

Dictionaries, degrees and devices work together

By Walter Boomsma
Maine State Grange
Communications Director

As many know, the Valley Grange "Words for Thirds" Dictionary Program has become a "rite of passage" in our area—and a bit of a ritual. Last year, we had to make significant changes in our approach when COVID meant third graders couldn't visit the Grange Hall and Grangers couldn't visit them at school.

One of the things I've always enjoyed is showing the kids the staves, explaining what farmer's tool each represents, and how we apply that to "the Grange Way of Life." I'm also always pleased when the thank you notes we receive include hand-drawn staves. The kids remember them!

So, I can't resist asking you to list the four staves. Bonus points if you know which officer carries which staff! (This is reminiscent of the game "Are you smarter than a third grader?")

While the recently released National Grange Brochure doesn't cover the staves, it does an excellent job of summarizing the Four Degrees: their emblems, seasons, and lessons. One thing that recommends this brochure is that it removes any mysticism, simplifies the degrees and symbols, and shows how they can apply to our daily lives.

That's what we try to explain to the kids during dictionary presentations.



The kids are pretty good at the application when we discuss the staves. I offer a brief explanation, then invite them to consider if they had one in their classroom; what might it remind them of? One of my all-time favorites came from a young fellow who said, "The pruning hook would

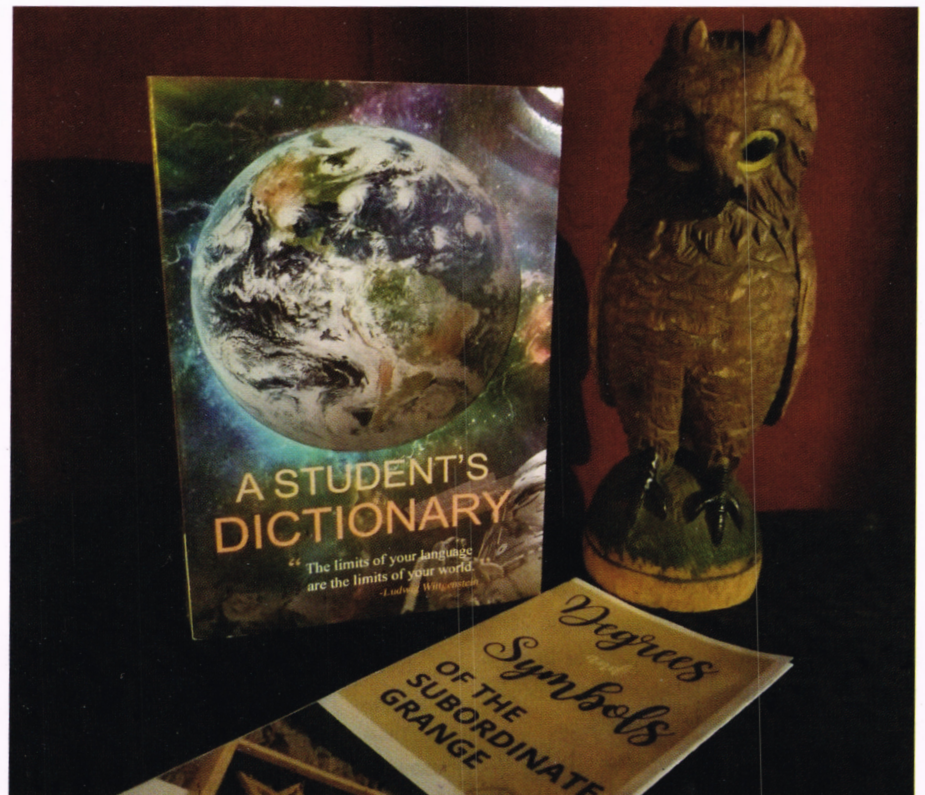


Photo submitted by Walter Boomsma

remind me to pick up papers and trash on the floor of our classroom." I was less pleased when a student asked if we couldn't use it to "cut out the math lessons." But she gets points for thinking. And we get to think about the fact that we don't always like what's good for us.

I wonder—do we "modern-day" Grangers consider the Degrees and Symbols as part of our daily lives to the same degree our forebears did? On Dictionary Day, the kids end up thinking about what agriculture and farming tools can teach us. Some think it would be pretty awesome to have a set of staves in their classrooms. (They especially like the owl.) We make the point that their dictionaries are tools and try to teach the concept of stewardship in a simple form.

Are we smarter than third-graders? (That's a game we play at school by asking older kids or adults questions about the things third-graders are learning.)

Memorizing the degrees and symbols can be fun, but let's not miss the meaning. If a Grange is struggling, could we not look at the emblems as a way of thinking through change? What do we need to prune out? Can the hoe help us "destroy error... while promoting the growth of knowledge and wisdom?"

An obvious Grange Program based on this brochure is to develop a "trivia" contest based on the degrees and symbols. But if we stop there, we fail our purpose as educators.

When was the last time someone other than the master and steward looked at the items in the implement case? The knowing is good, but let's not omit the doing. What tools do we have to grow ourselves and our Granges, and how are we going to best use them? Are we being good stewards? Who is ready to grab the shepherd's hook and lead the way?

