CLAMPER ACTIVITIES RELATED

By Ross F. Taylor
From Mountain Messenger
May 28, 1953

It is astonishing how much misinformation can be cooked up and serenely served by the uninformed. And when this fraud is perpetrated upon a noble congregation like the Ancient and Honorable Order of E Clampsus Vitus, it is little short of criminal.

Last week in the "Mountain Messenger", a Downieville journal, appeared a news story about Adam Lee Moore and the Clampers. The story was well written and it was interesting, but it was as phony as a compaign promise.

Any gray-beard who lived in Downieville in the 1890's knows that next to charity, the Clampers revered unalterable truth and veracity. Therefore, it devolves upon me in memory of that noble band that colored our history with the pastel hues of fire-engine red and garbage-wagon blue, to clear up some of the errors in last week's story.

It was said that the favorite drink of the old-time Clamper was pisco punch. This is pure libel, Pisco is a Peruvian brandy of such venomous properties that it would eat a hole in a bar rail if spilled. It was brought to San Francisco in the gold rush days by an organized group of humanity haters. It was mixed with other ingredients in a Montgomery Street bar and called a punch. It was never dispensed in Peter Kelly's bar in Downieville. (Alas, even the building is gone. Pete Lavezzola now raises lettuce on the spot where, 60 years ago, Pete Kelly delved among his bottles.)

The Clampers' native drink was a beneficial, mild tipple locally known as "booze". It was a light amber-colored beverage, lovingly distilled from rye or corn. It seldom contained more than 50 % (100 proof) alcohol. It was obtained by tilting a quart bottle of nectar over a two-ounce glass, to measure out the desired amount--- usually two ounces. The old-time Clamper was a strong man. He did not require the help of the bartender to fill his glass, as his puny descendent does. It was sufficient that the bartender removed the cork before placing the bottle on the bar.

Doc Stewart sold this "booze." So did Nat Meany, Jimmy Wiggins, Frank Gardiner, Pete Kelly, Louis Buzint, Monsieur Crignon (I forget his first name), A. J. Blohm, and Fritz Kaiser. There were others, but by this time you won't be interested. It is said that the Clampers' favorite drink is still dispensed in Downieville. I would not know as to that. Pisco punch, my eye! And this Duncan Nicoli; where did he tend bar?

Now, with this dietary item explained away, it might be well to delve further into the mysteries of the A.H.O.E.C.V. It is believed by many that the Clampers originated in Downieville. The Sierra County Chamber of Commerce would like to think so. So would the editor of the Mountain Messenger. So would I, but it is not so. The ritual states that the order is the oldest secret society on earth. I would hate to think that there is anyone so mean that he would doubt the ritual. King Solomon was a Clamper; So was King Arthur. So were Robin Hood, Noah and sitting Bull. So was Santa Claus. How then, it might well be asked, could an order whose charter members inscribed their names upon tablets of papyrus be founded in Downieville, which will be but 104 years old next September?

Downieville was the home of Le Broke Lodge No. 107, 303. If we assume that an average of 10 lodges a year were instituted since No. 1 was founded on the north slope of Mount Ararat, simple arithmetic will show that the lodge was at least 10,703 years old in 1860. Nor is this unreasonable. The ritual states that "the memory of man runneth not back to the time of its non-existence."

But to scratch the back of the chamber of commerce, it is certain that the order was first planted upon the Pacific slope in Downieville, about 1857. History has not recorded the name of the Clamper who seeded the lodge on the Yuba River. It might have been Adam Moore. It might have been A.J. McGuire. It definitely was not Eric Falconer or Bill Maxfield. It could have been, and probably was, Robert H. Taylor, one of Downieville's first attorneys who later made quite a name for himself in Nevada as a judge. Taylor was a genius, and it is recorded that he added much to the ritual. I certainly hope that he was a relative of mine.

Anyway, Le Broke Lodge No. 107,303 was formed in the roaring town of Downieville, then some 5000 population, of which about 1000 were Chinese. Immediately, when the civilizing and spiritual influence of the order was recognized, other lodges followed in rapid succession. Sierra City formed Balaam Lodge No. 107,304. Camptonville received he charter from the Grand Lodge at Mokelumne Hill for King Solomon Lodge No. 107,305, but unhappily I forgot the name. Maybe Bill Copren will recall it. Nor can I remember the town where No. 107,306 was located . Such are the frailities of the ageing human mind.

