

E. Clampus Vitus history : by Grand Noble Sublime Bill Wensrich

The Ancient and Honorable Order of E. Clampus Vitus (ECV or Clampers) is a fraternal organization founded in 4005 B.C. On second thought, maybe it was around 1845. ECV's commission may have come from the Emperor of the Celestial Kingdom. More likely, it evolved and was expanded upon during the California gold rush. No one knows for sure. It appears much of the historical record regarding the exact origin of ECV will remain forever murky. As all Clampers know and like to recall, "no one present was in any condition to take minutes, and after a meeting, no one could be found who remembered what happened."

We do know that ECV then, as well as today, includes taking care of widows and orphans. Clampers also enjoy a hearty drink while carrying out practical jokes and regaling each other with tales of the Trans-Mississippi west and other history. More importantly, modern day activities carried out by 40 Chapters, all nonprofit organizations, also include:

- On-going preservation of western U.S. history through the erection of historical plaques,
- Raising awareness and monies for worthy historical and educational activities,
- Public help programs such as the Yreka Kid's Fishing Derby, Wilderville Highway cleanup, and
- Participating in local parades, community events, charities and harmless levity.

Decades of dedication to local history by ECV have resulted in the placement of over 2,000 plaques commemorating significant historical buildings and stories of interest. These diverse monuments erected by ECV Chapters across the west remember individuals, places and events. Discovering and preserving the truth from the past is important to learning and knowing who we are. Your local ECV organization established in 2004 Umpqua Joe No. 1859, sponsored by the Yreka Humbug Chapter, has partnered numerous times with the Josephine and Siskiyou County Historical Societies in the research and placement of historical plaques. To date, the Umpqua Joe

Chapter has erected 22 plaques commemorating northern California and southern Oregon history.

ECV is said to have been started about 1845 by one Ephraim Bee, a tavern keeper, surveyor, blacksmith and state legislator from what is now West Virginia. The organization's roots germinated in California when a man named Joe Zumwalt, traveling to the 1849 gold rush, brought an eastern lodge ritual book with him. Taking hold in 1851, Mokelumne Hill became recognized as California's first official ECV Lodge. The organization, by nature, was a spoof on more dignified and straight-laced fraternal orders of the day such as the freemasons. Those orders took themselves too seriously and looked

down on the mining working class.

Evolving from pure burlesque and serious drinking to a worthy organization with a penchant for local history, ECV has undergone growth, decline and rebirth over the last 167 years. With the decline of mining and depopulation of camps in the diggins, ECV also declined. The old E Clampus Vitus ran out of steam by the turn of the 20th century. By 1915, there was only one lodge left. A lawyer named Carl Wheat and two friends, Leon O. Whitsell and George Ezra Dane, revived ECV in the early 1930s. Together they guided the organization to devote itself to the subject of preserving California and Trans-Mississippi western history. By the mid-1930s the

revivified ECV had established four chapters as well as made claim to the ECV recognized "territory of New Mexico" for another chapter. Today, Umpqua Joe Chapter serves six counties in southwest Oregon and is part of the larger E. Clampus Vitus organization. From four California Chapters in 1936, ECV has grown to 45 Chapters and seven Outposts located in nine western states.

Reminding us to retain the original spirit of ECV, Al Shumate, one of the Order's past Sublime Noble Grand Humbugs, wrote a vignette on ECV which included the following four points.

"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 offices are of equal indignity."



(Photo by Laura Mancuso, Illinois Valley News)

Grand Noble Humbug Tarry Frank (right) and Clamp Chef Mark Dillinger serve gumbo at a Super Bowl fundraiser Sunday, Feb. 4 at Sportsman Tavern in Cave Junction. The proceeds of the event will benefit a I.V. High School ECV Scholarship.

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