

The Masonic “Miracle”
The Story of Wilkerson College and Wilkerson College Lodge 760

By
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Every good Mason has thought it. Most good Masons have asked it. Some have even written it. But what is the answer? What could twenty-five or thirty good, and involved, Masons in a lodge accomplish? Sorry, I can't answer that, but I can tell you what thirty-three good Masons who belong to two dozen different lodges and live in a half-dozen Area Codes across a state can do: first, they can create something good. Then, they can create a lodge to which they, and those like them, can belong. And finally, they can look back on it all and realize that what they have created was . . . a miracle.

During Tom Gregory's year as Grand Master he often invited Lew Ledford to accompany him on trips to the various lodges throughout the state. During the long hours on the road one discussion would lead into another, but one subject kept coming back: the possibility of a school for lodge officers.

Like most jurisdictions, North Carolina has a normal share of Schools of Instruction and an occasional Leadership Seminar, but something was missing. The Schools of Instruction are good, but they are almost entirely about ritual. Even the best planned Leadership Seminars are poorly attended and the subject matter is quickly forgotten. There has to be a better way they thought.

Within a few weeks of on-again off-again discussions they had established that it should be a school for deacons only. Both were convinced that it takes a good Master at least three or four years of planning and organizing before he is Master, so restricting the school to deacons would accomplish the task. Also, the class size should be limited. One-on-one contact would be vital and this would be impossible with seventy-five or a hundred men in a room. Eventually they settled on thirty-six as the ideal number.

Tom's year as Grand Master ended and the conversations fell on the back burner, but even months and even a few years later the idea would reemerge.

One evening at a Scottish Rite function one of them casually mentioned the idea to Bill Brunk S.G.I.G of the Scottish Rite in North Carolina and Brunk suggested they work up the idea and let the Scottish Rite sponsor the school. At this point they had the go ahead. The next step was to pass the idea by the Grand Lodge so Gregory called the Grand Secretary, Walt Clapp, who immediately loved the concept. Gregory felt that if the idea was going to fly he would need a couple of more people to help bring it about. Clapp mentioned this to Assistant Grand Secretary, Ric Carter, who suggested Bill Dill and Dan Weatherington. This is when I became involved.

Ric Carter called me that same afternoon and basically stated the concept of a school for deacons and asked if I wanted to get involved. When he said Tom Gregory and Lew Ledford were on board my mind was made up and then when he said he was calling Bill Dill I was certain. I had served on the Committee on Masonic Education with Lew Ledford as Chairman during Gregory's year as Grand Master. That committee, that year, would come as close to “perfect” as I could imagine. I had known Bill Dill for a while. He was as bright and articulate an individual as one would ever care to know, and, he had a reputation as one of the best Masons in Eastern N.C. I couldn't imagine a better team! My only question was why did they call me? I

assumed it was a moderate degree of success with a couple of projects on the Masonic Education Committee, but in any event, I certainly wasn't going to ask.

We decided to meet at the Grand Lodge in Raleigh a few days later. The four of us would meet with Clapp, Carter and Brunk and try to put the idea together. I have used the word "perfect" before but this meeting too could only be described as "perfect." The ideas flowed, the suggestions were inspired. Everyone participated and everyone contributed.

In the end, we had decided to conduct the school, which had somewhere in the discussion become a "college" at three very impressive, and Masonic, locations. The first session would be at the Masonic Home for Children in Oxford, NC. The next session would be at the Grand Lodge office building in Raleigh, and the final session would be at the Masonic and Eastern Star Home in Greensboro. Most of the men who would be attending the school have never seen any of these places. Even though they are constantly asked to send money to the homes, they have never actually seen what they're contributing to. And the Grand Lodge office building? Every one of them hears the words "Grand Lodge" regularly and really doesn't know what it means. But now, they would see the place and meet the people they'll be working with and can help them when they become Master. *This will be good*, we felt.

Each session would be held in the Spring on weekends one month apart and the students would spend at least one night. We felt that spending the night could build a comradery that would help as they progress along the officer line. At least they could compare notes and see how others outside their lodge felt about the same issues. At one point Gregory mentioned something called a "low ropes course" which is a form of a confidence course. And, conveniently, there was one near Oxford. Most of the others were neutral to the suggestion. I was dead against it. My first question was what did it have to do with Masonry? And all I could picture was some guy crawling on his belly under concertina wire with live ammo firing overhead. At that point we were voting, and I lost.

