

## THE MYSTERIOUS HISTORY OF E CLAMPUS VITUS

by

Honorable Brother Al Shumate, M.D., ECV

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When I first came in this evening [June 25, 1991] and saw all the red shirts, I thought that it was a fireman's meeting. However, I realize I am surrounded by friends in Clamperdom.

As there are a few *Westerners* here who are not Clampers, I will give those old sayings we always say about ECV:

**First**, what does E Clampus Vitus mean? Well, that is the greatest mystery of all, because none of us know what it means!

**Second**, what is the purpose of the society? There is a description of the society that all of you have heard. It is claimed ECV is a historical drinking society; others claim it to be a drinking historical society. The debate continues; it has never been solved.

**Third**, the objectives of ECV are well known: Members swear to take care of the widows and orphans -- especially the widows.

**Fourth**, the governing authority of the Clampers is equally as explicit: **All members are officers and all officers are of equal indignity.**

These precepts give us some idea why some of the things in the history of ECV are murky. As all Clampers know, no one was in any condition to take minutes, and after a meeting, no one could be who remembered what had happened.

But getting down to what we think we know, the general tradition is that the society had its origin in Virginia, in a mountainous section that broke off during the Civil War and is now West Virginia. The perpetrator was **Ephraim Bee**, whose origins are as tangled as those of his organization. He was born in Salem, New Jersey or Harrison County, Virginia, in 1799 or 1802, depending on whether you consult *Hardesty's Encyclopedia* (1885) or Boyd K. Stuller's scholarly paper "*Ephraim Bee and E Clampus Vitus*" in the *West Virginia Review* of August 1931, based in part on an article in the *Parkersburg State Journal* in 1896. Which is right?

Bee's ancestors were ministers. They came from a group called Seven Day Baptists; as the name indicates, Saturday was their Sabbath Day. They left Salem, New Jersey and settled in Salem, Doddridge County, Virginia, where the Seventh Day Baptists had a college. Bee lived there for the rest of his life. Ephraim married Catherine Davis on June 19, 1823, and had ten children with her. After her death, he

married a younger woman, Mary Welch, and had seven more children--seventeen in all. So you can see, right from the beginning he was a real Clamper!

Ephraim Bee started out as a blacksmith and remained one for most of his life. He was also an inn keeper. His tavern was appropriately called the *Bee Hive*. The location was most interesting. George Ezra Dane, one of those who helped revive ECV in 1931, and who was known for his own sense of humor, placed it at Meat House Fork on Middle Island Creek, near the present town of West Union, West Virginia. Its isolation did not bar Bee from participating in public affairs. He had only four months of formal schooling, which most likely qualified him for the West Virginia State Legislature. He was elected in 1863 and re-elected in 1865 and 1867.

However, Bee is best remembered as the founder of E Clampus Vitus. He was known throughout the county as a garrulous story teller and practical joker. Legend has it that around 1845, shortly after American minister Caleb Cushing returned from negotiating a treaty with China, Bee revealed that the Emperor of China had entrusted him with certain sacred rituals from the mysterious East. Bee then, brought forth E Clampus Vitus. As an indication of the profound impression it made on his family, Bee's son Herman remembered the name as the "Order of Clampin Vipers." This is a good example of how family legends become distorted.

From the first, all regarded ECV as a burlesque of the widespread secret societies, fraternal and political. In the 1820's and 1830's, some became suspicious of **Freemasonry** and demonstrated against it. In the next decade, the strong tide of immigration flowing from Germany and Ireland smashed on the rocks of Nativism. In 1844, the year Cushing returned from China, the Native Sons of America and the Order of the Sons of America emerged. 1850, for instance, brought forth the Order of the Sons of the Sires of 1776 and the more important Order of the Star-Spangled Banner. In the mid-1850's, these societies became a powerful political force: the Know-Nothing Party. Members denied all knowledge of the secret societies, hence the party name. Their mystery, mumble-jumble, and elaborate rituals were fertile soil to nourish Bee's spoof.

