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GRAND FAMILY - GRAND CHAPTER OF THE MASSACHUSETTS ORDER OF THE EASTERN STAR

Front row, from left

Joanne H. Langevin - ASSOCIATE GRAND CONDUCTRESS
Irving T. Nicoll - GRAND SENTINEL
Shirley E. Della Penna - GRAND CONDUCTRESS
Blanche H. Shaw, PGM - GRAND TREASURER
Wendell Clapp - WORTHY GRAND PATRON
Eunice K. Gonyer - WORTHY GRAND MATRON
Elizabeth K. Rogers - ASSOCIATE GRAND MATRON
Charles F. Whitaker - ASSOCIATE GRAND PATRON
Frances M. Ganong, PGM - GRAND SECRETARY
Norman C. Goward - GRAND CHAPLAIN

Back row, from left

Dane E. Kimball - GRAND WARDER
Evelyn H. Whitaker - GRAND ORGANIST
Vera M. Batson - GRAND ELECTA
Maureen A. Holmgren - GRAND ESTHER
June M. Clapp - GRAND RUTH
Paula A. Burge - GRAND ADAH
Pamela A. Blood - GRAND MARSHAL
Ellen E. Goodwin - GRAND MARTHA

The Order of the Eastern Star
boasts 22.5 million members worldwide.
But what is this pageantry-laden
organization all about?

MAJESTY TO THE MAX

BY LINDA MATCHAN

Enice K. Gonyer certainly notices the peculiarities of the Order of the Eastern Star. The profusion of pageantry, for instance, and the grandiose array of honors accorded its officers: the evening gowns worn to business meetings; the regalia pinned to dresses; the long-winded designations such as Most Worthy Grand Matron, Right Worthy Grand Secretary, or Associate Conductress. And the fact that there are members who persist in regarding it as a secret, unpublicizable society when, according to its leaders, it is not. "I can't reiterate this enough times," stresses Gonyer, who as Worthy Grand Matron of Massachusetts is Eastern Star's highest-ranking officer in the state. "We're *not* a secret organization. It's just our modes of recognition that are secret."

Nor does it elude her that, at least from a 1980s point of view, there is an obtrusive gap in reasoning apparent when an organization that is headed by women and was originally created for them not only permits men to be members but requires them.

But all this is beside the point to the earnest, enthusiastic Gonyer, who has virtually nothing but good to say about the 137-year-old society, dedicated as it is to the precepts of "charity, truth, and loving-kindness." "We're a compassionate group of caring women that does so much *good* in the world," Gonyer says emphatically. "If people truly

lived by the doctrines we teach — consideration of others, people helping people — there wouldn't be cheating, or" — she pauses for a moment — "anything you could think of."

THERE WAS A TIME, IN THE EARLY part of the century, when so-called fraternal organizations for women such as the Order of the Eastern Star were a prominent part of the social landscape of America. Year after year, their activities, business transactions, and comings and goings were meticulously recorded in the newspapers of the nation. In 1922, when President Warren G. Harding shook hands with no fewer than 1,450 delegates of an Eastern Star meeting in Washington, D.C., *The New York Times* took note. When, in 1942, some 500 Eastern Star members contributed "their ability with the needle and thread to the sew-for-soldiers program . . . for the boys in khaki," the *Times* hailed the women's efforts. In 1949, when the Massachusetts Eastern Star chapter held its 73rd annual session at Worcester Memorial Auditorium, the minutiae of the meeting, right down to the "extensive blue-and-silver decorations in plants and flowers," appeared on page 2 of the *Christian Science Monitor*.

But more recently the Order of the Eastern Star has faded from public view. So, of course, have many other kindred organizations, as the "women's pages" of major newspapers have focused on women in professions and away from those in sewing circles. Some groups have missed the attention and have staged major fund-raisers or other public events to maintain the interest and involvement of outsiders. But unlike these groups, Eastern Star has eschewed any-

thing remotely resembling public relations, almost savoring its low profile. Indeed, when I called the state Eastern Star office to get information about the Order for this article, the officer who answered the telephone said curtly that she was busy and the Order doesn't like advertising, and then abruptly hung up.

