Life on the Pamlico

Nathan Hooker, Mason Leader and Former Logger

By Angela M. Blount-Wright

Introduction

I visited with Mr. Nathan Hooker on December 15, 1995. I observed him from my car as I drove up a small path to his home. Arriving at approximately 1:00 p.m. on a mild December day, I found Mr. Hooker, a tall, kind looking, elderly gentleman, reading his daily newspaper while sitting peacefully in a rocking chair on his huge front porch. He waved politely, beckoning me to join him. I
Life on the Pamlico

looked back hoping to see my instructor, Mr. Armstrong, who was about an hour late. While waiting for Mr. Armstrong, Mr. Hooker and I began conversing. Appropriately he speaks in a soft but confident voice. I told him that my journalism group had chosen him for an interview, and we were glad that he had agreed to tell us a little about his organization, the Masons. He also told us some fascinating information about his experiences as a logger. This was a “bonus” because we didn’t know about that part of his life.

He began joking after I told him that it looked as if it was just he and I. But whatever the makeup of the group, he was very well prepared. He held a memo pad containing dates and events in chronological order; he was, indeed, impressive. As we began to talk, I found him to be extremely articulate and precise. He thinks about what he has to say before he says it, which is unusual these days. This quality made me feel comfortable. Indeed, Mr. Hooker is not the type of man to meet a stranger. He welcomes all and makes everyone feel as comfortable as possible. I say this because I had never met Mr. Hooker before, but he talked to me as if he had known me all of my life.

Mr. Armstrong, who had gotten lost, finally arrived, and the interview began.

Life: What kind of organization is the Masons? Is it a civic club or a religious group?

Mr. Hooker: I presume it could be both, because it is supposed to be based on our religion, Christianity. It could also be a civic group, because our main purpose is to improve ourselves, our families, and our communities.

Life: How long have you been a member?

Mr. Hooker: I joined in June 1949 or 1950.

Life: So you have been active in the organization for a long time?

Mr. Hooker: Yes, quite a while. The charter I am under now is not the one I was first inducted under. The name of the first charter was Hiram Tyre #784, located in Bonnerton, North Carolina. It was formed in 1915. Then, I moved my membership here to Blounts Creek, North Carolina, in the fall of 1952, where I am a resident.

Life: How often do you meet?

Mr. Hooker: We are supposed to meet twice a month.

Life: What is a typical meeting like?

Mr. Hooker: The first thing they do is have prayer. Then they call the meeting to order, discuss different activities, what we are supposed to do, and the things we may work on.

Life: Is this with your family? The ways you are supposed to act with your family.

Mr. Hooker: Yes, in some ways. You are supposed to act nice to your families, as well as everybody else, because that’s how all good Christians are supposed to act.

Life: So the first thing you all do is discuss how you are supposed to act toward others.
Life on the Pamlico

Mr. Hooker: Yes, these are some of the things we discuss. We also discuss things we are trying to do for our community and other communities. If someone is disabled or something, we are supposed to do the best we can to help them get back on their feet or until they are over their illness. We just do what we can to help them until they can do better. We help families and wives until they get straightened out.

Life: Only men are in the Masons?

Mr. Hooker: Yes, only men. Of course, they do have an auxiliary branch [of women] called “The Eastern Star,” which usually works under the Masons.

Life: How do you become aware of the people that need help? Is it by word of mouth or what?

Mr. Hooker: They usually ask if anyone knows of anyone who is sick or in distress. Other times, we actually have a sick committee [which finds out about people in need]. They bring in their reports, and sometimes another member may have someone in mind, too.

Life: How do you and the Masons specifically help needy or sick people?

Mr. Hooker: We were able to assist sick people until they recovered [by providing] medical attention, food, clothes, money.

Life: So you would provide money?

Mr. Hooker: Whatever they needed, to the best of our ability.

Life: Do you pay dues?

Mr. Hooker: Yes, we pay dues. We pay so much per month or per year.

Life: Do you do other things besides help people in distress? What about community projects?

Mr. Hooker: We support the NAACP and also the Children’s Orphanage in Oxford, North Carolina. Other times we know we are supposed to be dedicated [to bettering the community]; whether we do it or not is different [laughing].

