

'We don't aspire to be a world power'



TIMOTHY BULLARD/Daily Courier

Tom Miller is head of the Grants Pass Masons Lodge and has been a member for 20 years.

## They may have some secrets, but Masons not a secret organization

By Patricia Snyder  
of the Daily Courier

Stories of hidden conspiracy and intrigue may find roots in Masonic history, but they're enlarged tales spun around small bits of truth, according to those involved with the organization locally.

Author Dan Brown's recently released best-selling novel "The Lost Symbol" is about Harvard symbologist Robert Langdon's attempt to save his kidnapped mentor, a prominent Mason and philanthropist. Langdon's journey takes him into Masonic secrets and hidden history.

Brown is far from the first to advance such theories about the Masons, who have been accused of satanic worship, secret government control and ties to UFOs and aliens. Masonic lore was also central to the hugely popular 2004 movie "National Treasure."

It is true the organization has secrets, and it doesn't let everyone in, said Thomas Miller, whose title as head of the Grants Pass lodge is "worshipful master." He's aware of rumors surrounding the Masons, of which he's been a member for

20 years. For him, the appeal is in doing things for the community and becoming a better person.

"We don't aspire to be a world power," he said.

Richard Surroz has risen to as high an office as the Masons have in the United States, "grand master of Masons in Oregon." The Masons have no central figure over the organization, so the top office in the state is the highest level of authority, he explained.

The position involves a lot of travel to visit lodges throughout the state.

The local lodge holds elections in November and initiation of new officers on Dec. 27.

Surroz has read books that advance the idea of a global Mason conspiracy. "That's just really kind of ridiculous," he said. He speculated the theories may stem from a fear of the unknown.

"We have some secrets, but we're not a secret organization," said Surroz, who 10

years ago was only the second state leader to come from Grants Pass. The first was Dr. W.H. Flanagan, in 1905, who was a founder and charter member of the Grants Pass Masonic Lodge in 1885. The first head of the local lodge was L.L. Townsend, his photo proudly on display in the dining room alongside a photo of every worshipful master since. People may not realize the tie between community builders and the Masons, Surroz said.

"Many of the founding fathers of Grants Pass were members of the fraternity," he said.

He came across a mid-1920s program for the Easter Masonic service, and "it was just like the who's who of Grants Pass," he said.

Improving oneself is one of the central concepts of the organization, he said. "I think that being a Mason has made me a better man and person," he said.

The organization also brought him a greater understanding of God, he said. "I also learned a lot of things about ethics and morality," he added.

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# Masons

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Masons choose different paths, or "rites:" York for Christians and Scottish for other monotheistic faiths.

"We refer to God as the great architect of the universe," Miller said.

Masons ask members to believe in God, although they may be of different faiths, which is a position that has drawn some criticism that it is Satanic from people who equate accepting participation in any other faith as an attack on their own.

The purpose is to take a good man and make him better, said Miller, who finds appeal in knowing that the rituals kept secret in the Masons date back hundreds

of years. Stories abound of Masons helping other Masons, recognizing them by the symbol, such as on the ring he wears.

Not everyone who wants to become a Mason is allowed in. Any current member can object to someone being admitted, perhaps on moral or ethical grounds, Miller explained. He estimated 99 percent of those seeking membership in the Grants Pass Lodge have been admitted.

In addition to monthly meetings, the Masons have a variety of social and community activities, including dinners for widows of Masons, encouraging children to read books and putting together child

identification kits. On Sept. 1, the head of the Masons in Oregon visited, and more than 100 people attended a dinner for the Portland resident.

One must be a Mason to become a Shriner, and it really is a lot of fun to zip around in the wheeled parade formations, said Miller, who has done so.

The Masons are open only to men age 18 or older. Affiliated organizations are for women and youths. Masonic tradition prevents recruitment, so people must ask about joining. Anyone interested in becoming a Mason can call Miller at 474-2246. Dues are \$50 a year.