Asked about their reticence, members speak evasively about the necessity of being "cautious," about being consistently "misrepresented" and "misunderstood." It is a point of view that very nearly drives the current Worthy Grand Matron to despair.

"Why do we have to keep it all a secret?" protests Gonyer, a warm and endearing woman whose personal mandate during her one-year term of office is to enlarge the order and get the word out about Eastern Star, and who makes no effort to hide her impatience for those members who prefer to keep the workings of the organization under wraps. ("Biddies" is one of the terms she has used for them that found its way into an interview.) Gonyer is passionate about the Order, almost buoyant when she discusses her Eastern Star "watchwords" for the year: enthusiasm, kindness, and gratitude, formed from her initials, and the motto she chose for the jurisdiction, which is "Search all things, hold fast that which is true." Like many of the members interviewed, Gonyer was gracious, guileless, and thoroughly nice. "We do so *much*," she said in an interview. "This is so ridiculous the way some people want to guard this thing. I think we'd have more young people in it if they realized we don't just sit around and knit."

But despite its retiring demeanor, Eastern Star not only persists, it thrives. The organization *Continued on page 55*

LINDA MATCHAN IS A MEMBER OF THE *GLOBE* STAFF.

Majesty to the max

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 17

boasts 32,000 members in Massachusetts, approximately two-thirds of them women, and 147 chapters; with 22.5 million members worldwide, it is said to be the largest fraternal organization in the world to which both men and women may belong. Almost every night of the week, women all over Massachusetts are donning their long evening dresses, pinning on their regalia, and driving off "to Star."

A first encounter with the Order of the Eastern Star is a perplexing experience for the uninitiated. It is also a rare experience, since the organization's regular meetings are closed to the public and membership in Eastern Star is restricted to those with a connection to the Ancient Free and Accepted Masons, the centuries-old men's fraternal organization. Only men who are members of Masons and only women who are close relatives of Masons — specifically, wives, daughters, mothers, widows, sisters, and granddaughters over the age of 18 — are eligible to join the organization. But some of the Order's events, such as the annual installation of officers, are open to the public by invitation, and Gonyer welcomed me to

a few of them so that I could learn more about Eastern Star.

At its core, she says, Eastern Star is a charitable social order devoted to helping those in need, and it is very much defined by issues of morality. (Morality is loosely interpreted in Eastern Star literature as "mental, moral and spiritual quality.") "If you know someone who has stolen or cheated or is running around with someone else's wife or something, or is not a good person, you don't want them in our order," Gonyer says. "It's as simple as that."

Before prospective members may join, their moral mettle is formally investigated by a three-person Eastern Star "investigation team," which essentially involves "having a cup of coffee with them and chatting," Gonyer says. If the team is satisfied that the individual meets their criteria, the application is put to a chapter ballot: White balls in the ballot box signal "yes," but a single black cube "blackballs" the applicant, who is summarily nixed from Eastern Star. "That's our protection, if you will," Gonyer says.

While she insists that the organization is not secret, Gonyer nevertheless uses the word "secret" to describe some of its rites. Meetings open and close in ritualistic fashion with what Gonyer describes as some "secret work" — passes and phrases that establish members' identity.