ECV spread from (West) Virginia to other states. There is documentation of lodges in Bedford Pennsylvania, (1847); Metropolis, Illinois (1849); and Bowling Green, Missouri (1849). Ken Castro of Murphys found evidence in the Stockton *San Joaquin Republican* of March 7, 1853, of a chapter in Dahlenega, a gold mining community about 65 miles north of Atlanta, Georgia. Miners from that region arrived in California in 1849, and, like the Sonorans from Mexico, helped teach the Argonauts how to mine. The majority of the 49ers knew nothing about gold mining. They thought they could walk up the hill and pick up big chunks of gold.

How did ECV come to California? All accounts agree that a person by the name of **Joe Zumwalt** was the Apostle. On his way to California in 1849, Zumwalt wandered into a printing office in Bowling Green, Pike County, Missouri, saw the ritual of the Clampers, and brought it along. In 1850, he attempted to establish a lodge in Hangtown (Placerville). It did not succeed because the miners were still moving fast and were not settled down. However, the next year, Zumwalt went to Mokelumne Hill, re-established the Clampers, and, to use an expression found in all the articles, "It spread like wild fire."

As befitting the tangled Clamper history, a question arises as to which Joe Zumwalt. One member of the family, not too many years ago, said that **Joseph Zumwalt**, a native of Kentucky born in 1800, was the one. Joe left Illinois for California in 1849, dying in the Golden State in 1892. Eve Zumwalt, another member of the Zumwalt family states in a new book, *The Romance of Mokelumne Hill* (1990) that the true founder was Joel Henry Zumwalt. J.H. was born in 1831 in Frankford, Pike County, Missouri, not too far from Bowling Green. The late Judge J.A. Smith of San Andreas, a noted local historian, was also of the opinion that J.H. was the founder. He quoted the *Marysville Democrat* of February 1896, and the *Calaveras Prospect* of May 30, 1896, to support his claim. In 1851, J.H. Zumwalt settled in Mokelumne Hill, the birthplace of the first successful Clamper chapter. It was Zumwalt's home until his death in 1906.

To continue the convoluted history of ECV, there is some question as to which organization spread. Was it "Clampus," "Clampusus," or "Clampusis?" In 1931, Carl Wheat selected "Clampus," which is the present spelling. In Illinois in 1847, they spelled "Clampus" that way with the "us." However, in Nineteenth Century California, it was always "sus." Did the printer in Bowling Green, Missouri, drop in an extra "s?" Only the Pennsylvanians seem to have adopted the "sis." What is the correct spelling of the Order?

ECV was popular because it afforded the young men at the mines with a perfect excuse for horseplay. Furthermore, as in the East, it ridiculed the stuffy secret fraternal, benevolent, and political societies, such as the Masons, Odd Fellows, and in the mid-1850s, Know-Nothings, which were so important in the **Gold Rush** days. Not only were there chapters in such well-known towns as Yreka, Nevada City, Auburn, Placerville, Sonora, and Mariposa, but in mining camps, some long gone. There are records of lodges in Morristown, Rabbit Creek (La Porte), Howland Flat, Sawpit Flat, St. Louis, Portwine, Comanche Camp, Yankee Jim's, Freeze Out, and the one I like the best, Hell's Delight. Also the Clampers were in the bigger cities, such as Sacramento, Marysville, Stockton, Petaluma, and Benicia. In San Francisco, it was here as early as 1852.

There were also chapters outside the state. In 1858, during the great Fraser River gold rush, Clampers went up to British Columbia. That is probably natural, because there were over 20,000 miners from California that went to that fiasco. A book written in 1963, called *Ghost Towns, of British Columbia*, mentioned the establishment of the Clampers in Fort Douglas. I wrote to the author, Bruce Ramsey, and got a letter back that was rather amusing. I had written my letter on stationery of **E Clampus Vitus**. He said that he came in from lunch, saw the envelope, and thought he was seeing a ghost.

