Fraternalism in America

Book Review Essay by William Weisberger

Constructing Brotherhood: Class, Gender, and Fraternalism
by Mary Ann Clawson

Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America
by Mark C. Carnes

Fraternal and female orders and voluntary associations have had a significant place in American life. Scholars, unfortunately, have devoted minimal attention to their functions, activities, and histories. The studies by Clawson and Carnes, despite the passage of nearly four years since their release, are pioneering and comparative works of great importance.

Clawson advances the thesis that fraternal organizations in America are indebted in many respects to the ritualistic and institutional operations of Speculative Freemasonry and that women’s and some religious groups arose during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to protest against their private operations. In seven insightful, topically arranged chapters, Clawson examines the Masons, the Odd Fellows, and Knights of Pythias; she also assesses the place of their related female auxiliaries. Carnes, meanwhile, in five fascinating chapters on the ritual and ceremonial activities of major secret societies in Victorian America, shows how these orders functioned during the past two centuries.

Clawson begins her work by viewing fraternalism as a social form; she argues that the Masons, the Odd Fellows, and the Knights effectively used ritual and ceremony as a “social metaphor” of brotherhood. Each order’s doctrine emphasized capitalism, competition and individualism, and Clawson demonstrates that lodge activities were geared to promoting patriarchal values and masculine cultural tenets.

In the “European Definitions” section early in the book, Clawson claims that family and fraternal life in medieval and early modern Europe revolved around concepts of “kinship.” This model applied not only to the patriarchal family unit, including servants, but also to voluntary associations. To acquire the skills of their craft, journeymen were exposed to ritual practiced by specific crafts and their associations. Clawson claims that fraternalism became especially prevalent among trade guilds, whose leaders were involved with governance, taught production techniques, and used ritual to explain the craft’s central doctrines and customs to promote a sense of solidarity among members.

Speculative Freemasonry, which used some teachings, doctrines, and symbols of the operative lodges, emerged during the eighteenth century as a dynamic new organization. This form of Masonry, Clawson maintains in chapter two, succeeded by using its rites to promote major scientific and political doctrines and eighteenth-century ethical teachings. As an example, Clawson uses the Modern Grand Lodge of London, which, created in 1717, had capable administrators, recruited aristocratic and middle-class members into its local lodges, and became well known for promoting sociability through these lodges, which were closely associated with London coffeehouses and tavern life.

Like Professor Margaret Jacob and this writer, Clawson in several ways accentuates the intimate connections between Speculative Freemasonry, or the Modern Grand Lodge, and the Enlightenment. To this end, there are impressive accounts of the contributions by John T. Desaguliers, a Huguenot minister, a disciple of Sir Isaac Newton, and an active member of the Royal Society of London. Clawson shows the role of Desaguliers, whose influence on the rites of this new order show up in mechanistic and materialist doctrines from Newtonian science, tenets and symbols from classical architecture, and concepts associated with deism and republicanism. Under Desaguliers, grand master of the London Grand Lodge, Speculative Freemasonry during the first half of the eighteenth century became well established and identified with important Enlightenment institutions and elites in England, Europe, and America.

In the second part of the book, “American Transformations,” Clawson attempts to illustrate how Freemasonry served as a paradigm for other secret orders in this country. Such organizations as the Knights of Pythias, Odd Fellows, and Modern Woodmen of America seemed to copy the institutional development...
model of many Masonic lodges, which were governed by a constitution and elected officers, recruited members, and promoted collectivism and individualism by conferring degrees. (The degrees or rites of these organizations convey major doctrines and symbols of the order and are staged in local lodges. These bodies, in turn, operate under the jurisdictions of the respective fraternal order.)

Clawson also examines the class composition of major American fraternal orders. Analyzing the rosters of nineteenth century Pythian lodges in Belleville, Ill., and Buffalo in light of certain categories and networks, and by developing a sociological concept of “catnets,” she finds that both lodges had working- and middle-class members. Her split findings emphasize the need for extensive research along these lines.