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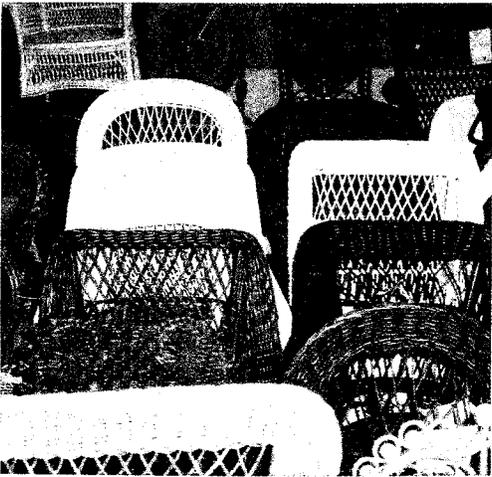
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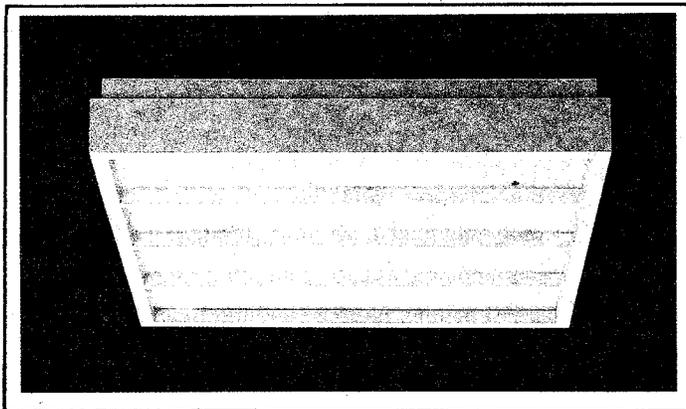
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It is not a political organization; in fact, members resolutely refuse to talk about politics at meetings. "It's just not done," says Gonyer. "We don't infringe on anyone's privacy." It is not technically a religious organization, despite the presence at all meetings of an altar and Bible in the center of the room, and despite the fact that membership is categorically prohibited to those of "no faith," as an Eastern Star leaflet states. Belief in a Supreme Being — any Supreme Being, in principle — is compulsory.

What Eastern Star does do is impart to its members "refreshing and character building lessons" through "ritualistic work," as the Order's literature puts it. The means of transmission are five "beautiful and inspiring Biblical examples of heroic conduct and moral values." These examples are the "star points": Adah, Ruth, Esther, Martha, and Electa. They are five Biblical women who, in the Eastern Star view of the world, stand for such "sublime virtues" as fidelity, constancy, honesty, justice, courage, and devotion to religious principles. Members of Eastern Star are appointed by the Worthy Ma-

tron, the highest-ranking officer in a chapter, to "be" one of these star points for a year's term of office. The women sit at designated "stations," which are the points of a star that is embroidered or embossed into a rug on the floor. They are charged with recounting the stories of the heroines to new members being initiated. Candidates for membership are led by the Conductress and Associate Conductress around the room in a special way, Gonyer says, in a manner that symbolizes "the labyrinth of human life." And all of this takes place under the scrutiny of the Worthy Patron — always a man — whose job is to ensure that the Order's ritual work is handled correctly.

Also central to Eastern Star's raison d'être is its community work. The organization raises large sums of money for charities, including research on cancer, the heart, and the eye, and for children's hospitals; between 1982 and 1985 it contributed \$6 million worldwide by sponsoring such events as bake sales, craft fairs, and dinners. Eastern Star also supports other "benevolences" specifically for the aid of its own mem-

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bers. In Massachusetts, these include an elegant Eastern Star rest home in Orange, on the premises of an old mansion; the Isadore Forbes Fund, a "silent fund" that supports members, quietly and anonymously, if they find themselves in any sort of financial need or distress; the Estarl fund for religious leadership training for members and their families; and scholarship funds for higher education and job training.

The Order also sponsors a profusion of social events, from gala fund-raising affairs to ultraformal dinners to honor newly appointed officers. Gonyer says, "I can get myself all duded up in my gown and go out every night of the week if I want to."

The essence of Eastern Star is perhaps no more complex than this: It is a social organization with some rituals that does good work. But there is another dimension to Eastern Star that sets it apart and that has been known to render observers dumbfounded. This is its propensity for pageantry on such a grand scale that it could make the coronation of the Queen of England look commonplace. It is majesty to the max.

At every Star meeting, even business meetings, women officers must wear full-length evening gowns, and many members favor chiffony sequined dresses and silver pumps and clutch bags. (Gonyer figures she has 50 eve-

ning dresses hanging in her "gown closet.") Male officers dress in tuxedos, many with ruffled shirts and shiny patent shoes. Officers wear gilded medals hanging military-style from multi-colored ribbons pinned to their gowns, bearing the badges of office that represent, in a curiously literal way, the jobs they hold for that year. Where the Worthy Matron wears a gavel within a star to indicate she is an authority, Gonyer says, the Treasurer gets crossed keys, which symbolize security, and the Secretary is conferred with crossed pens within a star.