Life: How have you helped some people in the community?

Mr. Hooker: For instance, it’s cold weather now, and if we see a family and they need fuel or firewood, we would cut it for them and take it to them. Whatever type of fuel they use, that’s what we would provide.

Life: Is your membership increasing?

Mr. Hooker: Here lately our membership is down pretty low. We have, I think, twenty members, and some of them live in places like Raleigh and other different communities. Since membership is down, we have not been doing what we should do.

Life: Why do you think membership is down?

Mr. Hooker: I have been thinking about that. I have been the secretary every since we organized in 1952. Maybe I have been in
there too long; I am not sure. I have been thinking about trying to get out this year.

Life: Are your members mainly older?

Mr. Hooker: Yes, many of them are.

Life: Is it difficult to appeal to the younger men?

Mr. Hooker: We cannot appeal to them like we could older men. Most older men were more serious. Younger ones, sometimes they would come once and never come back anymore. There must be some other activities that they [are interested in], so they cannot attend as they should.

Life: Are you connected to any particular church, or are the Masons just generally based on Christianity?

Mr. Hooker: Christianity, no particular church. We work under Prince Hall [named after founder], of North Carolina. The headquarters is in Durham, North Carolina.

Life: The official name of the organization is Free Masons, is that right?

Mr. Hooker: Free and Accepted Masons. It goes back quite a ways. I think it originated from a fellow they called Prince Hall. That's the reason they call the headquarters "The Prince Hall," because it was named after him. I think he happened to be the first one to start it.

Life: When did it originate?

Mr. Hooker: The first black lodge of North Carolina was established in 1866 in New Bern, North Carolina. It was known as King of Solomon Charter Number One.

Life: Are all of your members black?

Mr. Hooker: Yes.

Life: There are white Masons, of course.

Mr. Hooker: [The blacks are known as] Free and Accepted Masons, [the whites as] Ancient Free Masons.

Life: Do both organizations come from one original group?

Mr. Hooker: No. I think that Prince Hall was black. He started the black organization. The white organization had been started earlier. They started in England. I believe Prince Hall was from England, too.

Life: To join your lodge, a person simply has to be a Christian?

Mr. Hooker: Yes. You are supposed to be a Christian, and someone is supposed to check your background to see if you are a criminal or have done anything that is not becoming of a good citizen. A Mason is supposed to be an outstanding person, a Christian. He is not supposed to be doing any and everything. Like crime, that's not a good characteristic of a Mason. If you find one
that does criminal things, he is not a true Mason. So a Mason is a Christian, does not have a criminal record, has a good credit record. A Mason is really supposed to be a pretty outstanding citizen.

Life: Do the members vote on incoming members?

Mr. Hooker: Yes. Some vote on paper; some roll marbles.

Life: Does the vote have to be unanimous?

Mr. Hooker: Yes. The marbles are black and white. If you get a black marble, you are not in.

Life: Does that happen much?

Mr. Hooker: Not very much, every once in a while. One reason you would want to screen [prospective members] is that so many [rumors] are said that a Mason can do, for instance, breaking the law. Some people’s intentions are to break the law, and join the Masons thinking that they can get away with it. This is not true, because a Mason is not supposed to break the law. The main reason a Mason is supposed to be able to do a lot of things is because of the way he carries himself. That does not include breaking the law.[Earlier], if you got a criminal record or broke the law, the lodge would kick you out. Then you would have to apologize and face the members of the lodge and go into another trial and then they [still might] kick you out if what you did was bad enough.

Life: Do you have any regulations about drinking or smoking?

Mr. Hooker: The smoking, they have never said anything about that; they don’t go along with drinking.

Life: Do you all have social activities?

Mr. Hooker: We don’t have dances, but sometimes we have parties. We are supposed to meet and have a church service at least once a year; sometimes we may meet more than once a year.

Life: What do you think it would take for your local lodge to become dynamic, to get more members?

Mr. Hooker: Most lodges are having a hard time appealing to younger generations. This year we may get two or three new members. Sometimes we lose members because they hate to pay their membership fees.

Life: How much is membership?

Mr. Hooker: Our membership fee is only $35 to join and $54 per year.

Life: How many local black lodges are there?