Chapter four examines activities and patterns of fraternal orders in nineteenth century America. There were two prevalent kinds of fraternal organizations: the mutual benefit or benevolent society and the Masonic-styled order which stressed the place of ritualism and cross-class membership. The Independent Order of Odd Fellows, which started in England during the late eighteenth century and appeared in Baltimore in 1819, was a ritual order closely associated with tavern life in both British and American cities and towns. Under the leadership of James Ridgeley and George Norris, Odd Fellowship in America during the 1830s and 1840s changed greatly. Clawson notes that American adherents promoted temperance, developed new degrees, and established a middle-class base.

Comparing American Odd Fellowship to Masonry during the first half of the nineteenth century, Clawson finds both were constrained to change. Masonry sought new members by associating with the “republican cult” of Washington and Franklin and by offering the higher degrees of the Scottish Rite and the American Rite. But Masonry was seriously threatened by anti-Masonic sentiment, which began with the alleged murder of William Morgan in 1826 by Masons for divulging secrets of the order. Such sentiment blossomed into a powerful anti-elitist and socio-political reform movement in most states, fostering campaigns against the Masons’ secretive and ritualistic activities and their purported domination of political and economic institutions. Many lodges were forced to close their doors through the mid-1840s, although Masonry did enjoy a revival before the Civil War. Other fraternal societies (the Elks, the Ancient Order of United Workmen, the Modern Woodmen of America, and the Shriners) grew in importance with the rise of industrialism, helping to shape craft unionism in America. Fraternal orders, Clawson posits, improved the social environment of industrialism by advocating a workplace morality of integrity, honesty, and sobriety. Clawson also addresses these groups’ tendencies to exclude blacks, Catholics, and non-native whites from membership.

In chapter six, Clawson devotes attention to women’s organizations in American life. She states that Freemasonry, the Odd Fellows, and other orders, in denying membership to women, promoted masculine superiority and cultural values. One result of the anti-Masonic movement, however, was the establishment of female auxiliaries by notable fraternals: the Odd Fellows created the Degree of Rebekah and Freemasonry formed the Eastern Star. Their status as pioneers was mainly confined to their mere existence, however, as both stressed in their rituals and activities not female independence but rather the importance of family life and traditional female roles in it.

Chapter seven explores brotherhood as big business. Printers, sellers of fraternal attire, and even individuals selling memberships stood to gain. Many physicians, lawyers, merchants, and insurance salesmen used their fraternal ties to recruit clients and customers. Even ritual became a marketable commodity, since many orders invented degrees in the last years of the nineteenth century to enlist new members. As Clawson explains, fraternalism waned in the first two decades of the twentieth century, due to lost interest in ritualism, and the appearance of other institutions for socializing and kinship relations. Later in the century, the rise of mass media and new forms of entertainment became reasons for decline as well.

In her conclusion, Clawson claims that Masonic ritual and lodge organization served as the basis of fraternalism in America. Fraternal organizations arising in this country during the nineteenth century, she finds, promoted interaction among classes and between genders, to a certain extent, as well as republican, capitalist, and middle-class values. Through ritual and lodge activities, these orders tried to bond middle- and working-class members into a solidified community.

This work has much to recommend it, offering a fine macro-view of fraternalism and a closely reasoned comparative sociological analysis of a subject greatly neglected in scholarship. While Clawson draws extensively on primary materials, it suffers from repetition and inadequate explanation of ritual and lodge activities.

In those realms where Clawson’s book is weak, Carnes’s work is strong. In many ways, analysis of ritual is at the heart of the Carnes study. Fascinating vignettes describing major doctrines and symbols help him demonstrate the immense psychological significance of the orders’ degrees. Dramatically staged ceremonies and
rites created a quasi-religious atmosphere in a “male” environment.

The last quarter of the nineteenth century marked the “golden age” of fraternalism, and Carnes devotes his prologue to explaining why Masonry, the Odd Fellows, the Knights of Pythias, and the Red Men reached pinnacles during the period. “Fraternal joiners,” Carnes maintains, were either Protestant or Jewish, and they spent considerable money on dues and initiations. Merchants and professionals, especially, enjoyed the “ritual oasis” of Masonry — the ceremonies, rites and symbolism connected with the masculine culture of the era — while the Odd Fellows attracted men from the middle and working classes.