It began to appear that we have a school, but what do we teach and who teaches it? The first part was simple. We already have Schools of Instruction teaching ritual, we don't need to duplicate them, and besides, ritual isn't one of our major problems. We have some excellent ritualists, what we need are leaders. We need people who can lead Masonic lodges *Masonically*. The past leadership courses have invariably been reworked military or fund-raising courses that have had a few Masonic words added. We knew those would never do. We needed courses designed to help a man know how to organize and lead a Masonic lodge. Laying on the table in front of us was the answer. It was the NC Masonic Directory. We were convinced there was no one course that could be devised that could teach what we needed, but before us we had a list of "experts" in particular areas.

Each person in that directory was heavily involved in Masonry either as a Grand Officer, or Past Grand Master or committee or board member or a secretary or a Master of a lodge. There were dozens to choose from. These people were all known. At least one of us sitting at that table was familiar with almost everyone in that book. We knew their strengths and their weaknesses. It was just a matter of picking the best man to devise and teach each course. Besides, most of the deacons who would be coming had never seen a member of a Grand Lodge Committee much less a Past Grand Master or member of the Grand Line in their life. If they had seen one it was from a distance while they were at Grand Lodge or at some lodge function where the only thing personal was a quick handshake and an even quicker introduction. No, this was going to be

good. These students will be meeting those guys they mostly only read about. They will be talking with them. They will be eating with them. They will be sharing ideas together. *This too is good.*

Driving home I was convinced I had just left one of the most productive meetings of my life. One glitch was when I was elected the Dean of the College and while it was an honor just being selected to be in that group the “Dean” thing was something. Still, I was concerned. Though the rooms, meals, etc. would be offered to the students at cost, we weren’t sure how the \$590 best estimate price tag would be received. We knew that some of the lodges would help with the cost and the Scottish Rite would offer some scholarships, but would it be enough? Was the price, even at cost, too high? And, how many deacons would be willing to spend the night away from home? Would it be a deterrent? In addition, the old secretary leaning back in his chair and saying “it’s a bad idea” to everything new and different is more than just a cliché. It’s very real and we knew that. Would the naysayer kill the college before it even got started?

The next day I was on the phone to Gregory and a thought came up; what are we going to call the college? I know we discussed “Montfort” and a couple of other things, but did we ever decide? He only said that he would like to name it after Lloyd Wilkerson the immediate Past S.G.I.G. of the Scottish Rite in NC. I told him I thought the idea was excellent and asked him if he wanted to call him and ask. My response was that Gregory was a PGM and it might be a bit more impressive. He said he felt the request should actually come from the “Dean.” I discovered at that moment the same response that would be used again . . . often.

In just a few short hours I had been showered with honors but calling Lloyd Wilkerson would be one of the highest. Wilkerson was a retired Marine Corps. General who had been honored in wars since WWII, had commanded men in Vietnam and had been Commanding General of Camp LeJune, NC. He had received every honor the Grand Lodge of NC can bestow and had served on most of their committees. Overall he was one of the most respected Masons in NC. One of the favorite sayings about Lloyd Wilkerson is that if there’s a picture beside the word “integrity” in the dictionary it’s a picture of Lloyd.

As long as I live I will never forget the call. I called and mentioned what I wanted and I heard the voice of one of the strongest individuals I had ever known quiver because he felt so honored. Here was a man who had led men into battle and commanded men in one of the bloodiest wars in American history who was telling me how honored he was to be asked. And here was this man I had heard about all my Masonic life saying he didn’t think he was deserving to have our little college named after him. Here was this man I so admired whom I felt had a tear in his eye.

With Wilkerson’s acceptance the foundation was laid. The next few months were full of planning and discussions with what would soon be the “faculty” of Wilkerson College and the paperwork involved with attracting the new students. Notices and brochures were designed and went out to the lodges and questions were answered. We assumed that some of the people invited to teach at one of the sessions would decline for one reason or another but only two did so, one because he would be out of the country and the other because he would begin cancer treatments that day, but even then they both offered to help at the next session or at any other time. The problem with the faculty was that there were too many people who were willing and capable. Even after the final selections we had people who were just as capable that could be called. In the final list of faculty members we had most of the Grand Line, many of the Past Grand Masters, and members of several Grand Lodge committees. Most of the faculty were 33° Masons

and every one had demonstrated an excellent knowledge of the subject he would be teaching.

The College was scheduled to begin the first weekend in March, but by the end January only a handful had registered. We were becoming concerned. What number was too few? Could we have it for five or six? Brunk said it was a go with what we had, but by the middle of February fifteen had registered and three more registered a few days later. We had a class!

The first meeting of the Wilkerson College Class of 2002 was at Camp Oak Hill, the low-ropes facility I had been dead against. There they spent the night in bunks and joined together around a campfire and two days before class was to begin I came down with the worst case of flu in my life. For me at least, Wilkerson College would have to wait. I called and made my apologies and began to worry. Would everything go okay? Would everyone show up? This continued until about eight-thirty that night when Ledford called me with the words, "Weatherington, you're not going to believe this. These guys are singing around the campfire, comparing notes about what they do and don't do in their lodges, they're talking about what they need to do to help each other. Like I said, it's unbelievable."