Mr. Hooker: On this side [south] of the Pamlico River we have three lodges: one in Aurora, Bonnerton, and the one here in Blounts Creek. We would probably be better off if we had only one.

Life: Have you talked about combining the three lodges?

Mr. Hooker: Yes, we have talked about it. It would be a good idea. We would have more members to work with. I would be in favor
of that. I have often mentioned it, especially when I run into some of the members from Bonnerton and Aurora. I know most of them from Aurora and Bonnerton.

Life: Let us ask you something about your background. Were you born in the area?

Mr. Hooker: Yes. I was born January 22, 1927, right here in this house. I grew up here.

Life: What kind of work have you done?

Mr. Hooker: I have farmed; I went in the military in World War II in the Army. When I came back, I continued to farm to make a decent living, and in order to pay my bills. I also worked in the logging industry, too. I started working in logging around 1947. I have worked in logging just about all of my life.

Life: [Mr. Hooker told us of several accidents he had had in his logging activities.]

Mr. Hooker: Me and another fellow bought a Caterpillar [tractor] in 1969; we worked on the other side of South Creek [Campbell’s Creek area]. It was real cold that winter, and by me not being used to a tractor, the tracks got slack. In order to tighten them, I had to use what you call grease gun. It had sealer in it; it would expand the track. It was so cold, until the mud and stuff on the grease filler was frozen. I didn’t have any experience, no safety glasses. I decided I would unscrew the plug so I could clean it out. I got it loose, and it hit me directly in my right eye, just like a bullet. Then I couldn’t see anything until I went to the eye doctor. Dr. Locket, in Washington, was my doctor; I stayed under his care for a long time, about a year. He put patches on both eyes; they stayed on about a month. He said if I didn’t have one on my left eye, it would irritate the other one because I would be watching different things with the good eye. That was in 1969. In 1973, we started a new job with four of us working; my father-in-law was cutting trees. I usually drove the tractor. This particular time we went to help him out and try to get him started and anything we could do to help him get some logs out. He was cutting a pretty good size pine tree, and the tree was supposed to have fallen in a certain direction; the other fellow and I were standing just about on the right side of my father-in-law. All of a sudden he said, “Watch out! Watch out!” Usually when you throw a tree, it hits another tree and the limbs would bounce back on you, so he screamed, “Watch out! Watch out!” So the other fellow and I took off running in the opposite direction. My father-in-law kept screaming. We were running just as hard as we could, and the other fellow ran to left. We were thinking that we were running from a [falling] limb. Just as the other fellow went to the left, the tree hit me and knocked me down. That was a big tree. The only thing that saved me was a big limb lying on the ground, which held the tree off of me. However, it did hit me beside the face, and I started spitting up blood. So I went to the hospital, and they kept me overnight. That was really a close call. I started having nightmares.

Life: Did you have any lasting effects from the accident?

Mr. Hooker: No more than nightmares, for quite a while.

Life: Is that right?

Mr. Hooker: The next accident I had was in 1987, on August 8. My sister died in June, and I guess I hadn’t recovered from that because
it was so sudden. Another fellow and I were cutting a right of way for a fellow out of Wallace. We both had saws and were cutting the wood up so that it could be cleared out of the way for a road. It was hot, and we were doing pretty good, making good time. All of a sudden I was on the ground. I didn’t know what had happened. I thought someone had come in pranking or something, sneaked up from behind me and grabbed me. When I got up, I fell again. That’s when I saw the blood gushing. Evidently, the top of the tree or a limb or something had fallen out of the tree. I didn’t see it; it hit me on the shoulder and beside the head. That’s what knocked me down. The blood steadily poured. By that time, the fellow that was with me saw it and asked if he could help me out. I told him that I could manage all right. We had quite a ways to go. When we got out of the woods, I took a couple of swallows of water. I kept doing that until they took me to the emergency room. I took about twelve stitches. Now that had a lasting effect! Yes, it did! In fact, I don’t think I ever got straighten out from that. It happened on a Thursday, and I went back that Saturday for a checkup. That Sunday I got up, and everything started spinning. I stayed like that for a long time, for years. I had to be careful how I laid down, how I got up, to keep from falling. Then I finally went to Aurora Medical Center, and they gave me some tablets for the problem, and I am still taking some of them now.

