

CREDO QUIA ABSURDUM!

Among the many lodges, secret orders, and similar organizations which flourished in the California gold mine country during the early days of the Gold Rush, there was one which must be among the most unusual to have ever been conceived. This was the Ancient and Honorable Order of E Clampus Vitus. The main object of this VERY secret order seems to have been one of spoofing other secret orders. It became one of the most powerful of all societies in the mines, in spite of, or, perhaps because of, the fact that its members refused to take themselves, or any one else, seriously.



No one can pinpoint the place of the first meeting held. Many of the "authorities" state that it was a society imported from the East. Others, equally firm in their conviction, pump for the mining camps. The mining camps seem, to this writer, to be the most logical, since the broad and ribald humor of this society fits so well the type of humor prevalent in the camps.

There is very good evidence which points to Sierra City, Sierra Co., as the birth place of the E Clampus Vitus; however, other areas also claim this distinction, and they base their claim on "very good evidence."

Many of those folks "beyond the pale", or otherwise ineligible to join the other societies, took to the Clampers in droves. This may have been because each member became a chairman of The Most Important Committee, and each member was an officer of equal indignity. The list of titles given to the members as they were "taken in" (and were they ever taken in) starts with the leader's title of Noble Grand Humbug. Then in swift order, follows

Clampus Petrix,
Clampus Vetric,
Clamps Matrix,
Royal Platrix,
Great Mountageon,

High and Mighty Hangman,
Grand Qyascutis, not necessarily in order of importance. Other titles were made up as needed. The meetings of this society of enlightenment were held in the Hall of Comparative Oventions. The meetings were called by the sounding of the Hewgag, a rather frightening instrument, shaped something like a bugle, flaring widely at the end and being approximately four plus feet long. The sound was said to be horrendous. It lifted the spirits of the miners, however, for upon the blast they knew they were ready to take in a new spirit and that he would furnish the spirit for the rest of the boys. It is said that none of the members were capable of keeping minutes of the meeting after the uplifting of spirits brought about by the induction of a new "brother". This may be one explanation for the dearth of material on the early days of the organization. After a poor

6.

Blind Candidate had sat in the Expungent's Chair, passed through the Cave of Silence, ridden the Rocky Road (a wheel-barrow with a large wet sponge in the bottom pushed rapidly over a long ladder on the floor), experienced the Elevation of Man (being tossed in a blanket wielded lustily by as many members as could get a hand on it), taken the fearful oaths, endured the Obliterating Obfuscation, received the Staff of Relief, and seen his initiation fee converted into liquid assets to be consumed by all assembled Clampers, he had no remaining doubts about his being "taken in". He was understandably eager to find another sucker in order to get even.



Spoofing the orthodox fraternities, the Clampers concocted marvelous and hilarious paraphernalia--the Blunderbasket, the Sword of Justice Tempered with Mercy and the aforementioned Hewgag.

From the History of Plumas, Lassen and Sierra Counties--Fariss and Smith, 1882, we get the following:

"In 1871, a grand Fourth-of-July celebration was held at Sierra City, on which occasion J.J. Tinney read the Declaration of Independence to a vast audience, and Frank Anderson of Downieville delivered an eloquent and thrilling oration. A prominent feature of the day was the laying of the corner-stone of the Bush Building on Main Street, by the E Clampus Vitus society, with appropriate and impressive ceremonies. The brazen serpent, and other insignia of this ancient and honorable order, were displayed to the public gaze; while Harry Warner, in an able peroration, dilated at some length on the benefits accruing to its members and their families by their connection with a secret order possessing such broad and liberal principles. Many an old Clamper was fired with enthusiasm at the recital, the public mind stirred, and the effect of the address was an immediate numerous batch of applications for admission within the pale of the favored order. The E Clampus Vitus was first organized in Sierra City in 1857, with Sammel Hartly as the pioneer NGH."

To return to that corner-stone laying mentioned in the above paragraph, the present resident in the old building informed me that Mr. A.C. Busch told her that in the corner-stone is a copy of a paper of that time, whether locally printed or not she didn't know, one each of all the coins minted at that time and a quart of whisky. But she added in an aside, "I don't know whether to believe him or not. He was the biggest fibber in town."