My next call from Ledford came about noon. It appeared the ropes course I had been so dead against proved me dead wrong. It was a fantastic learning and bonding experience among the eighteen students. They loved it! Brunk, Ledford and Dill welcomed the students at lunch, and shortly afterward classes began in the library of the York Rite Chapel. That first afternoon there was a brief course in Masonic history which began "There was no Hiram-Abif as Grand Architect at the building of King Solomon's Temple." Then, they were given an overview of the documented history by two PhDs. This was followed by a course in officer selection by General Wilkerson.

Following was a tour of the orphanage led by the students themselves. Normally, a preplanned tour would be given, but Ric Carter, the Asst. Grand Secretary, had one of the most moving brainstorms of the College: "let it be as close to one-on-one as possible. Let every one of those Wilkerson students take one of the little ones by the hand and let him show him"his" campus. Let the little one show him "his" cottage." This was a phenomenal success.

After the tour it was back to work. Dill, a high school principal presented the students with notebooks and three-year planners made especially for the occasion. Then he showed them how to use them and assigned homework to be returned at the next session. He also informed them there would be additional homework to be returned at the third session.

Though it was getting late, Ledford and Joey Transou, both members of the board of the orphanage carried the students outside and showed them the plans for the new "Vision" project which will expand the orphanage. My final call of that night was "we did good. No, we did great! This thing was a bang-up success. Those guys left as inspired and motivated as any group I have ever seen. Get rid of the flu and be ready in Raleigh."

It was our intention to bring the students into the Grand Lodge building on Friday night of the second session for a welcome-back reception and a light supper, but about a week before the session was to begin the Grand Secretary called to let me know that Cary, one of the local lodges, was inviting everyone in the college to a steak dinner on Friday night. One of the students, Morty Jayson from Cary, had obviously talked to his brothers. The first night of the second session began with a fine steak supper and some of the best fellowship I have ever enjoyed. I had wondered how we were going to live-up to the great session in Oxford, but it

appeared we just might.

I had talked to Clapp and Carter throughout that week and they had mentioned how they were cleaning-up before the students came. I had been in the Grand Lodge building countless times throughout the years and never seen it look nicer. The Grand Lodge gleamed!

During that day we had PGM Bill Simpson discuss how to work with the PMs in your lodge, Tom Gregory talked about how to work with the Grand Lodge, and we had Carter, who is also Editor of the NC Mason, an award-winning newspaper, speak on designing and producing an effective newsletter for your lodge and effective communications. Graham Pervier, the City Manager of Winston Salem, NC spoke on budgeting and a class on how to make your meetings interesting was held. The Grand Lodge staff gave a tour of the building and presented a history of the Grand Lodge. Rev. Ed Lawing and Rev. James Holshouser gave a session on mentoring and there was a lesson on working with and obtaining help from the Grand Lodge Committees given by Leonard Safrit who will be Grand Master in 2004. And though the day had been long and the students were tired, Bill Dill was there to go over their homework and give assignments for the next session.

Sometime that afternoon Morty Jayson cornered me and said that some of the guys had asked about starting a new lodge called Wilkerson Lodge revolving around the Wilkerson idea. I told him it sounded like a great idea to me, but he needed to pass it by the Grand Secretary and see what they needed to do. Little more was said . . . at least not then!

That Monday Cornelia Doherty one of the secretaries at the Grand Lodge called. She said that seldom had she ever been as impressed with a group of men as she was with the Wilkerson students. They had been polite and courteous, but they had also been anxious to learn. They wanted to know how the Grand Lodge could help them and *how they could help the Grand Lodge*.

Then Clapp got on the phone and said they had already called him that morning about creating a new lodge. I said it was a great idea, but it would be nice if the students did it themselves without a lot of help from us. He agreed, but somehow I knew this Grand Secretary was going to be there every time they called.

“Dean Dan” was becoming very proud of a group of men he didn’t even know a month before. He was also even prouder of the Orphanage and Grand Lodge he had known for so long. But, the third session at the Masonic & Eastern Star Home in Greensboro was still to come. Was there any possible way something this good could continue?

We had invited the wives to the non-class events of the last session in Greensboro and about a week before it began, John Rose, Administrator of the Home, called to touch base but suddenly the base had gotten a bit broader. Instead of the snacks and Cokes I had anticipated for the Friday night welcoming-back, we were now going to have a Chicken and Rib barbeque at the Home. When I got there, I was greeted by one of the nicest spreads imaginable. It was delicious! Step one of session three was even getting better.

