

## **Cable-Tow & Cable Length**

**Are they the same? How do they differ? Is there a marine connotation to either?  
Ron Mark**

Cable-Tow:

In the E.A. ritual, the cable-tow is a real object used to symbolically represent the prevention of a retreat. It is also capable of a wide-ranging symbolism, e.g., submission, or the bonding of ignorance. A case can also be made that the cable-tow represents re-birth or in Masonic use, birth into Masonic life. Other symbolism can also be attributed to the cable-tow. Can you think of more?

In a literal sense the cable-tow is a cable or cord by which something is towed or drawn. For Masons, particularly in the E.A. degree the cable-tow is an apt symbol of those forces and influences which conduct not only the individual, but the human race out of a condition of ignorance or darkness into one of light and knowledge.

It should be noted that cable-tow is not found in most dictionaries. Masonic references are clear that the word is unique as a Masonic term. Although it seems to have a sea flavour, there is no historical documentation to support that assumption. The attachment of a marine flavour is usually driven from confusing cable-tow with cable length use elsewhere in the Ob.. (Cable length will be described in a later issue.)

How long is a Cable-Tow?

During the Ob. of the M.M. degree the candidate promises to answer and obey all lawful ...summonses ... if within the length of my cable-tow. If it is not a marine measurement, then what is the measurement?

The Masonic symbolic allusion of cable-tow length is drive from the old operative regulations which obligated the medieval mason to attend the annual or triennial 'Assemblies' except in the case of sickness or 'in peril of death'. The later versions of the old charges often mention the distance within which attendance was obligatory. Variations on this point range from three to fifty miles.

Nowadays the Candidate's Ob. to answer a Lodge Summons is a simple promise to attend the Lodge so long as it is within his power to do so. No specific distance is involved.

Cable Length:

In the E.A degree there is a reference to something buried at least a cable length from shore. A cable or cable's length is indeed a unit of marine measurement. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a cable length as "about 100 fathoms: in marine charts 605.56 feet, or one tenth of a sea mile."

In our rituals it is certain that the intent of specifying the burial of something at that distance from shore was to make the object irrecoverable.

It is interesting to note that this idea of burial from shore appears in our earliest ritual documents, though the actual use of the words cable length came later. The first use of the term appears in the Wilkinson MS., c 1710.

Incidentally, the Oxford English Dictionary cites a number of special combinations with the word 'cable', e.g., cable-rope, cable-range, cable-stock, etc., but it does not give 'cable-tow'

#### References

The Freemason At Work. Harry Carr 1976

Symbolism Of The Three Degrees. Oliver Street 1924

Education Officer: Vancouver & Quadra, Victoria BC, Canada, 1994  
Victoria BC Canada