In 1858, a meeting was called in Honolulu, and Clampers were active in Carson City and Virginia City, Nevada, during the Comstock Lode years. However, when the last century came to an end, gold mining and the Gold Rush towns faded. **E Clampus Vitus** also waned. However there was some activity in Downieville, and Sierra City (1890s), Nevada City (1908), Marysville (1911-1916), Colusa and Willows (1913), and in Quincy (1917-1918). *The Quincy Plumas National Bulletin* of April 5, 1917, used half of the front page describing a Clamper parade. The other half of the page was devoted to the U.S. Senate's voting for war against Germany! Most likely World War I was a factor in the fading of ECV. By the end of the 1920s, the order was just a memory.

**Carl Wheat** has written that in 1930, on the "road from Columbia to Parrott's Ferry" he said to his companion, fellow attorney **George Ezra Dane**, "Let's revive the Clampers. I do not believe this sensational revelation is entirely true. During his last disabling illness, Carl gave me some Clamper materials. In it, I found where he had put aside notes from books and different little articles that he had found about the Clampers. He had been thinking about the Clampers for a long time. Anyway, in 1931, at a luncheon at the Clift Hotel in San Francisco, Wheat, Dane, Leon Whitsell and their friends decided to revive ECV. **Frederick C. Clift** [of hotel fame] was one of the Charter Members, incidentally.

Dane, Whitsell, and especially Wheat were the most important of those Charter Members. Dane was a San Francisco attorney, who, like Wheat, attended Pomona College and received his law degree from Harvard. In fact, they were in the same law office for a while. Ezra wrote extensively about California. His last book was *Ghost Town* (1941), the story of Columbia, Tuolumne County, which is now a state park (His two daughters hope to republish it in 1992). Dane's tragic death at age 37 occurred in October 1941. I was present in Columbia in September 1947 for the unveiling of a plaque in his honor.

**Leon O. Whitsell**, the third "founder" was a high official in the Masonic order. He also wrote *One Hundred Years of Freemasonry in California* (1950) and other historical monographs about California. He was well beloved in Clamperdom.

**Carl Irving Wheat**, the "revivifier" of E Clampus Vitus, was the most remarkable man I have ever met. Carl was raised in Los Angeles and in 1915 received his Bachelor of Arts degree, cum laude, from Pomona College. He served in the U.S. Army Air Service in World War I, and after the war he earned his law degree at Harvard. In the 1920s, he was the Chief Counsel of the Railroad Commission of California. He carried on legal work in Los Angeles and San Francisco, and from the mid-1930s, in Washington, D.C. From 1936 to 1938, he was a telephone rate attorney with the Federal Communications Commission, and was in the Federal Government during World War II.

Carl was one of the first members of the Zamorano Club of Los Angeles and a founder of the Roxburghe Club of San Francisco. His enthusiasm for fine printing resulted in his own hand press, the "Wheat Stalk," and his serving as President of the **Book Club of California**. He was also a director of the **California Historical Society** and editor of the *CHS Quarterly*, and as well as being editor of the *Quarterly of the Historical Society of Southern California*. Wheat served as President of the Friends of the Bancroft Library and was a member of the National Parks Advisory Board. Of the many books he wrote, his monumental five-volume cartographic study, *Mapping the Transmississippi West* (1957-63), stands as his most prodigious work.

He was an amazing, amazing man, who could tell many stories. I had the pleasure of taking some trips with him, and I was always amazed at Wheat's knowledge of everything. One trip I remember was going to Downieville to dedicate a plaque to Clamper **Adam Lee Moore**. In the front seat with Wheat was Dr. John Lawrence, head of the Donner Laboratory in California, and brother of Ernest Livermore, of today's Livermore Laboratory. They discussed nuclear medicine.

Another thing Wheat did is one that I never did when I was driving. I would drive to the place. Carl Wheat had to go off on every dirt road between Camptonville and Downieville to show us some building or mine. He knew the area completely!

Carl became ill at the **Bohemian Club's Grove** and died at the age of seventy-four. I was one of the speakers at the services for him on June 17, 1966. Two years earlier, on May 30, 1964, the *Grand Council* had unveiled a plaque in his honor on the **Wall of Comparative Ovations** in the old gold town of Murphys.

