

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

September 25, 1953

'Noble Grand Humbug'

E. Clampus Vitus. Because we wrote of G. Ezra Dane, the writer, and his enthusiastic interest in that early California organization, we expect that there will be readers who have never heard of the Clampers and what they stand for. For that reason we have gone back in our files and reclaimed a bit of what we learned about the group a few years ago.

In June 1856 there appeared a notice in the Monterey Sentinel concerning the coming meeting of E. Clampus Vitus to be held in August of the same year. And, by the way, that was the last issue of the 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." It had lasted in Monterey just one year. The bound issue of that first year's publication are now the property of the Santa Cruz paper and we have had the pleasure of going through the entire edition, finding much of interest.

The announcement appearing in that last issue in Monterey read as follows: "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."

The organization and its objects are part of California's history. In the Gold Rush days, E. Clampus Vitus flourished throughout the diggings, more as a joke perhaps, 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 and titles were imaginative, without rhythm or reason, such as the title of the leader which was "Noble Grand Humbug."

Two California cities lay claim to the first "lodge" of E. Clampus Vitus – Sierra City and 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 seems to prove that even Monterey's lodge outdates them all.

It is known that Lt. John Derby, first California humorist known also by his pen names of "John P. Squibob" and "John Phoenix," was a member of the Clampers. Derby came to Monterey in 1849 and took part in several of the plays at the First Theater. Derby called the group "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, now Placerville, as early as 1850 when it was organized by J.H. Zumwalt. He later moved to Mokelumne Hill and proceeded to form Mokelumne Hill Lodge No. 1001, which at the time had as many as 500 members.

The Ancient and Honorable Order of E. Campus Vitus members 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 Gold Rush and 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 Harte roamed, or where Joaquin Murietta held up a stage coach. Therefore instead of 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.

Once again, after 1856, the Clampers returned to Monterey. In the summer of 1946, they came here and with great ceremony placed a plaque on 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 tales in the story which has made Monterey famous.