

Our Montague Grange

by Michael Muller, Overseer
November 2002

If you aren't already a member, there is a very good chance you don't know what the Grange is or what it does. Not surprising, since the Grange was originally a secret order with passwords, secret knocks, handshakes and oaths. But that was decades ago. The Order of the Patrons of Husbandry, also known as the Grange, has changed its policy towards non-members and now Grange meetings are open to the public.

So, what is the Grange?

Originally, the Grange was a farmers' organization, helping to empower, educate and lobby for family farmers. Today the Grange is a community service organization, with degrees of involvement in the local community varying from town to town. Some Granges are very dance-oriented, some are very community service oriented, putting on fund drives for local causes, or collecting hearing aides for nursing homes.

How the Grange started

Six months after the end of the Civil War, in the spring of 1865, Oliver Kelly was hired by the Department of Agriculture to collect farm and plantation statistics throughout the South. No data had been collected from that region during the war and the government needed to get food production back up.

As he toured the post-Civil War south, a hostile area for a Northerner, Kelly found that being a member of the Masons, a centuries-old fraternity of businessmen, was an asset. He was received by the southern plantation owners as a brother of their Order.

Listening to their stories, seeing that agriculture in the south was nearly destroyed by the war, and feeling the camaraderie provided by his membership in the Masonic Order, he thought that a farm cooperative would assist in organizing and educating farmers, and help end sectionalism (the north vs. south rivalry) in the re-united country. He began to write to associates back home and discussed his idea of a "Secret Society of

Agriculturists, as an element to restore kindly feelings among the people."

The Grange was initially set up as a three-level organization. The National Grange was the body that set the by-laws of the Grange and lobbied for legislative issues in Washington D.C. State Granges were set up in states with ten or more local Granges, to lobby at the state level of government. Lastly, and most importantly, were the Subordinate Granges, where a person could actually join and receive the benefits of membership. Local Granges would debate all sorts of issues, usually problems facing farmers, and submit formal recommendations to the State or National Grange to ease hardships on the American farmer.

Local Granges quickly became social centers in their communities. Dances, potlucks and gatherings of all types occurred on at least a weekly basis, with potlucks usually preceding each meeting and coffee and cake afterwards to increase opportunities for socializing. Education was a major part of the local grange, with a lecturer's program slotted for every meeting.

Inside the Grange

A Grange has sixteen officers. Six of them are titles taken from traditional agricultural roles, such as the Master, Overseer, Steward and two Assistant Stewards, and Gate Keeper. Three are named for mythological goddesses of agriculture: Flora, Ceres and Pomona. A Lecturer is charged with education. Officers include a Secretary, a Treasurer, a Chaplain, and the three member Executive Committee.

Meetings are typically monthly, with some Granges meeting twice monthly. Some Granges own their halls, and have building committees to handle the upkeep. Some Granges rent the basement of a local church or another Fraternal Hall, such as Masons, Elks, or Lions.

Grange achievements

Some of the major achievements the Grange claims to its credit were the formation of the Anti-Monopoly "Populist" Party and the break-up of the railroad monopolies in the late 1800's; ballot reform and anti-trust laws; rural credit; school lunch and milk programs; rural road maintenance; and the creation of the Department of Commerce and the

Department of Labor, with their heads as members of the President's cabinet.

They helped create a land-grant university system, of which the Massachusetts Agricultural College, now UMass Amherst, was one.

They also advocated for free rural mail delivery and the creation of the parcels post. The Grange sponsored legislation to create the Rural Electrification Administration and the rural telephone program, bringing electricity and telephone lines to rural America and its farms. The Grange was the dominant force in bringing Social Security to farmers and other self-employed persons. Quite an amazing history!

Grange membership declines

The Grange as an organization peaked, in terms of members, in 1949. Since then the organization has been in a steady decline.

Across the nation, farms had matured and began heading toward conglomeration during the World War II. Economically secure, they no longer needed the Grange's help.

Servicemen and women returned from the war in the mid-1940's and were now in the business of making families and moving forward with the new technologies of the day. One thing they all wanted was a TV set.

This technology had also matured during the war, and was now affordable and packed with evening entertainment.

Essentially, Grange membership dropped because the sons and daughters of the current members did not want to join "their father's club." The Grange was a farmers' organization, and the young returning G.I.s were looking towards a new prosperity. They chose to join the rest of America watching Uncle Milty on TV; they did not want to take over their fathers' farms.

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In Montague, however, the Grange has bucked the recent trend. Membership has actually increased in recent years.

At the Montague Grange we meet at 7:30 on the first Wednesday of every month. We still do the full "ritual" at the beginning and ending of each meeting, enjoying the music provided by the two or three musicians on hand to accompany the various walking and singing segments.

We usually spend the bulk of our meetings talking about the upkeep of the building, recent and ongoing projects, and upcoming community events we want to be involved in.

At the November 2002 meeting we spoke about updating our rental policy, as we have had problems with some events at the hall in the past (noise late at night, etc). We will be holding a special Grange meeting on Wednesday November 20th to discuss our rental policy with the building's neighbors as it pertains to late-night use. If you plan to rent the Grange hall for an evening concert in the future, or are a neighbor within earshot in Montague Center, you are urged to attend.

If you are interested in the your local community and want to represent your village or town, or want to get involved and start a program under the auspices of the Grange, we would welcome you at our next meeting, Wednesday, December 4th at 7:30.

We will be collecting gifts for the children at Kurn Hattin Home in Vermont, a haven for children in troubled periods in their families' lives, so bring a gift if you can. Also, Lynn Benander from Co-op Plus, an energy cooperative in Western Mass, will be the guest Lecturer.

For more information, please visit www.MontagueMA.net/grange

You are invited

to a special

Grange Meeting

Wednesday, November 20th 2002

The Montague Grange is reviewing its Hall Rental Policy on Wednesday the 20th at 7:30 PM and, as a neighbor on your street, we seek your input.

We plan on **meeting for one hour**. During that time we will discuss typical hall usage, type of events, hours of operation, and anything else that could affect the hall, the neighborhood, or your quality of living as a close neighbor to the building.

A copy of the proposed rental agreement will be available for your inspection and comments. Additional information on the Grange in general will be available as well.

If you are interested in more Grange events, our next regular meeting is **Wednesday December 4th at 7:30**. Lynn Benander from Co-op Plus will be guest Lecturer. We will also be collecting gifts for children at Kurn Hattin Home in Vermont. Come check out a meeting if you've never been to one.

Thank you, and we hope to see you at the hall.