Of all the names, Sierra City chose the most appropriate. Balaam, it will be recalled by the devout, was the patriarch who used to debate with his jackass. He was certainly a Clamper, probably Grand Vitrix of Jerusalem Lodge No. 7646.

By the time I arrived in Sierra City, in 1890, the Clampers had passed their peak in membership and were declining, due to the diminishing crop of poor, blind candidates in the form of commercial travelers, then know as "drummers." But meetings were still being held when an occasional poor, blind candidate could be found, and while I was too young to attend the initiations, I could certainly hear them.

The Clampers hall, or temple, in Downieville was on the site of Tony Pezzola's house that adjoins the Riverside Motel. It had been a Congregational Church. I lived with my parents directly across the street in the lower portion of the Masonic Hall building. In fact, the press of the Mountain Messenger now stands in our former living room. The room didn't seem so cluttered up in my childhood. Though it has been 57 years at least, I can still recall being lulled to slumber by the mellifluous tones of the hewgag. When properly blown, it could be heard half way up the Mountain House grade; I can assure you that it was quite audible across the street in my trundle bed.

And as the tones of the Hewgag died away, and the echoes were reverberation in Gold Valley and LaPorte, the brothers would begin to gather, and we knew that Le Broke Lodge No. 107, 303 had found a P.B.C., and that some hapless "drummer" was going to take a ride over the Marshy Road. Later in the evening, the dulcet tones from David's Noisless Cavern further confirmed the fact.

Now these meeting nights, while apparently irregular, were all definitely set. And they were not, as a recent Mountain Messenger story would have you believe, "the first Saturday before or after the full moon." I will admit that this is the general impression, and that the several lodges in this county so advertised their meetings in the local papers, but that was only to add mystery to the order. Every Clamper meeting was held on the first Saturday before the next rain. And as Providence provided the sheep for sacrafice in the place of Isaac, the same beneficent Providence would always provide a sheep for sacrafice in the shape of a P.B. C. on these meeting nights.

The drummer, wandering in outer darkness, was always identified by his inability to answer the recognition sign, made to him by some local merchant, who, invariably, would later sponsor his application for the Elevation of Mankind.

The sign was made as follows: the right arm was extended, bent back at the elbow, like the label on a package of baking soda; then the palm of the left hand was brought down upon the biceps of the flexed right arm with a resounding slap. The answering sign, which an uninitatee could not give, was made like this: the thumbs of both hands were placed against the temples, and the extended fingers wriggled forward and back, like the ears of an aroused burro.

These were distinctive signs. They resembled in no way the furtive signs of contemporary lodges. It is said that never on Main Street, Downieville, Spencer Street, Camptonville; Butte Street, Sierra City, or Lincoln Street, Sierraville, were the Clampters' recognition signs mistaken for the signs of the Rebekahs or Native Daughters.

When the stranger was unable to answer the first sign, as of course, he would be, he found no buyer among the merchants on Main street, or Lincoln Street, or wherever he was. In desperation he would seek the reason, and would find that the Clampers always confined their business transactions to fellow Clampers. However, the disappointed drummer was invariably informed, this particular day happened to be the first Saturday before the next rain, and there would be a lodge meeting that evening. The generous merchant would be glad to try to get the poor blind candidate accepted. The initiation fee would be whatever the local merchant thought could be extracted from the eager applicant for admission to the lodge. The drummer was always accepted. Later, the hewgag sounded.

So well did the mountain storekeeper do his part in selling the Clampers to the drummers from below, that one dull-witted knight of the grip joined the lodge three times---first in Downieville, next at Sierra City and finally at Sierraville. Each initiation, he was solemnly informed, constituted a separate degree. He lived to tell the tale. How the credulous salesman escaped Camptonville was never explained. It must have been because he failed to light in the Yuba County town that trip. They would have got him, otherwise; they never missed a candidate.