The language of Eastern Star is exalted, too. There are a lot of "beholds" and "worthys" and "damsels" in the Order's lingo; enigmatic references to a "refulgent sun" and to the "mystery and aims" and "mystic rites" of Eastern Star; emotional pleas that "the cry of the widow and orphan shall never be heard in vain." Time is measured in "trieniums," place in "jurisdictions"; officers sit, not against this wall or that, but in the "East" or "West." Introductions are long, speeches longer, words of inspiration offered again and again and again.

And the titles seem most elaborate of all. The program at the Aurora chapter's three-hour-plus installation last April in Natick included an Installing Grand Patron, Installing Grand Chaplain, Installing Grand Marshal, and even an Installing Grand Organist, not to over-

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look the Warder, Sentinel, Chaplain, Marshal, and Conductress and Associate Conductress. Then there were the five "floral star points," the escorts with degrees after their names such as PP and AP (for Past Patron and Associate Patron) and even, lest he be forgotten, the electrician, PGP, for Past Grand Patron. ("They're going to bring in the dog next and introduce him," a member who frequents installations once heard a visitor say.)

Just summoning officers into the room is a

major production, involving gavel bangs, organ music, quick heel turns, deep bows, and an elaborately choreographed chair shuffle, to the fervent strains of such melodies as "Climb Ev'ry Mountain" and Barbra Streisand's "People." At the Natick installation, it seemed as if snatches of every ceremonial form imaginable passed through the labyrinth of human life that evening — a parade, fashion show, wedding, church service, Army march, May Day festivity, parliament. If the phrase "trigger-happy" could be applied to

ceremony choreography, it might describe the architect of Eastern Star.

Davis Morgan of La Grange, Kentucky, however, uses the word "brilliant" to describe the creator of Eastern Star. Morgan, a Past Patron of the Order, is a trustee and member of the board of directors of the Rob Morris Memorial in La Grange and is also author of a four-page pamphlet called *History of Dr. Rob Morris*. Morris, though little-known outside Masonic circles, is a preeminent figure in Eastern Star lore because he founded the Order. Today his home, the Rob Morris Memorial, is a museum. "We call it a shrine," says Morgan.

Details of Morris' life are sketchy. "The real origin of the Eastern Star, like Masonry, will always be shrouded in mystery," declares the official Eastern Star history book, a florid 38-page booklet.

What is known is that Morris, who was born in Boston in 1818 and spent most of his adult years in Mississippi and Kentucky, was a sort of latter-day renaissance figure with an eccentric grab bag of interests. He became a teacher, lawyer, writer, geologist, numismatist, amateur archaeologist, and theologian. But according to Morgan, it was Masonry that truly galvanized Morris' life. He writes that Morris "was brought to Masonic light in Oxford, Mississippi, on March 5, 1846," and "at once became so intensely alive to the beauties of its symbolic teachings that his whole future life was given to the study of Masonry." Morris published more than 300 articles on Masonic subjects, was designated "Poet Laureate of Freemasonry" in 1884, and delivered thousands of lectures on the intricacies of Masonic precepts. He was given to composing Masonic poems in stagecoaches, railway carriages, steamboats, and on horseback. Morgan maintains, "He was a genius."

But for some reason Morris was never completely comfortable with the fact that the benefits of Masonry could be reaped only by men. And so in 1850, while confined to his home by an accident, he is said to have developed the concept of Eastern Star, which today has chapters in every US state and Canadian province, as well as in Guam, Germany, Italy, England, China, Japan, the Philippines, Bermuda, Australia, and New Zealand, among other countries.