Carl's great love was for the Clampers. He was the first Noble Grand Humbug of the San Francisco Chapter and of the Los Angeles Chapter. In 1954, he was given the title of "His Benign Austerity," and he always called himself the "Perpetual N.G.H. [Noble Grand Humbug] of Skunk's Misery," referring to the name of a mining camp he found on a map while writing his own beautiful, scholarly *Maps of the California Gold Regions* (1942). As X.S.N.G.H. (Ex-Sublime Noble Grand Humbug) Sid Platford said, "There is only one Wheat; the rest of us are chaff."

Carl Wheat "discovered" a Clamper of the old order, who aided the revival immensely. **Adam Lee Moore** was the last N.G.H. of **Balaam Lodge in Sierra City**. Adam always referred to it as "**Sigh-era**." He was the link, in Wheat's words, in the "Apostolic succession from the Clampatriarchs of old." Moore had an excellent memory and recalled the words of the old initiation ritual.

Moore had been a red-shirted miner and stage coach driver among other things, lived to be 99, and was quite a person. I had the pleasure of driving with Adam Moore, his wife, and Lee Stopple from San Francisco to Downieville on May 31, 1941. We were delivering a new charter for a meeting of the Chapter and initiation to be held that night. I was a lot younger then and more easily shocked, and I know I was shocked when the PBCs [Poor Blind Candidates] came down the main street of the town, with people lining the sidewalks, holding torches and chanting a dirge: "**Poor sons of bitches, E Clampus Vitus, poor sons of bitches**." Tired after the drive and initiation, I said to Adam, "I'm going to bed." I'll never forget his answer, and he had just turned 94 at the time, "Ain't yah going to dance?" And he went!

In May 1932, the "Chapter Redivivus" made its first pilgrimage to the gold country, first to Camptonville, then on to Downieville and Sierra City. Carl Wheat became the first Noble Grand Humbug. This trip to the "Diggin's" was aided by a Clamper of the old order, **William Bull Meek**. (A chapter bears his name in the Nevada City area.) Meek, a native Californian born in 1857, drove freight wagons over the Henness Pass in his youth and served many years as **Wells, Fargo & Co's** agent in Camptonville. He was a Clamper in Marysville in the 1890's and was 79 when he died in 1936.

I have a letter Meek wrote to Wheat regarding that first enclampment. He was a Justice of the Peace, and this letter was written on the stationery of the Justice Court of Camptonville Township: "I am glad to learn that E Clampus Vitus is going to be revived and hope that the new life of the Order will be as complete as the original. Mr. Labadie passed away this winter, but Mrs. Labadie still conducts the Hotel. I have spoken to her regards your coming and she says if a crowd comes . . . she quotes a rate of one dollar per person per bed and fifty cents a meal. She has enough rooms to accommodate about 34

people." As you can see, the Clampers that went up there were all affluent. How prices have changed on Clamper treks!

After that trek, Clamperdom proceeded to enlarge. PBCs were supposed to have an interest in California history, and by 1936, the Clampers could boast of many of the era's most respected historians, bibliographers, historical society presidents, journal editors, printers, and collectors from throughout California. Clampers included: **Herbert E. Bolton, Lindley Bynum, Robert E. Cowan, Charles P. Cutten, Francis P. Farquhar, Ed Grabhorn, Phil Townsend Hanna, Edgar B. Jessup, Lawton Kennedy, J. Gregg Layne,, George D. Lyman, Thomas W. Norris, Terry E. Stephenson, Douglas S. Watson, Henry R. Wagner, Jerry Wickland, and Ernest A. Wiltsee.**

