

by Amber Hanneken

The term Freemasonry may bring to mind images of a secret society, piles of ancient gold, mysterious symbols in stone and actor Nicholas Cage holding a torch. In truth, Masonry today is more likely a society with secrets than a secret society, and in Missouri, Masons have been helping communities since statehood in 1821.

To learn the truth about the Freemasons and what they do in Missouri, take a trip on Highway 63 to the Masonic Museum of Missouri in north Columbia. Located in the group's Grand Lodge, admission is free and it is open to the public Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

"The museum is a chance to really tell the story," says Cindee Herrick, the museum's curator. "They wanted to get the word out. They wanted to celebrate and that's the reason it's a public institution and there's no admission fee."

The museum, which is served by Boone Electric Cooperative, celebrated its grand opening in February. It features items and stories from famous Missouri members including Meriwether Lewis, President Harry S. Truman and the first person to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean successfully, Charles Lindbergh. It also houses memorabilia from various lodges and members' families.

The lambskin apron, a symbol of purity and innocence, is presented to a Mason upon membership and is the first item visitors are greeted with when coming to the museum. There are several more aprons, including one belonging to William Clark as well as treasures such as jewels, war medals, stained glass, a ballot box and more on display.

"It's good for kids who are learning not only about history of the Masons but the history of this great country of ours. An awful lot of presidents were Masons," Past Grand Master Bob Berger says. "This is a lesson I think the kids can learn as well as the adults."

A grand master is an elected supreme ruler over a jurisdiction that has the job of conducting meetings and the business of the Grand Lodge.

The museum is divided into five galleries, each exhibiting a Masonic value. The first gallery is called "Patriots and Pathmakers" where visitors learn about the founding fathers, Lewis and Clark's journey and individual Mason's roles in the military.

The "Living Well" gallery discusses the values of music and education. Visitors can listen to Masonic music and learn about symbolic objects. The gallery highlights the work of writer Laura Ingalls Wilder, who helped found a chapter of the women and men's organization called Order of the Eastern Star in Missouri.

The third value is "Generosity." This exhibit shows the support members have given to their communities and to the Masonic Home, a charity organization and outreach program that provides care to Masonic families in need.

"Making your community better than it started is part of the goal of the Masons," Cindee says.

The fourth gallery discusses "Lead-



Photo by Bob McEwen

Bob Berger, past grand master and member of the board of directors for the Masonic Museum and Library, stands next to a portrait of Past Grand Master Harry S. Truman.

A Collection of Values

The Masonic Museum celebrates the history of Freemasonry in Missouri

ership" with President Truman, a former Missouri grand master, being the highlight of the exhibit. The gallery also includes information about various past grand masters and discusses the role of democracy and responsibility involved in conducting meetings.

"A lot of famous people have been Masons, and you can see a lot of cool stuff that belonged to famous people," she says.

The last gallery is called the "Every-

man" gallery, which is a rotating exhibit honoring the achievements of modern Masons and Masonic Lodges across the state. This exhibit shows the history and symbols of specific lodges and showcases the achievements of individuals. It will change yearly or as needed. There are currently 370 lodges in Missouri and approximately 50,000 members.

Visitors to the museum will get to know a piece of Missouri history that isn't included in most textbooks. They will learn about both the role and beliefs of a Missouri Mason and the part Masons, both famous and mundane, have played in the story.

For those fans of movies like "National Treasure," or those who are simply curious about some of the symbols and practices of the Masonic order, this museum offers insight into how meetings are conducted and the meanings of certain iconography and rituals.

To be a Mason in Missouri, there are four basic requirements: that the person be male, 18 years old or older, that he believe in a higher or Supreme Being and he cannot have a criminal record. Once those requirements are met, a man may petition to become a member by giving references and getting a recommendation from a member of the lodge.

"A fraternal organization is not for

everybody," Grand Secretary Ronald Miller says. "We would like to think it is, but it's not." He says that when a person identifies himself as a Mason, you know he is of good moral character and is someone you can trust if you need help or friendship.

The museum was decided when the Masonic Home and Grand Lodge building was planned in 2000.

A Masonic library is currently in the planning stages and is projected to open in three to five years. It will provide resources for those researching the history of Freemasonry.

They chose Columbia as the location because it is centrally located within the state. Because of the intersection of Interstate 70 and Highway 63, the museum and lodge is easily accessible from both the cities and rural areas.

"The library and the museum is not meant just for the membership — it is meant for the general public to show that this Masonic fraternity cares about our fellow man," Ronald says. "The museum shows what we have done and the type of people that have associated themselves with this fraternity."

The Masonic Museum is located at the Grand Lodge of Missouri, 6033 Masonic Drive in Columbia. Call 800-434-9804 or 573-814-4663 or go online to www.mohome.org for more information.



A stained-glass window depicting Queen Esther, originally from an Eastern Star Chapel, is one of several unique pieces on display at the museum.