Exactly why a man would want to invent an organization for women is not completely understood, although evidently Morris was so enamored with what he had wrought that he named one of his daughters Ruth Electa. The Eastern Star literature depicts him as a sort of benevolent, egalitarian guru who wanted to spread his inspired teachings to women so they could be likewise inspired. "There was always in his mind the thought that Masonry should be for the whole family," the Order's history booklet notes. Eastern Star's highest-ranking officer concurs. "He enjoyed Masonry so much, he wanted his wife and mother to enjoy a fraternal organization based upon his precepts," said Most Worthy Grand Matron Helen Roquemore Cox, reached by telephone during her official tour of the Subordinate Chapters of Hawaii.

But a closer look at the Eastern Star literature suggests that what Rob Morris really had in mind was not a ladies' version of Masons but a ladies' aid to Masons, an organization very much in line with 19th-century sensibilities about the dominance of men in society. "It is an imposition

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to communicate the Eastern Star [precepts] to a lady," the Eastern Star history booklet quotes Rob Morris as writing, "unless we can make perfectly clear to her the means by which she can make herself known to Freemasons."

It is a perspective that the Order apparently feels no need to revise, according to the preface to the most recent edition of the history booklet, which was published by the General Grand Chapter of Eastern Star. "The primary object of the Order was at first to afford facilities to the wives, mothers, widows, daughters and sisters of Master Masons to make themselves known as such," the book states. "This being true, it follows as a natural sequence that all members should seek to obtain and retain the hearty co-operation of all Master Masons, and on all proper occasions set at rest and discountenance the idea that this is a woman's organization, bearing in mind that a Master Mason must preside at every initiation, and that they are endowed with equal voice in the management of the affairs of a chapter."

At a time when women are being appointed to the Supreme Court, running for federal office, and going up into space, what sorts of women would want to be part of a fraternal organization that determines their eligibility by their relationship to a man? What sorts of women would be interested in an organization that goes in for fanfare

on such an elaborate scale that Eunice Gonyer herself jokes that she is the "princess" of Eastern Star?

Gonyer says they are women of all ages and from all walks of life, though if appearances are to be believed, there seemed a disproportionate amount of gray hair and white faces at three recent Eastern Star events. As for why the women are there, "the reason is different for different people," Gonyer says.

There are those, like Gonyer herself, who were raised in Eastern Star families and who simply couldn't imagine an existence without regalia and star points and rituals; Gonyer, 60, joined the Order with her mother and father 41 years ago. Laurie Lloyd, 23, of Natick, started out in Rainbow Girls — a girls' youth group sponsored by Eastern Star — and, she says, "it just followed that Eastern Star is next."

Or women like Laurie's mother, Jane Lloyd, the Worthy Matron of Aurora Chapter, who says she has done more in Eastern Star than she ever thought she was capable of. Growing up, she was "a shy little girl who wouldn't say boo to anyone," and when she got married she was a full-time homemaker except for a part-time job, when her children were grown, "just putting stuff into a computer." The prospect of raising \$1,000 for an Eastern Star benevolence at first scared her: "I thought, 'How can I do that?'" But she found out she could, raising more than that amount in lob-

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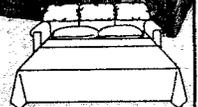
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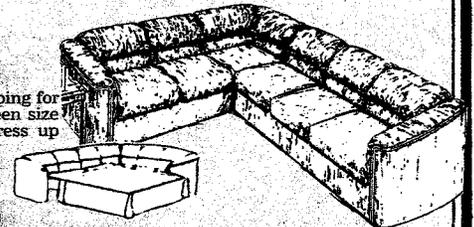
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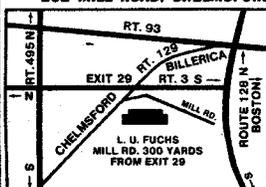
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ster-roll sales alone in a single year. "It kind of expands you," she says. "It opens up your life. Otherwise, *this* is where I'd be," Jane Lloyd says, fixing her gaze on her cat asleep on the hearth. "Right here."

