

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The Ancient and Honorable Order of *E Clampus Vitus*

"There will be a meeting of E Clampus Vitus on the first day of August, 1856, consisting of a grand gala festival in full regalia in Monterey. An invitation has been extended to the San Juan Bautista brethren of special degree of B. A. H. P. in good standing, and they are requested to attend."

This notice appeared in the last July issue of the Monterey Sentinel to be published in Monterey. After that date the press, type and the name were transported to Santa Cruz by schooner to be published thereafter as The Santa Cruz Sentinel. The bound issues of the Monterey Sentinel – a weekly – from June of 1855 to June of 1856 are now in the possession of the Santa Cruz daily.

Reading this item regarding a meeting of E Clampus Vitus of which I had heard but knew little about, made me wish to delve further into the archives and report to the Diary of the findings.

From Thomas W. Norris of Carmel, I obtained two books and much information worth repeating – the organization and its objects are part of California history.

In the Gold Rush days E Clampus Vitus flourished throughout the diggings, more as a joke, a sort of parody on the solemn and mysterious fraternal orders then so popular in the States. Perhaps its popularity was because the Clampers made every member a chairman of "The Most Important Committee and "every member held an office of equal indignity." All officers' names or titles were imaginative, without rhyme or reason, such as the title of the leader which was "Noble Grand Humbug."

Sierra City has long laid claim to having started the first "lodge" of E Clampus Vitus in California. But El Dorado County claims an earlier beginning in Placerville. The "Mountain Democrat" in 1855 seems to prove in a story that the "Hangtown" organization antedated Sierra City by two years. Now the notice in the Monterey Sentinel of July 1855 may prove that even Monterey's lodge outdates them both. It is also known that Lt. John Derby, first California humorist, known also by his pen names, John P. Squibob and John Phoenix, was a member. Derby came to Monterey in 1849, and took

part in several of the early plays at the First Theatre. Derby called the Clampers, "the peculiar spirit of the West, a love of fun."

The "Calaveras Prospect" on May 30, 1896 pointed out that the organization existed in Hangtown (Placerville) as early as 1850 organized by J.H. Zumwalt. Zumwalt later moved to Mokelumne Hill and proceeded to organize Mokelumne Hill Lodge No. 1001, which at one time had as many as 500 members.

The Ancient and Honorable Order of E Clampus Vitus is now composed of blacksmiths, jewellers, lawyers, doctors, dentists, writers, historians, printers, retired financiers, in fact, almost every calling is represented in its membership. For the most part they have one thing in common, that is, an appreciation of the good things of life and the ability to laugh and have a good time. Another trait in common is an abundant appreciation for the part played in history by those who built this land with little or no thought for posterity.

The present day Clampers have revived and now keep the organization alive to preserve the spirit of the Days of Gold. They have a love for the relics and scenes of the early days, they visit the exact spot where gold was discovered; where Bret Hart roamed, or where Joaquin Murietta held up a stage coach. Therefore instead of a meeting to initiate a new member, they now have meetings as near the date of Marshall's discovery of gold as possible, and usually one other each year at an historic site.

A manuscript book of the "Ancient and Honorable Order of E Clampus Vitus, Division No. 110," of Metropolis City, Illinois, dated 1849, is preserved in the Huntington Library in Pasadena.

After several years of inactivity, E Clampus Vitus was revived, in the year 1931 in the Clift Hotel in San Francisco, with some ten members present. Thomas W. Norris was elected Grand Farmer. The Clampers declared that once each year they would join in a pilgrimage to the Diggins, there invoke the spirit of the past and honor the anniversary of the discovery of gold by their late lamented Humbug James Wilson Marshall. Humbug is the title applied to the leader.

Since then meetings have been held each year and the Clampers have placed plaques to honor famous persons or places in California history – namely: one to Hank Monk, early stage driver at the Raffles Hotel in Placerville; one to James Marshall at Coloma; one to

Sam Brannan's California Star (San Francisco's first newspaper); to George Ezra Dane at Columbia, where initiation took place in the Fallon Theatre; and others. But most important to Monterey was in the summer of 1948, when the Clampers, under the leadership of Harry Tait, well known in Monterey, came here and with great ceremony placed a plaque upon the home of the late Miss Sue Gregory on Johnson Avenue. The plaque named the location as that used by John Steinbeck in his novel "Tortilla Flat" and Miss Gregory as the teller of many episodes of the story which has made Monterey famous.

On Saturday of this week a group from the Peninsula will journey to Hangtown (Placerville) again for a meeting of E Clampus Vitus where they will be guests of the Clampers of James Marshall Lodge, No. 49. They will visit Growlersburg (Georgetown) where they will take part with the Rotary Club, in placing a plaque honoring George Phipps, who with a party of sailors camped there in 1849, and for whom the early mining settlement was named. Making the trip will be Thomas W. Norris, William J. Crabb, a member of Placerville lodge; William Beatty, Frank Stuart, Lowell W. Bowhay, Fred Diefendorf and Guy Custis are also members.