

*The Decatur Daily* - Sunday, March 20, 1966

## **Masonic Lodge No. 29 Looks Back 139 Years**

Then... and NoW

By John Knox

Decatur Personnel Director John G. McGehee has a unique document presented to him 39 years ago and prized for obvious reasons. It is a scroll containing a complete roster of the officers of Decatur's first Masonic Lodge - Rising Sun Lodge No. 29 - for a period covering the first 100 years of its history. Only a few of these were printed by the Grand Lodge of Alabama on the occasion of the local lodge's centennial, and McGehee, who was Worshipful Master here in that year (1927) received one of them. To anyone interested in the early history of the region, this is a prize find, too, containing as it does dates and names of some 200 area business, professional and political leaders.

It is no surprise to find that Wm. Francis Dancy was the first Worshipful Master, serving three terms, to be followed by James Fennell, James T. Sykes, Isaac Lane, William Darwin, W. Sanders, Jonathan Lane, Lawrence T. and L. S. Banks, W. G. Davis and C. W. McCord, to mention only those who served in this office during the first two decades. Nathan Kimbell, Horace Green, R. A. High, Alex Ross, Robert W. Figg, William Miller, M. Mahan, J. A. Damarson, A. A. McCartney, and C. F. M. Dancy, are among the senior and junior wardens for this same period.

### **FAMILIAR NAMES**

Nearly all of these names are familiar ones in the early track books of the Decatur-Trinity area. Isaac Lane has been frequently mentioned as one of the five trustees of the original Decatur Land Company. He, with Jessie W. Garth, George Peck, Henry W. Rhodes, and McKinney Holderness, are usually referred to as the "town founders." But no less important in the early annals were the Dancy and Sykes families, both related by marriage to Jessie W. Garth and Henry W. Rhodes, while Darwins, Kimbells, Greens, Sanders, Davises and Banks were all pioneer settlers in the region west of Decatur and between Trinity and Finley Island.

The Fennell family too first settled in this section and, like the Sykes, extended their holdings into the Courtland and Leighton areas.

### **RELATIONSHIPS**

To trace the various relationships of these clans would make a long story. Many Tennessee Valley people today can claim descent from three or four of them. James T. Sykes and Henry W. Rhodes, for example, married sisters, daughters of the Dancy line. Dr. Frank Sykes, son of James T., married a daughter of Gen. Jesse W. Garth; Charles Fenton Mercer Dancy married another of Garth's daughters, and they were the parents of the Misses Unity and Mary Lou Dancy, for the latter of whom a local chapter of the Order of the Eastern Star is named.

We cannot attempt here to give a genealogy of any of these families. Col. James Saunders, writing in the 1880's, mentioned that the Sykes, Dancys, and Rhodes families

came in “a colony from Greenville County, Virginia,” but even at that time, he said, they had become too numerous to list in a brief article.

Likewise, the patriarch of the Fennel Family, Willy (or Wiley), who was the father of James Fennel, the second Worshipful Master on the Masonic roster, was a business partner of George Peck, whose family were the first settlers, among the Kimbells and Darwins, in the regions inland from Finley Island, where Kimbells operated an early stagecoach inn on the old Courtland-Decatur route which is now Joe Wheeler Highway. Davises and Banks, also represented on the list of Masonic officers during the first two decades, were related to Fennels or their descendants, and had early holdings in the Trinity area.

## **ROSTER**

To name all the projects and activities of these families who are represented on the Masonic roster would be to sketch the history of the region. As planters, builders, legislators, county officials, doctors, lawyers, bankers, railroad and business men, they figured in practically every important development during the first quarter to half century of the county's history.

Rising Sun Lodge No. 29 was chartered in Decatur in 1827. The first Masonic lodge in Alabama was Madison Lodge No. 21 at Huntsville, organized under dispensation issued by the grand master of Kentucky on Aug. 29, 1811. Lodge No. 34 was organized at Moulton under Tennessee jurisdiction on May 2, 1820, and chartered Oct. 4, 1820. Lodge No. 40 was organized at Courtland, under the same jurisdiction on Mar. 3, 1821, and chartered Dec. 18, 1821.

The Lafayette Lodge at LaGrange was organized in the same year as the Decatur Lodge. William Leigh of Leighton, was listed as Worshipful Master on Dec. 22, 1827. Leigh became Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Alabama in 1834. This state organization had been formed on June 11, 1821, at Cahaba, with the representatives of nine subordinate lodges participating. The dates of earlier Morgan County lodges, in addition to the one at Decatur, are not at hand, but will be printed later.

## **TRACE LODGE**

Some 25 years ago, ex-W.M. John McGehee set out to trace the movements of the old Decatur Lodge, from meeting hall to meeting hall. He was able to locate, with the help of E. W. Collier who had been Worshipful Master in 1890, no less than seven different places where the lodge had gathered since 1870, but was unable to go back beyond that date. Where it met first was not known to Collier, who was 90 years old at the time he helped McGehee with his sketch.

“The location of the lodge has been changed quite a number of times,” the latter wrote. “In the early 1870's the hall was at the northwest corner of Bank and Pond Streets (the latter now called Wilson Street), across from the old State Bank building. This was a two-story frame building either built by the Lodge or by Masonic endeavor. The building burned about 60 years ago.

“After the building burned, the meetings were held in a two-story frame building at the corner of Bank and Market Streets. This building was by the McCartney Hotel building

and was owned by R. P. Baker. It was while the lodge was meeting here that Bro. E. W. Collier was Worshipful Master...

### **FORMER MAYOR**

"It was here that Bro. E. C. Payne, a former Mayor and propionate citizen, was made a Mason.

"The next move was to West Vine Street, just back of the Hotel Echols, which was on the southwest corner of Bank and Vine Streets. This was also a two-story frame building.

"Following this the lodge moved to the J. T. Banks building, now called the McEntire building, on the corner of Oak and Cain Streets. This was a three-story brick building and the meetings were on the top floor. The building is now only two-stories, following a fire about 20 years ago."

The "twenty years ago" referred to 20 years before the notes were taken from E. W. Collier's reminisces. The old building, which had also served as a temporary courthouse while the first one in Decatur was being built, is still standing.

McGehee continues; "The next place to which the lodge moved was in the block on Bank Street between Church Street and Wilson Street on the west side of the street.

"From there the lodge moved into the Knights of Pythias building on the corner of Bank and Vine Streets, on the third floor."

This placed it in a building fronting Bank Street which was on the opposite side of Vine from its previous meeting place behind what had been the Echols Hotel.

### **NEXT MOVE**

"The next move," said McGehee, "is the last - to the Masonic Hall on Johnson Street. In the 1930's, Rising Sun Lodge No. 29 had been combined with Albany Lodge No. 491, under the name of the older lodge."

It continues under this name and at the same meeting hall today.

John G. McGehee has the proud distinction of being the second member of his family who has served as Worshipful Master of the Rising Sun Lodge. His father D. D. McGehee was Worshipful Master in 1911, at which time S. I. Nichols was Senior Warden, and, Charles Kent Junior Warden.

The McGehees had come from Kentucky in 1901, and D. D. McGehee had entered the furniture business in Decatur, John G. McGehee has served the city as personnel director since March of 1963.

Photos:            Site Of Former Echols Hotel Masons Met At Back  
                      Masons Met In This Block (Bank And Wilson) In The 1870's  
                      John G. McGehee Shows Masonic Scroll  
                      Present Decatur Masonic Hall  
                      Officers Of Rising Sun Lodge From 1827 To 1927

Courtesy:         Morgan County Archives - Bank Street - Decatur, Alabama