

This article ran in the February 2004 issue of the Massachusetts State Grange News and was reprinted in the State Grange newsletters of Pennsylvania and Ohio. It is offered here in the context of helping to determine whether a new mission is required or wanted for the Montague Grange.

Where do we go from here?...

In writing a research paper on the Grange recently I did extensive reading on the origins of our Order and found out something amazing. It was far simpler than I expected, and though it took a lot of effort and risk on the part of a few people, it exploded because of one simple fact.

In the beginning there was a dire need.

That is it in a nutshell. The Order of the Patrons of Husbandry was created and founded on a great, dire need. What it was specifically, however important or historical, is irrelevant to the birth itself. Had conditions not existed as they did back then (crippled agricultural industry, disadvantaged farmers, etc) the Grange would not have been born. It was simply needed.

Back in 1867, roughly 65% of all Americans were farmers, and they needed legislative help and social connections. That was the dire need. Today, 135+ years later, what is the dire need?

We know that 50 years ago membership in the Grange had already peaked and begun its long steady decline. We know this is due to several factors, such as the slow death of the family farm and the takeover of corporate farming. We know that WWII had ended and the returning G.I.'s didn't want to return to their father's farm. We know that rural America had accelerated its modernization and that ubiquitous communications brought everyone closer together with no effort. We know that travel wasn't the hardship it once was, so the twice a month meetings weren't the only time farmers would ever see their neighbors. And further, we know that the explosion of entertainment options (TV, etc) kept people at home or elsewhere instead of at Grange meetings.

So, today the Grange is no longer needed as the sole social access point, family farmers are no longer a significant portion of the American landscape, and anyway, their dire needs have been met: electricity, phone service, postal service, socializing, education. We no longer meet their needs.

In my town, Montague, there are still plenty of small family farms. None of them are members. They don't have time, and the Grange offers them nothing -- nothing!-- for their invested time.

What purpose, then, does the Grange serve?

Well, for our older members, it is one of the last links to their past (many 50 year members are still active). For others it is a way to join in this established, entrenched community. A way to rub elbows with the town fathers and mothers. For some it is access to tradition, which they may not otherwise have if they don't attend church or participate in any other rituals at home. For others, perhaps, it is just another entertainment option... a way to hang out with other people in their area, or assist in the upkeep of an old building, or simply because a friend attends meetings.

Except for a few committees, such as the Deaf Awareness Committee, the Grange doesn't serve any dire needs anymore. And if a member were to stop attending, they wouldn't feel the impact in their daily life. 100 years ago, to leave the Grange was a big deal. You had to petition for a demit, and you felt it. Today, many members simply stop attending, and some don't even bother to communicate their intentions, even after being contacted.

For most people, the mere act of attending a once-a-month meeting is too much for them because they don't feel it is time effective. There is simply too much to do today, and the people who we might consider as "joiners" are already spread thin on projects they consider important. Life is way more complicated than it was 100 years ago, and unless there is a dire need, membership in an organization such as ours is an entertainment option.

My Grange, Montague #141, has had two years of fantastic growth, relatively speaking. We have garnered 13 new members in the past two years, though only a few attend more than one meeting a quarter. The rest don't come at all because they don't see the meetings as productive, or relative, to their lives.

So what do we do to change this?

America today is again experiencing some hardships. Not as bad as the years following the Civil War, but still there are hardships: The economy is shaky, social services are being cut everywhere, local schools are losing teachers, jobs are moving away, towns budgets

are being cut to the bone. The list is very long. The situation is dire, again, in America. Does it fit into the Grange model, though?

The Grange's original purpose, to assist the local farmer, is no longer of primary concern in America. Logic holds that sticking to this concept may doom the organization. Modifying the mission to target "Rural America's Needs" should be the main mission.

And the Massachusetts State Grange has done this, but... still... what's the dire need? The State Grange Website says the following: "Most Granges in the Bay State concentrate their efforts on preserving rural life effectively through community service work and activities for the betterment of their community."

What are the dire needs? Define "preserving rural life effectively." What issues in your community are hurting your local neighbors that your Grange could pick up and run with? Is your local school about to close? Is a local park about to close? Is a heavily relied upon service in your area about to lose funding? Look at what people rely on in your area and see if the issue can be absorbed by your local Grange.

You will likely bring newcomers to your meetings by letting them know that you are bringing local issues important to them into your Grange hall for debate and possible action. Schedule a discussion on this local issue for an upcoming meeting. Arrange to have two public figures associated with the issue present different sides to the issue at your meeting. Invite the public to come and participate. If done during the Lecturer's Program (moved up in the agenda to soon after the opening of the meeting) you will expose these new people to a meeting and its curious rituals, and also do a service for your community and possibly even garner new members who see your Grange as proactive in your town.

Normally active and involved people will join any organization they feel is empowered, active, and effective. They do not have time for sitting around and discussing the hall's kitchen utensil supplies. They do have time for discussing issues relevant to their lives.

As an example, at the October meeting my Grange voted to go on record as being against approving the President's request for \$87 billion when so many local needs are being cut, unless the tax refunds for the richest Americans was rescinded. They do not need the money and are not feeling the squeeze our local, rural, communities are feeling.

While we didn't write any letters to our senators, we did feel good about taking our first issue-related vote in more than five years, and later published it in our local paper. After the vote we agreed that we should keep up the momentum and continue discussing and debating issues that impact our local community, and possibly begin letter-writing campaigns based on the results of any future votes.

THAT, my brothers and sisters, is what community action is, and that is what the original Grange was all about: Local connections, education, and lobbying.

Read up on the history of our organization, and feel the power, attention, and attraction we once wielded, and the dire need we once fulfilled. Go and do good work.

Good luck.

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