The Clampers went to the Indian Reservation outside of Tuolumne City on the Memorial weekend of 1937. Chief William Fuller was a Clamper. I remember it well because I was a PBC. I was invited to become a Clamper by a schoolmate of mine in grammar and high school, Edgar Kahn. "Cable Car" Kahn, as we called him, was the author of *Cable Car Days in San Francisco* (1940). Anyway, Edgar was rather serious in some ways, and he said to me, "Al, don't bring any liquor because it's an Indian reservation. It's illegal. Also, Clampers are hardy, bring a sleeping bag." I did. At first we had an Indian dinner. I'll never forget it because I didn't eat it. It was fried grasshoppers and acorn bread. Try it some time. Anyway, I put my sleeping bag on the cold hard ground and prepared to sleep. Every Clamper, who had sense, left and went down to the hotel and the nearest bar. Hardly had I put down the sleeping bag, when the Indians who had performed the dances and served the horrible food, started eating hot dogs. They had hired a Filipino jazz band to play, brought out whiskey from every place, and got as drunk as skunks.

In 1939, E Clampus Vitus adopted a "**Clampconstitution**," but when efforts were made to incorporate the order, they found that the Marysville group had done so in 1915. Lee Stoppie, the N.G.H. of Yerba Buena in San Francisco, scheduled a meeting in Marysville with the surviving directors. On May 18, 1940, he arranged a merger, and became President of the Board of Directors. From then on, the Clampers have had their incorporation papers.

After World War II, Carl Wheat returned home from Washington, D.C., and again there was activity. He put in new Directors and in 1950, I became one. Later Carl wrote new by-laws, which called for the formation of the Grand Council of Venerable Clampatriarchs. At Mariposa, on May 8, 1954, the council came into being; all present and past Noble Grand Humbugs were members. In 1957, when the council met at Murphys, Ed Jessup became the first Sublime Noble Grand Humbug of the Grand Council. Since then, the Grand Council has met in Murphys, first every two years, then yearly.

Since 1957, E Clampus Vitus has grown in an amazing manner. It has over 40 chapters now. While ECV has spread, serious orders such as the Odd Fellows, once so popular and influential, have faded. Ephraim Bee would be astonished!

However, the growth of the Clampers is not that surprising considering the amazing service it has done for the nation. One example will suffice. In 1937, when I was a PBC, Sir Francis Drake's "plate of brass" claiming California for England had appeared just the year before. Tests in recent years have virtually

destroyed its credibility on metallurgical analysis, but in 1937, the Clampers were concerned about California being claimed by the English King.

Drake had claimed that the Miwok Indians had "freely resigne(d) their right and title in the whole land." William Fuller, who was hereditary chief of the Mi-Wuks, knew he had the authority to nullify the Englishman's claim. Before the assembled Brethren, he made this clamplamation:

Bee it knowne unto all men by their presence: Whereas, in the year of Grace of 1579, the Great Hi-oh, of the Mee-Wuks was seduced by that buccaneer, Francis Drake to deliver this land of **Nova Albion to Elizabeth ye Queene**, and Her successors forever. Now, therefore I the present Chief Hi-oh, of the Mee-Wuk Nation, do now revoke said grant on grounds of deceit, fraud, and failure to occupy the said domain. William Fuller, G.H. Done in the presence of **E Clampus Vitus**, May 29, 1937.

A copy of this revocation reached the desk of the President of the United States. I have it on absolute authority, from a person of prominence. I cannot mention his name, but he was in Washington, D.C., at that time. He said that it was the first time that he had seen President Franklin D. Roosevelt smile in a long time. Roosevelt knew that our glorious State would remain part of the Union. Thanks to ECV, you and your children are still under this flag, this glorious Star Spangled Banner!

However, you will not find this proclamation in the text books of your children. You will not find it in the standard histories. Do the Clampers resent that? No! Why not? Because they are a meek group; a group that would never blow its own horn. They give aid to the widows, but do they expect to be thanked? No! Do they expect them to say "**Satisfactory?**" No! E Clampus Vitus is a self-effacing group with a mysterious past!!

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**Presented by Dr. Albert Shumate, M.D., ECV** author of numerous books on San Francisco history, and a Humbug of Sublime, Noble, and Grand proportions, to the *San Francisco Corral of Westerners* on June 25, 1991. It won the *Westerners International Phillip A. Danielson Award* for best presentation to a Corral by a Westerner in 1991.