When the password was finally given to the poor blind candidate, a password "associated with the tenderest recollections of childhood," and given in a whisper by the Grand Petrix and the Vitrix, and the final seal of membership

implanted upon his rump, he was declared a member, and entitled to wear the apron, not as a Mason does, but tastily and with Clamperian dignity, across the seat of his pants. It is said that 50 or 60 Clampers solemnly marching around the floor of the lodge room on initiation night was something to write back East about.

The new members you may be assured, lost no time in finding, among his acquaintances in the flat lands, a new poor blind candidate to offer for initiation. For so deeply was the first candidate impressed by the beautiful initiatory ceremony that he could not rest until he had witnessed an initiation, with his guiless friend as the initiatee. And so it went on, each new member finding another.

My father was grand musician both of Le Broke and Balaam lodges. It was from him that I had early instruction in the order, in the hope thatIwould some day be worthy to receive the subline degree. Many a first Saturday before the nest rain did he fiddle "The Dance That David Danced Before the Knights Assembled." My father told me that about 1888 Balaam Lodge did not have a member who could render appropriate music for this Stately Measure. His local fame as a violinist made my father a natural for the exalted position. But Dad was not a Clamper, nor was his makeup of such artistic qualities that made him yearn for the more spiritual things of life as emplified by a regular Clamper initiation. But the Clampers needed my father so they made a deal: he would escape (or forego) the usual initiation, and receive full membership if he would accept the honored position of grand musician. He had only to receive the seal of membership; that part of the initiation could not be waived. My father accepted, received the seal, and entered upon a musical career in Balaam Lodge. But he played the fiddle standing up for some time.

About 1895, due to causes I have named above, Le Broke Lodge began to disintegrate. As a Kid, I wandered with other brats born about 1890 through the deserted temple, booting Adam's Apron out of the way of my childish feet, staring with unappreciative eyes at the Chariot, and the Musket, and the Hewgag, and the grisly Coffin that Pete Kelly woke up in, one night after a bout with a Character known as John Barleycorn. Nobody ever had the brains to gather up and preserve these priceless relics of a noble era. If he had, he could exchange them now for Eric Falconer's check book.

Early in this story I named the order as the Ancient and Honorable Order of E Clampsus Vitus. And "Clampsus" it was, not "Clampus," as modern letterheads and recent literature would have us believe. Any present-day lodge that spells the mystic work without the first "S" cannot trace its origin to Le Broke Lodge, or Balaam Lodge, or

King Solomon Lodge. In fact, the word "Clampsus" has a far different meaning than the word "Clampus." But I'll never tell you the difference; that would be divulging a part of the Work, and that I will not do. I may go over Niagara Falls, anyway, for revealing the sign of Recognition.

So while Le Broke and Balaam are no more, their noble activities live on in the memories of the oldtimers of male extraction. Frequently, I can conjure up a belly-laugh at some recollection antic of the Clampers of 60 years ago. For instance the time Balaam Lodge darned near initiated a woman, and, but for the intervention of more serious-minded members, might have done so. That wasn't funny, but it is an awful good story. Then there was the time when a poor blind candidate, suddenly fearful of the initiation to come, escaped from his guard before he could be Elevated. And when it is considered that this guard consisted of five or six husky Clampers armed with spears, the point of each being within six inches of the candidate's wishbone, escape was no mean feat. This hero was know ever afterward as Clamper Jack. And there was a local man who actually refused admission to Le Broke Lodge, even though he applied for membership. This is the only instance of anyone being black-balled.

Then there was the drummer from San Francisco who worked out a terrible revenge (financial in form), for his initiation, which the misguided man did not appreciate. Johnny Mayer and Frank Gardiner long felt the sting of this vengeance. The drummer never returned to Downieville.

Today, the Ancient and Honorable Order of E. Clampus Vitus lives a more or less active life in San Francisco, Marysville, and foothill towns of California. But the Ancient and Honorable Order Of E. Clampsus Vitus lives only in the memory of a rapidly diminishing rank of old-timers and, indeed it is a pleasant memory.

-------------Ross F. Taylor

"Mountain Messenger", May 28, 1953

Note: The above article first appeared in the "Mountain Messenger." It was submitted to the Quarterly by contributing author, Ruth Drury of Goodyear Bar, who felt it worthy of further preservation. Mr. Taylor was a resident of Downieville for many years.