The first chapter, entitled “Masks,” tracks the evolution of the two orders in England and America. The author, however, believes that the three degrees of Modern Masonry, emphasizing teachings and symbols concerning Solomon’s Temple, Newtonian science, deism, and ancient and Enlightenment morality, provided this new movement with enormous impetus. While minimizing anti-Masonic pressure, Carnes claims that Masonry in nineteenth century America reflected regional patterns and variations but developed a middle-class base; Masonry prospered because it offered, through its degrees of the Scottish and York Rites, visual explanations of capitalist and republican doctrines. Similarly, Odd Fellowship spread in America because it added new degrees, while also becoming a town movement. Carnes also suggests that by cloaking themselves in secrets and private ritual — hiding behind masks — American fraternal members could assume new and exciting roles in their communities.

Carnes next discusses the evolution of fraternal degrees: the Royal Arch Mason Degree and the White Degree of the Odd Fellows. The first concerns the efforts of Masons to rebuild the destroyed temple in Jerusalem and it reveals the symbolic richness of the Masonic Deity, the triangle, and the number three. The rebuilding of this great edifice illustrates how Masons used knowledge to improve society and its institutions. Carnes also maintains that the Odd Fellows’s White Degree and the Knights of Pythias’s Chancellor Commander Degree resemble the Masons’ Royal Arch Degree in that all revolve around efforts of the fraternalists to divest themselves of sin and to perform virtuous acts.

The third chapter squarely addresses the basis of the anti-Masonist claims of the nineteenth century that fraternal organizations corrupted society. Carnes makes a strong case for Charles Grandison Finney, demonstrating that this former Mason, who repudiated the principles of the order, worked to discredit it. As president of Oberlin College in Ohio and then as the ranking leader of the National Christian Foundation, Finney denounced Masonic leaders in the 1870s, perceiving the Craft as a satanic secular monster that was highly destructive to religious institutions. Masonic leaders denounced Finney and the association he headed, and encouraged women, whom Finney said were demeaned by the Craft, to become active in the Eastern Star.

In chapter four, entitled “Fathers,” Carnes develops an historical paradigm regarding masculine development and fraternalism. In colonial and revolutionary America, he maintains, fathers taught their sons through the apprentice system, directing them about farming and business. After the Revolution, fathers and sons less often worked together. Because of this fundamental change in the patriarchal family, middle-class males often took alternative paths of masculine development to adulthood. Young men were attracted to fraternalism, for these orders offered them a mimic journey of life. Carnes argues that ritual enabled young men to escape their mothers’ influence and to be bonded into a new patriarchy. Carnes also explains how Masonry and other fraternal organizations developed rites and ceremonies for the burial of their members and provided assistance to families who lost their fathers.

“Secrets” is the title of chapter five, in which Carnes presents an interesting section on Albert Pike, who revised specific rituals of the higher Scottish degrees. The author claims that Pike’s 32nd Degree, with its military setting and skull and crossbones, is quite confusing. This digression presents incoherent views and bisexual interpretations about the geometric figures and symbols in it. Thus, the unclear message conveyed by the doctrines and symbols of this degree and others well suggest why Masonry and other significant male orders in late nineteenth century America would begin to decline.

The epilogue suggests explanations for the dramatic demise of fraternal orders during the twentieth century. Carnes believes they couldn’t compete with service and recreational clubs, in part because of pressure from secular and scientific values associated with relativism. He also calls for further studies of fraternal orders that would assess major ideologies and values prevalent in America since the colonial period.

The chief strength of Carnes’s work, with its use of previously neglected primary sources on fraternal doctrine and ceremonies, is its documentation of the psychological and emotional appeal of fraternal ritualism. It makes little progress, however, in connecting the major tenets of fraternal societies to attitudes and values of nineteenth and twentieth century America. It also says little about the middle- and working-class elites recruited to these orders or about the specific operations of both grand and local lodges. A convincing conclusion, comparing and con-
trasting rituals and structures among the Masons, the Odd Fellows, the Knights, and other orders examined, would have enhanced the work.

