey had retired from the position of head of the Order, he continued to take the liveliest interest in its welfare, though after his unremitting service of twelve years at its head it would seem that he was entitled to rest on the laurels he had already won, leaving the task of still further extending the Order to younger men; yet he was ever ready to devote his time, and spend his moderate means, to aid the cause to which he had consecrated his life.

Knowing his willingness and devotion Grand Sire Gettys deputed Wildey to visit such lodges lying north and east of Baltimore as might need encouragement, or in which disputes had arisen, and which might be settled by the influence and counsel of so revered a brother. This duty was cheerfully accepted by Wildey and occupied considerable of his time during the fall of 1835.

In the summer of 1837, Wildey visited Richmond, Virginia, and on August 20th instituted the Grand Lodge of Virginia. Having been appointed by the Grand Lodge in 1837 as travelling agent to organize lodges and encampments in the South and West, and, generally, to look after the interests of the Order in those sections, with unabated energy Wildey started on his mission, leaving Baltimore in March, 1838, and returning there on October 1st; during his absence, as is shown by his report, he had travelled more than eight thousand miles, instituted and visited lodges and encampments in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Missouri, Iowa, and Indiana. On this trip he also instituted the Grand Lodge of Mississippi, on the 4th of May; the Grand Lodge of Missouri, on the 13th of June; and the Grand Lodge of Illinois, on the 22nd of August; besides which, while in New Orleans, he granted a dispensation to organize a lodge at Houston in the republic of Texas, the first organized beyond the limits of the United States,—and which was instituted July 25, 1838, as Lone Star Lodge, No. 1.

This trip resulted in much good to the Order, and indicates the zeal which animated Wildey, then over fifty-six years of age; who, supported by his indomitable will and energy, accomplished a journey far more arduous and exhausting than would be a trip at the present time around the world, or to Central Africa; but he recognized no obstacle or fatigue as being too serious where the good of his loved Order was concerned.

This journey practically closed his work as a missionary of Odd Fellowship; but, though no longer holding high office in the Order, he did not cease to regularly participate in the councils of his brethren. Every

session of the Grand Lodge of the United States found him in his seat as Past Grand Sire, ready as ever to advise and counsel the younger generation who succeeded him, and with cheery voice and hearty hand-clasp to greet the few old associates of his early days of leadership, until on the 19th day of October, 1861, in the city of Baltimore, in the 80th year of his age, he quietly passed to that eternal rest and reward, provided for those who love and cherish their fellow-men.

The tidings of his death, while not unexpected, were received by the membership with every token of sorrow for his loss and respect for his memory; his old friend and associate, James L. Ridgely, delivered an address of great beauty and deep pathos, on his life and character, in the Front Street theatre, Baltimore, and the Grand Lodge of the United States promptly inaugurated a plan for the erection of a monument to his memory.

While Thomas Wildey needed no monument to carry his name down to posterity, for no history of Odd Fellowship can ever be written which will not have him as one of the central figures, yet his sorrowing and grateful brothers could not permit his name and memory to rest without substantial evidence of their love and respect; so by the joint contributions of the entire membership, a stately monument was erected in Broadway, Baltimore, being dedicated on September 20, 1865, with solemn and appropriate ceremonies, and it now stands a lasting and beautiful testimonial to the memory of Thomas Wildey, the founder and father of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows.

With all his ardent, earnest nature, Wildey devoted himself to what he *felt* was the cause of humanity and fraternity. Unable of himself to properly formulate its creed in adequate and fit language, he yet *knew* what others could couch in appropriate words, and he promptly adopted and assimilated, as his own, the rituals and charges penned by Ridgely and others; borne up and sustained by a love of humanity, he consecrated himself to the service and leadership of Odd Fellowship, an organization best devoted to such ends; and, as its adherent, sank all other considerations and objects in the overwhelming passion and love for the Order, and desired only to be known as Wildey the Odd Fellow.

For these reasons the writer who essays to present Wildey as a private citizen, or in the domestic circle, finds no facts to detail, for as one who knew him better than any who will hereafter picture him said:—

“Known to many now living, but even they were not admitted to the knowledge of his private walks, or to witness those home scenes which more than any other indicate the man; he was at all times reticent or entirely silent about himself.”

So must close this incomplete sketch, incomplete for the reason, among others, because Wildey's private life is missing, leaving him as one whose

name will ever be remembered as the founder, or rather as he who laid the corner-stone of the temple, of American Odd Fellowship, and commenced its erection, but left the task and the glory of designating its proportions, and elaborating its decorations, to other hands and to other brains.



THOMAS WILDEY. FOUNDER OF AMERICAN ODD FELLOWSHIP.