

Frank Sherman Land

Founder of the Order of De Molay
1890-1959

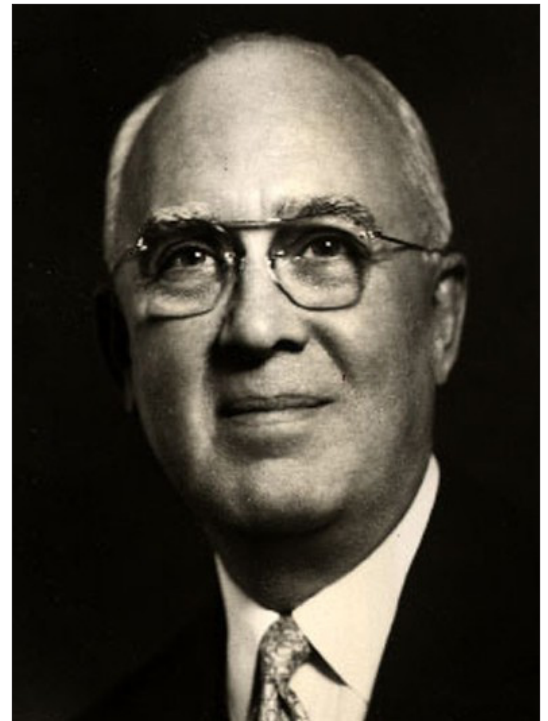
by Daniel Coleman

Frank S. Land surprised his parents and peers when, at age 10, he taught Sunday school to a packed house of over 300 boys in his St. Louis home. Land expressed this same surprise at the rapid growth of the boys' citizenship organization he founded, ascribing the success of the Order of De Molay not to himself, but to the attractiveness of the group's ideals in a time of great cultural change. Millions of De Molay boys were as captivated by Frank Land's charisma as those who, forty years earlier, had sat spellbound watching him emerge from a basement coal bin carrying a Bible and a message.

Frank Sherman Land was born in Kansas City on June 21, 1890. His mother, Elizabeth Sampson Land, was sixteen at the time of his birth, and his father, William S. Land, moved the family to St. Louis two years later to pursue a job as a lumberyard foreman. Young Frank found solace from the uncertainties of his childhood in religion; in addition to the lessons he gave to boys in his neighborhood, he was known for his own perfect attendance at church Sunday school classes. After his parents' separation, the 12-year old Frank moved back to Kansas City with his mother, where he attended Longfellow School, Manual High School, and the Kansas City Art Institute.

When school was not in session, Land worked at the restaurant of his maternal grandmother, Martha J. Sampson, at 31st and Holmes. During his little free time, Land spearheaded the Municipal Art League, a student movement to beautify Kansas City. His grandmother eventually arranged for Land to assume ownership of her restaurant, and after a tentative start with ten borrowed dollars in the till, Land's proprietorship proved a success.

But Land craved a more service-oriented career. In 1914, he sold the restaurant to work full-time coordinating Scottish Rite masons' relief efforts to needy Kansas City families—a job he had begun as a volunteer. Several years later, Land became interested in helping boys rendered fatherless by World War I, and after a failed effort to recruit mentors from the business community, he conceived the



idea of a fraternal society in which boys could find fellowship with other boys.

With tales of Biblical heroes, knights, and crusaders, Land captivated the 33 boys who showed up for the group's first meeting at the 15th and Troost Scottish Rite Temple on March 18, 1919. Of particular interest to the boys that evening was the story of Jacques De Molay, a pious crusader whose burning at the stake in Paris had occurred on that date in the year 1314. They took De Molay's name for their club, and Land encouraged them to hold the famous knight's chivalry, fidelity, and courage as personal ideals. With the help of *Kansas City Journal-Post* theater critic Frank Marshall, Land authored a mysterious and dramatic initiation ritual, and within a few years De Molay chapters—sponsored by, but not officially affiliated with masonry—had spread to Omaha, Boston, New York, and Washington, D.C.

Much to Land's surprise, the popularity of De Molay's contemporary knighthood drove an exponential increase in its membership of boys between the ages of 14 and 21, and Land dedicated the rest of his career to leading the organization. Despite a period of hard times during the 1930s, during which he spent much of his own savings to keep De Molay afloat, chapters existed in all 50 states and 12 foreign nations by the late 1950s. Celebrities such as Walt Disney, tennis great Don Budge, and radio comedians Chester Lauck and Norris Goff counted themselves among the De Molay ranks, and Land's involvement with the group led to his friendship with a wide range of leaders from various walks of life, including several U.S. presidents and thousands of De Molay boys who had grown into successful adults.

During the last decade of his life, Land's achievements included his selection as Imperial Potentate of the Shrine of North America and election as head of the Kansas City Board of Education. Land died at age 69 on November 8, 1959. He was survived by his wife Nell, and although he left no children, he had in various ways earned the nickname by which he was known to over 3,000,000 De Molay boys: "Dad."

Sources

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