The place of fraternal orders and related organizations in the Pittsburgh vicinity has yet to be determined. What is known is that Masonry served as a paragon during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, recruiting men from various strata of the middle- and upper-classes. Similar to Joseph Rishel’s conclusions in his *Founding Families of Pittsburgh: The Evolution of a Regional Elite* (Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1990, 59-61, 181), my findings about Masons in early Steubenville, Ohio, in *Enlightened Men: A History of Steubenville Lodge #45 F. and A.M.* (Standard Press, 1967, 15-42), suggest that between 1818 and the Civil War, members held the most part consisted of military and political leaders, lawyers, physicians, merchants, bankers, and a few mechanics and farmers. Such men evidently were attracted to Masonry because of its ritualistic appeal and social opportunities. During the late nineteenth century and well into this one, members of my lodge were middle- and working-class men. However, since the early 1960s, demonstrative of the national pattern in Masonry, membership in my lodge as well as in others in this region has greatly declined.

Studies of other male and female fraternal orders in the Western Pennsylvania region are greatly needed. Neither are there many works about women’s societies or religious/ethnic organizations. Ritualistic language and doctrines, philanthropical activities, and gender and ethnic bonding probably were among the major reasons that residents in the Pittsburgh vicinity once gravitated to these organizations in great numbers. ■

**The New Crowd: The Changing Face of the Jewish Guard on Wall Street**

by Judith R. Erlich and Barry J. Rehfeld


**D**uring the late nineteenth century, an elite group of Jews of German extraction played a prominent role in the world of American investment banking. As Stephen Birmingham demonstrates (*The Great Jewish Families of New York* [New York, 1967]), the Schiffs, Kuhns, Goldmans, and Lehms constituted the basis of this crowd and were intimately involved in the financing of both American and European industries; these and other members of that crowd became the great Jewish families of New York and, more importantly, took pride in their reputations as major contributors to cultural and philanthropic causes. In contrast, Erlich and Rehfeld show that by the 1980s, a new crowd of Jewish investment bankers emerged on Wall Street which was of Eastern European heritage.

The authors believe that members of the new crowd were competitive, mobile, innovative, and charitable. Gutfreund, Milken, Wasserstein, and many other investment barons of the new crowd were involved with mergers, leveraged buyouts, and arbitrage, and ultimately helped to promote a new financial environment in America during the ’80s.

The book is a collective biography and abounds with vivid profiles of executives from the new crowd. The son of Polish Jews, Sandy Weill, who exuded aggressiveness, climbed the ladder at Shearson Hayden and eventually bought controlling interest in the firm. Moreover, Weill in 1979 fused his firm with Loeb Rhoades and thus absorbed the last of the Wall Street firms which had been owned and directed by American Jews of German descent. Erlich and Rehfeld show that Weill was a man driven by success, later heading American Express and Primes. The book also contains a fine sketch of Sidney Weinberg, known for breaking through religious and class barriers on Wall Street; Weinberg directed the trading department at Goldman Sachs, sat on boards of numerous corporations, was even offered diplomatic posts, and was perceived by executives of both Protestant and Jewish investment firms as being “Mr. Wall Street.”

The authors as well make a case for other financiers connected with the new crowd. The son of a Russian immigrant who did well in Oklahoma in the clothing business, “Ace” Greenberg joined Bear, Stearns in 1949. Known as a gambler, he made considerable profits for his firm from his trading, and later became its head. The book also contains an interesting profile of Lewis Glucksman; a man with the unyielding stare of a bulldog, Glucksman gave capable direction to the commercial paper division of Lehman Brothers and was named to the firm’s board of directors. The authors explain, however, how Glucksman was socially rejected and how old crowd aristocrats Frederick Ehrman and Pete Peterson thwarted his rise to the top position within the firm. In contrast, the experiences of John Gutfreund at Salomon Brothers were somewhat different than those of Glucksman. Gutfreund developed an amenable relationship with Billy Salomon, helped to revitalize Salomon Brothers, and ultimately became its president. Combative and tough, Gutfreund developed vast contacts with institutional investors, enabling him to sell with ease large amounts of underwritings and to transform Salomon Brothers into the largest firm on Wall Street.

Ehrlich and Rehfeld examine other major investment roles of prominent members of the new crowd. Felix Rohatyn, who escaped the persecution of the Nazis, is depicted as a deal-maker; Rohatyn became associated with Lazard Freres and re-