Life: So you worked in logging for quite a while?

Mr. Hooker: Quite a while.

Life: Where you working for a big company or for yourself?

Mr. Hooker: We were mostly working for ourselves, sort of like contracting. I worked for a pretty good size company when I first started, M. G. Waters. It has been out of existence for a long time. I don’t know if you have even heard of it. The wood went to Weyerhaeuser. Because we were so small, we had to sell under a dealer. We did deliver the wood to Weyerhaeuser. The dealer paid us, and Weyerhaeuser paid the dealer.

Life: So you made some money too?

Mr. Hooker: Yes, practically everyone made money except the ones who did the work.

Life: So you made the smallest amount?

Mr. Hooker: Yes, a small amount. Sometimes it was hard. Back in the ’50’s and ’60’s, we worked real hard. We cut what you call pulp wood in short lengths, 62-63 inches. We had to load it on the trucks by hand. It was heavy; it would almost kill you.

Life: Did you start logging before the chain saw was developed?

Mr. Hooker: Yes. When I started logging, I was using what they called a crosscut.

Life: I bet that was a job, cutting down trees with a crosscut?

Mr. Hooker: Yes, it was a job, but it wasn’t too bad after you got used to it. It just took two people to use it, one on each side. They did have a chainsaw at that time, one that two men used. The motor was on one end, and they had what you called the small end. The first time I used one, I was working with M. G. Waters. I wasn’t familiar with it, and it really was a mess. It was about five feet long. The operator was supposed to put the small end down when the
motor got up against the tree. The person that had the small end, which was me, controlled the motor. When I put my end down, I didn’t know that I was supposed to wait until the motor touched the log. When I finally put my end down, it would fly right pass me. Half of the time I stayed scared, and I was trying to work, too. Sometimes, I’d put it down, and the fellow that was working with me would tell me to do something else. He understood it just about as much as I did. Sometimes I’d think he had said to do one thing and I would do it, and the saw would end up behind me or flying between my legs. It made me want to go back to the crosscut. However, when I finally learned how to use it, it was pretty good, but I have had some bad experiences.

We didn’t have all these things they have in the woods now. Mostly, we used horses [to pull out logs], and we would cut off old trucks and make dinkeys out of them. That’s what I did, hooked them up. That was a job. I had to place the cable under the logs and fasten them. In order to get enough to take out, we might have to get two or three trees and fasten them down. In order for me to do that, I had to have a pole so that I could reach the cable. I had to carry a pair of drafts [traction pulling devices]; they weighed about 20 pounds. They wanted a straight path, so you earned your money. Every bit of it!

Life: It’s a lot easier now days.

Mr. Hooker: A lot easier! They have equipment now that I couldn’t have imagined at that time. Now their hands don’t even have to touch the wood.

Life: [Before leaving Mr. Hooker’s home we noticed what used to be a family-owned store. He told us that it was built around the turn
Life on the Pamlico

of the century, and that he had helped operate it when he was younger. We must wait for another time for that story.]

Former family-owned store, built around the turn of the century.

Conclusion

My interview with Mr. Hooker was interesting as well as informative. He cited the criteria that are required to become a Mason. Some of the things required of Masons are that they must be respectable, have a good credit history, no criminal records, nor should they be involved in any thing that is illegal; and they must be good Christians.

Mr. Hooker informed us that if the Masons identify first with God, they believe that everything else will fall into its proper place. He also informed us that the Masons is an organization that believes in helping those who are in need. The organization has contributed

31
Life on the Pamlico

to the Children's Orphanage in Oxford, North Carolina. They donate wood to those who need fuel, such as widows and the elderly. These are just a few of the many good deeds that the Masons perform.

Mr. Hooker is an inspiration to me today because he stands firmly in his faith. He has been a diligent worker in his community and has served in the Armed Forces, not to mention being a man of many talents, as his stories of his logging days suggest. I commend him for being a man of principles, with his priorities and morals firmly in tact.

I found Mr. Hooker to be a very pleasant, laid-back type of gentleman. He also has a great sense of humor. So if you are ever in the Blounts Creek area and would like to carry on an enjoyable conversation, look up Mr. Hooker, and I am sure he will delight you.