There are those who say the community work that Eastern Star does makes them feel rewarded and productive, and there are those who say the Order makes them feel secure, such as Alfreda "Bobbie" Shepherd, 90, who lives in the Eastern Star home in Orange. "You never feel alone," Shepherd said recently. "If I were ill, I'd have so many people visiting me and so many cards. If they thought you needed a bedjacket, they'd send you one. They are very, very thoughtful."

Certainly there is a significant contingent of members who are attracted, at least in part, by the organization's grandiosity and its fanfare. The organization supports a massive machine and hierarchy, with its grand officers, grand honors, grand chapters, Right Worthy Grand Secretary, and, perhaps grandest of all, the opulent International Eastern Star Temple in Washington, D.C., located in the former Belmont Mansion, across the street from the embassy of Nicaragua. The mansion, which the Order sometimes calls the Temple Beautiful, was sold inexpensively to the Order by its owner, a Master Mason, and still contains the original, extraordinary furnishings, including topaz and amethyst chandeliers and a gold-leafed Steinway piano.

"Maybe there is a little bit of the ham in me," acknowledges Betty Davis of Chatham, a past Grand Matron in her 60s. "I like the fact that I can justify to my husband that I can wear a glitzy gown. And, I have to say, I like it when people say I look lovely and that it's been a good evening."

The order may satisfy some important psychological need as well. "For women who will never walk down the aisle and be the bishop in the Roman Catholic Church or the Grand Patriarch of Moscow in the Orthodox Church or the Bishop of Massachusetts in the Anglican Church, [belonging to Eastern Star] must be a pretty good feeling," says Diana Eck, a professor of religion at Harvard who has written about rites and rituals and who belonged to Rainbow Girls as an adolescent.

Betty Davis, an eloquent advocate of Eastern Star, agrees that the Order does have these kinds of connotations for her. "It is pseudoreligious," she says. "There are no sermons. There is no guiding hand, like a rabbi or minister. We don't counsel one another. But we get together in fellowship. We are religious; we take what we do from the Bible. I've been listening to the ritual for more than 30 years, and I always find something in it that is of comfort and is joyous to me."

Not that Eastern Star doesn't have its mortal side. The Order has been bedeviled by more than its share of contention over the years, which did not always put the best face on an organization dedicated to the precepts of charity, truth, and loving-kindness.

There was the decade of controversy in New York, for example, which first came to public attention in 1923 with a front-page *New York Times* article headlined "Thirty Women Faint at Waldorf Astoria in Heated Session of Eastern Star Order." The story centered on "one of the bitterest fights within the ranks of the Grand Chapter," a fight that followed Grand Matron



Eunice Gonyer with some of the gowns she wears to Eastern Star meetings.

Mildred V. Everson's decision to suspend a Grand Trustee over matters related to the Order's financial accounting. Not only did 30 ladies collapse from all the excitement, according to the *Times* (provoking the Waldorf Astoria to issue a terse press statement — "The room is one of the best ventilated meeting places in the city" — absolving itself of any responsibility), but the events led to an even bigger blight on Eastern Star the following day. Everson had received a threat on her life in the form of a letter that contained a big black hand on paper, and the *Times* played it to the hilt with a spectacular nine-line headline referring to a "Black Hand Threat" and to "Death Message at Eastern Star Convention." The next day, events heated up even more when Everson opened an envelope that contained a bleeding heart colored with red ink, among other threatening communications. "Eastern Star Puts 17 Guards at Door," the headline screamed. "News Leaks Out, However, That 'Bleeding Heart' and 'Black Hand' Stirred Convention."

This was only the beginning of New York Eastern Star's notorious problems. Over the next 10 years, it was beset by a series of in-house crises over such issues as the fact that its state treasurer — the venerable Everson again — had inexplicably refused to oversee an audit of the Order's funds. For some reason, these internal problems had the habit of ending up in the courts as well as the newspapers, heaping yet more embarrassment on the already beleaguered New York Order. "Eastern Star Matron Facing an Injunction," "Eastern Star Officer Gives Version of Row," and "Sues Eastern Star to Get Back Her Job" are among the headlines that convey the spirit of the Order's difficulties during the Depression years. They culminated in what must have been the ultimate mortification in 1932, when a New York state Supreme Court judge, who had apparently had his fill of Eastern Star infighting, pronounced one Eastern Star meeting whose minutes he had studied "a disorderly and disgraceful proceeding." He added, "The record of a mob of illiterate, uncultured and frenzied in-