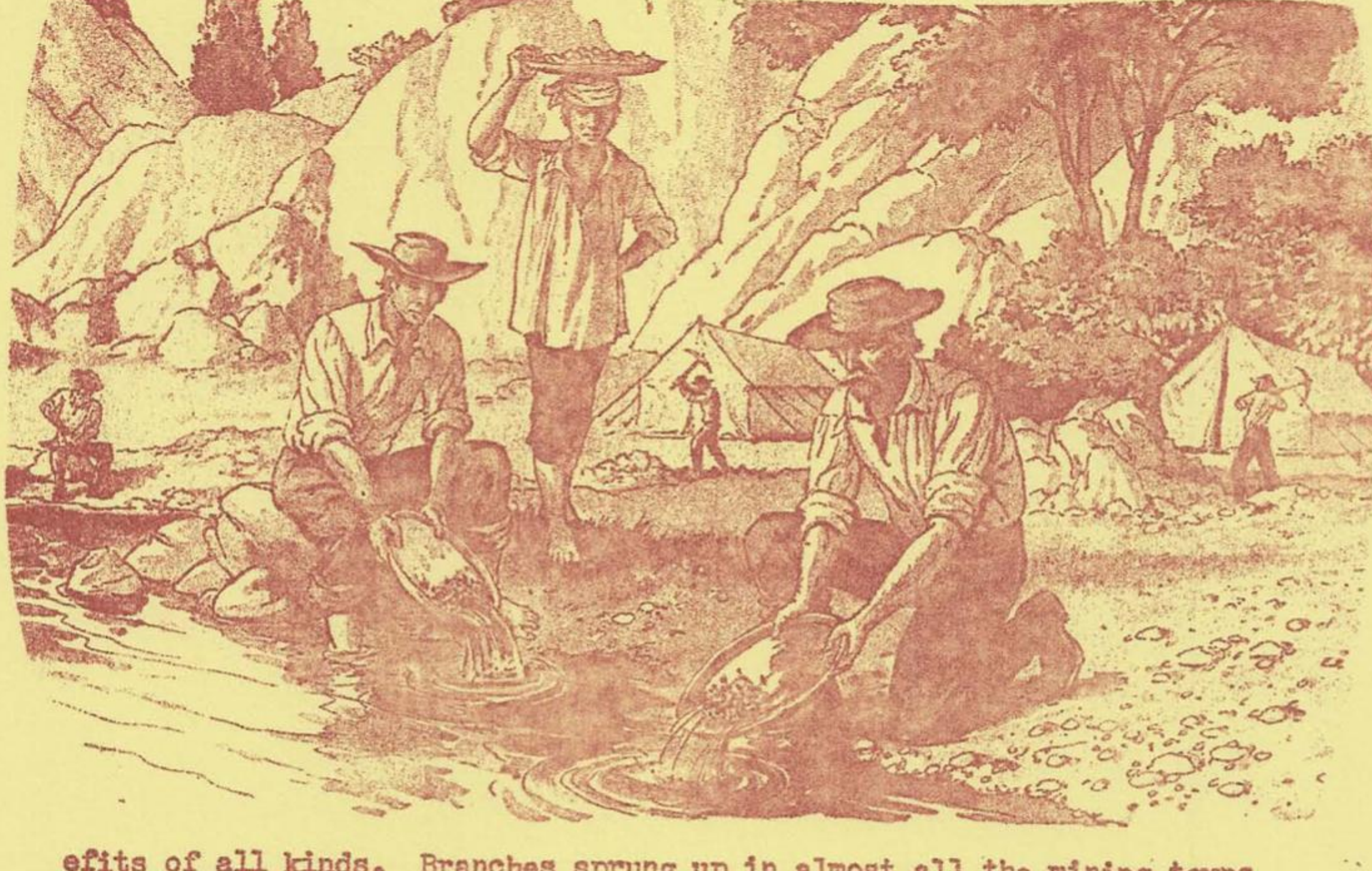


Despite their reputation for tom-

7.

foolery the Clampers became a powerful force in the mining communities. After enjoying their belly-laughs at the expense of the FEC and the elevation of their spirits, also at his expense, they would sit down to decide whether the family of some injured miner needed help or to plan a benefit for a family of some poor preacher or out-of-work miner. It made no difference whether those aided were Clampers or not; those in distress or needing help in any way would be the recipient of what was needed and many times this was done anonymously.

The atmosphere of the mines was perfect breeding ground for the well balanced projections of horse-play, nonsense and good works. They sponsored grand, and sometimes costumed, balls, lively picnics and ben-



efits of all kinds. Branches sprung up in almost all the mining towns of the time. Many of them made up their ritual as they went along. There was always some one, usually a recent FEC, who would present novel ways for the enlightenment of the prospective new member. However, the Noble Grand Humbug always explained to the new brother the reason for the motto, "Credo Quia Absurdum", (I believe because it is absurd) the importance of the Clampatron, St. Vitus, the significance of the emblem, the Staff of Relief, and then the ritual question, "What Say the Brethern?" always to receive the traditional answer, "Satisfactory!"

Most people knew the whole thing to be nonsense, but couldn't help being impressed against their own better judgement. After all usually the

8.

banker, the lawyers of the best repute, the doctors, the leaders of the town were members. Probably few truly believed the Clamper's Claim of memberships held proudly by Solomon, George Washington, Henry Ward Beecher, and John Sutter.

In 1930, after a long, dark decline in popularity, the order was revived. The members of present day hold meetings once a year usually, but they may be called anytime there is a need for it. The present day Clampers visit places of historic interest, often to dedicate plaques to commemorate important events from the past. To quote from the "Introduction to the Curious Book of Clampus": "In the Words of St. Vitus, Credo Quia Absurdum: take nothing seriously unless it is absurd! That which seems most serious is sure to reveal its absurdity when an inquisitive finger is poked into it. The most absurd spectacle in all the foolish farce of humanity is that of a man who takes himself seriously. It is the solemn duty of Clampers to expose the absurdity of all such pretensions and by Clamathematical demonstration reduce them to the common denominator of dampcoolishness. Our Ancient and Honorable Order has ever been the defender of the People against all false pretenders, demagogues, stuffed shirts, windbags, quacks, thimble-riggers, sinister ambidexters, fanatics, braggarts, prigs, hypocrites, imposters, wolves in sheep's clothing and asses in lions skins. It is time for the Hewgag to sound its terrible warning blast! TAAROOOMPHE! See, the smug faces fall! TOOOORAAAFAST! Watch, the overswelled chests deflate! RAATOOMK! They are on the run with their tales between their legs. There is here a great responsibility that our Ancient and Honorable Order has assumed and is nobly bringing to fruition."

WHAT SAY THE BRETHERN?

SATISFACTORY!!

My thanks for the help in this research to Myrtle Lamb, Frances Emerson, Inez Winstead, and the unwritten works of Clampatron St. Vitus.

Notes on the Author: This is the second article submitted by our very talented secretary, Jeanne McMahan. She wrote of the mines in the Sierra City area in our first edition. Jeanne resides in Sierra City with her husband, Forrest. She is presently the secretary of the Sierra County Historical Society and devotes much work towards the success of the organization. She is postmistress of the postoffice at Sierra City, California.

9.