

# THE ORIGIN OF THE GRANGE AND ITS OFFICERS

## A BRIEF HISTORY

Compiled by Sara Huston & Robert Grott, March 2023

The following is a short overview of where the Grange came from as an organization, and why it has the traditions and officers that it does – essentially our origin story.

### Beginnings

The Grange was founded in 1867 right after the Civil War. The organization – officially the *Order of the Patrons of Husbandry* – emerged as the country was shifting from a largely agrarian one to an urban one, and there was a growing need to advocate for the rights and welfare of farmers.

On one hand the Grange was a politically radical organization – originally envisioned as a “*secret society of agriculturalists*” – pushing back against the monopoly capitalism of the railroads and commodity buyers. Over the years, the Grange was behind movements for free rural mail delivery, rural electrification, and Social Security for farmers, among other initiatives. And this activism continues to this day as the Grange lobbies for rural broadband and against concentration in the meat processing industry.

For its internal organization, the Grange borrowed much from other fraternal organizations of the time, such as the Masons, in its embrace of ritual. In fact it had direct ties to the Order of Demeter and the 3,000 year old rituals associated with ancient Greek worship of that agricultural goddess.

### Officers

Formally, there are as many as 16 officers who lead a Grange. Some execute the same roles that you'll find in any organization, but the Grange has its own flavor.

But first a note about the name Grange itself: Many of the large farming estates in England and Ireland had been referred to as granges for centuries – apparently derived from a Latin word meaning grain. Continuing in this line, some of our officer titles such as Master, Overseer, Steward, and Gatekeeper date back to these positions on feudal English estates. Then there are ceremonial officers, such as Ceres, Pomona, and Flora which are named after Roman goddesses important to agriculture. Interestingly these positions are to be held by only by women, which stands in contrast to the otherwise strictly equal role woman have held in Grange leadership from the beginning.

As Jay Sexton, the Oregon Grange President, reminded us last month, the Grange is a fraternal organization akin to The Masons, Odd Fellows and Elks, and it traditionally functioned much like these organizations with an emphasis on traditional procedures and rituals for conducting its gatherings – practices which we in Corbett have all but abandoned

But the Grange is unique among organizations in being grounded in agricultural values, grass-roots democracy, gender equality, and the embrace of families and youth participants. And despite the use of an annual password and a secret handshake – which originally took the place of membership cards – there is little secret about the goings on in this hall.

### Traditional Officer Names & Roles

(Source: [https://www.castategrange.org/history\\_c09.html](https://www.castategrange.org/history_c09.html))

Grange officers are similar to the officers of this old baronial estate explained above. The Grange Hall, therefore, is meant to typify in miniature this farm estate with its palace, park, and Grange or farm proper.

The entrance to the estate, for instance, was closed by a massive gate, which was opened and closed by the **Gatekeeper**, who, with his family, lived in the gate keeper's lodge located beside the entrance. In the earlier days when might alone was right, his function in guarding the gate was an extremely important one. The owl is used as the emblem of the gate keeper because its habit of being awake at night makes it a fitting emblem for a watchman, which was the function of the gatekeeper.

The **Overseer** had the duties that his name implies, and in addition to the supervision of the farming operations (or the husbandry as it was called), often also had charge of the upkeep of the park-like grounds surrounding the mansion.

The **Lecturer**, while not an officer of the English estate, was nevertheless included as an important station in the basic design of the Grange. His contributions are extremely vital throughout Grange organization and activities.

The **Steward** was in a way the executive secretary of the estate. He made most of the purchases. He also had charge of the tools and supplies of the grange, and was the business agent of the whole enterprise. To a large measure the physical comfort of those living on the estate was dependent upon his efficiency.

Even the **Chaplain** was in an official position, and his living, so-called, was provided by the estate in which was located the little church – the entire expense of which was paid by the master's income, and not by the subscriptions of the congregation.

### **The Role of Women in the Grange**

The Grange was the first fraternal organization to make the wise move of admitting women as members with full equality with the men. So, when it was decided to invite women to join, it seemed desirable to create certain offices for them. In fact, women were given more than equality, for while a woman can hold any office in the Grange, there are four offices that are not open to men.

The need for a **Lady Assistant Steward**, for instance, was obvious. For three additional women officers roles, the founders called upon Roman mythology which in turn was based on Greek mythology and the Eleusinian rites of 25 centuries ago in which only the outstanding citizens could participate. The names chosen represented goddesses whose functions were the protection of growing things.

**Ceres** was the goddess who presented to mankind the great gift of grain upon which we depend to such a large extent for our sustenance. She had care over the cereals which are named after her, and over the grower of the grains. **Pomona** was the goddess who presided over fruits, and to whom the fruit growers appealed for protection of their products and for an abundant yield. **Flora** was the goddess of flowers and of Spring, and to her was due the fact that the earth is so beautifully adorned with flowers.

### **Final Note**

The challenge for the Grange movement in general, and our local Grange in particular, is to build off of these officer concepts and roles and to adapt them to our current day and values. This involves a change to contemporary titles (e.g. President instead of Master, Vice President instead of Overseer, etc.), using gender neutral language (unlike the excerpts above), and aligning Officer duties with our operational needs.