The next morning the Wilkerson students ate breakfast with the residents of the Home. One of my fondest memories of the college will be of the students returning from breakfast with a couple of those elderly ladies in tow, but I’ll often wonder exactly who was leading who.

The morning classes began with PGM Rick Moore who is also Chairman of the Jurisprudence

Committee leading a session on the Code. He was immediately bombarded with questions. The students had received a Code book in their handouts the previous session. It was probably the first copy of the Code most of the students had ever seen and the month between sessions had given them ample time to read it.

Most of the rest of the day was spent on discussions of the right, and wrong, ways to raise funds. Numerous questions were generated about fund raising for the lodge, which is a relatively new feature in NC Masonry. There was discussion on raising money for the homes and fund raising for local charities in the community. Just before lunch Bill Dill returned to check homework and help with the assigned projects. If the students hadn't learned the importance of planning and how to do it certainly wasn't Dill's fault.

Lunch was served in the middle of the day to the students and their wives. Afterwards they were off for a tour of the Home led by some of the residents. A couple of more classes about fund raising followed. At this point, the classes were over, but there were still questions. Good questions. So for the next hour or so we talked. We talked about Masonry. We talked about Wilkerson College. Students and teachers alike talked.

Then, when it appeared we were through, Morty Jayson stood and announced he had the items we needed to sign, and some things we needed to discuss about beginning the process to create a lodge. Wilkerson College Lodge #760 he called it and, it would be the first new lodge in North Carolina in twenty years. But . . . more on that later.

If the welcome-back barbeque had been good, the Graduation Banquet set-up by the Home was glamorous. We had linen tablecloths and napkins, candles and flowers on each table and a meal of pork loin and shrimp was served on fine china and crystal. During supper we had music played by one of the residents and entertainment by one of the singing groups at the Home. Tom Gregory made a moving speech of how proud we were of each student and how vital they would be to the fraternity in the coming years. When it was my turn to speak, the pride I felt in that group was overwhelming. Eighteen men from across the state had come together with another fifteen on the faculty and created something wonderful. This is what I commented on and this is what I was feeling. I thought, at that point, the next step was to begin planning for next year. I was wrong. The next step was just a couple of days away.

Wilkerson College Lodge #760

The next Monday morning I was talking to the Grand Secretary and I asked if there was going to be any problems with creating the lodge. He said there were a few, but it was mostly timing and small items.

Timing? A small problem? According to the Code the petition had to be signed by the Grand Master forty-five days before the Annual Communication of the Grand Lodge. There were delays and more delays, but somehow the petition was signed exactly forty-five days before the Communication. Following that, there were a couple of other snafus but everything came to pass and at the 2002 Annual Communication of The Grand Lodge of North Carolina Wilkerson College Lodge #760 was granted its charter.

The College was a milestone. Coming from it would be a world of opportunity. In addition to training leaders for the fraternity, those leaders could soon be called upon to train other leaders. But, now we also had a lodge and where would North Carolina's newest Masonic lodge fit into

our destiny?

Planning meetings were held while the lodge was awaiting its charter and from those meetings several profound decisions were made. First, the lodge would be a traveling lodge, an idea entirely new in this jurisdiction. It could go throughout the state and the brothers who wanted to do so could enjoy and benefit from the lodge. And, the lodge's mission would follow that of the College and be primarily one of Masonic Education. Also, a modified version of the European concept would be used. Members would be expected to contribute Masonic education input.

A significant decision was made that the lodge would be a white-apron lodge. Every member, officers, Past Grand Masters and new Mason would wear the same apron. It was especially significant considering the number of members entitled to wear the purple of the fraternity but preferring to take a step toward the basic Masonry the group desires.

Lloyd Wilkerson was appropriately elected the first Master and some of his military influence immediately surfaced in the dress and attitude of the officers and members. From the first, the officers wore either a tuxedo or a coat and tie as did the members. This was unusual in a state where "casual" has become the rule. The meetings were designed to be "events" rather than something routine. They are held on Saturdays and began at 11:00 A.M., another major departure from the usual. In the first hour business is conducted and then a break for lunch follows around noon. At 1:00 a Masonic Education program is offered. In another drastic departure from the usual and depending on the nature of the program, the lodge is opened to invited guests and the public to enjoy the presentation.

The new concepts, the new ideas appear to be filling a void. Within eight months of the time a handful of Wilkerson College students asked about starting a lodge, the membership in Wilkerson College Lodge has tripled. In one meeting last fall twenty petitions for affiliation were approved. Who are these people who are asking to join our ranks? They are Masons who want something more than they can find in the average lodge. They are Masons who want to be more than just members of a club. They want to experience Masonry in its fullest form. They are men who want to be a part of the "Wilkerson College Experience."