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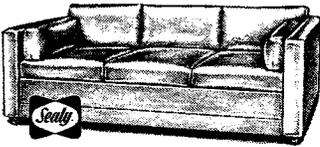
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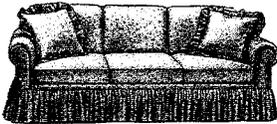
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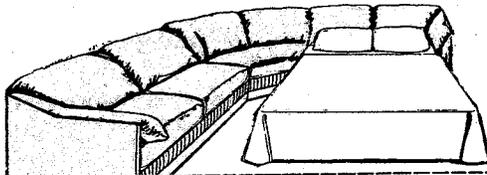
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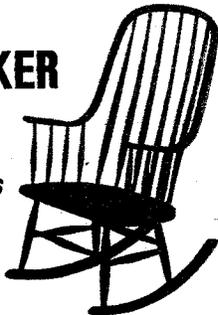
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dividuals could be no more humiliating than the record of this convention."

More recently, there was the trouble in Massachusetts. In 1972 it came to light that the Auburn and Spencer chapters of Rainbow Girls had been suspended by their national organization for admitting black girls. The ensuing publicity caused a great deal of consternation within the two organizations. Some Rainbow Girls circulated petitions, wrote letters, and even — in at least one well-publicized case — resigned from the organization in protest, with one girl lamenting in her letter of resignation, published in *The Boston Globe*, that "by excluding the black people you are not only defeating your purpose, but making a mockery of the very values you are striving to preserve in this plastic society." The restriction was eventually lifted, but, according to Betty Davis, the brouhaha forced Eastern Star to closely examine its own problematic prohibition, that "tiny one line" in its own regulations prohibiting anyone of "Ethiopian blood" (a euphemism for "black," Davis said) from joining the Order. "The feeling was, we'd better change this in Eastern Star," recalled Davis, and before long the restriction was lifted.

Heated as these controversies were at the time, many members interviewed have nevertheless put the episodes behind them, referring to them now only obliquely as "the upset" or "to-do." They are likewise uncritical about some of the other aspects of the Order that have raised eyebrows outside the Order — the fact, for instance, that hierarchical, pomp-heavy organizations like theirs have proven to be irresistibly ripe for parody. (Laurel and Hardy's Exhausted Ruler in the classic film *Sons of the Desert* is one

example that springs to mind, as does the cartoon caveman Fred Flintstone, who dons his water buffalo horns and goes off to commune with the "Grand Poobah" at the lodge.)

"I have a friend who kids her husband when he goes to his [Masonic] lodge," Betty Davis says. "She says to him, 'Do you have your horns on straight?' Once, when I was at her house, she looked at me and said, 'This makes you mad, doesn't it?' And I said, 'It doesn't make me mad. It's just sad, because you're missing the point.'"

The point, according to Eunice Gonyer, is that the Order of the Eastern Star provides a "bond of fellowship" like no other she knows of. When her husband died suddenly two years ago, Gonyer says, her Eastern Star sisters and brothers rallied around her and pulled her through her ordeal. "If it hadn't been for the Order when I lost Ernie, I don't know what I would have done," she says. "And there isn't a town in this state where I wouldn't feel perfectly comfortable, and where I wouldn't find a friend."

Nevertheless, it is not always easy for non-members to come around to the Eastern Star way of thinking. A visitor to one gala Eastern Star event held at Worcester Memorial Auditorium acknowledged she didn't know what to make of it. "It just looks like they walk around the floor a lot, to music," she said, looking puzzled.

Still, after thinking about it for a moment, she said, "They do do good things." She looked around her in the foyer, in the direction of a knot of white chiffon and jingling medallions. "And when you get right down to it," she said, shrugging, "we all have to have something, don't we?"

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