

# A Funny Thing Happened (On The Way To The Gold Rush)

The Clampers claimed their 'lodge' was created from a charter issued in the form of a golden tablet, given by the Emperor Titus to the Jewish Legion in the First Century A.D.

by Vivienne L. George - February 1971 - The West Magazine

THOMAS P.K. MILLER, ESQ., HAD no way of knowing it that spring evening in 1864 when he stepped off the stage in Comptonville, in the heart of California's Gold Rush "Northern Mines," but the minute loungers along the street laid eyes on him they knew he was the perfect patsy.

And that very evening Thomas Miller, who happened to be my grandfather, got his first (but not his last!) introduction to the Ancient and Honorable Order of E Clampus Vitus—a secret order concocted during the Gold Rush and probably the corniest, most elaborate practical joke ever perpetrated on greenhorns and tinhorns.

In fact, just about anybody the members could slicker out of a substantial round of drinks to wet down the belly laughs. The Clampers had one aim in life—to take in (and did they ever!) new members.

And Granddad was just what they were looking for. An Easterner, member of a genteel family, newly educated in the law as befitting his "station in life," he had come West not to "demean" himself by grubbing for gold, but to garner the rich pickin's of the hoi polloi who might be in need of a litigation lawyer.

He got off the stage in a hand tailored suit that shouted "greenhorn" from every thread, and with \$35 cash jingling in his pocket. He was ripe for the picking.

The Clampers didn't mess around. When they had a "live one" on the string they got out the "Hewgag," one of the awesome pieces of paraphernalia by which the order struck terror into the hearts of initiates.

The Hewgag was, as one old-timer put it, "a cross between a four-foot trumpet and an alpenhorn," with a sour, raucous bray that could "rock the jawbone of a miner a mile away," and served notice on all within hearing distance that the super-secret, pseudo-ritualistic initiation was about to begin.

Later Granddad detailed his first impression of the miners' camp in a letter to his Adams County, Ohio, sweetheart: "The stage stopped at Camptonville around sunset," he wrote, "and I retired at once, being considerably fatigued from the trouncing I had suffered as the rough trail wound over and around the Yuba River canyon.

"However, I had barely been lured into sleep when I was roused again by one of the most horrendous sounds ever perpetrated on mortal ear." "It was an indescribable cacophony, combining the roar of an

enraged bull elephant, the unearthly wail of a beleaguered banshee, and the caterwauling of a hundred tomcats. It jarred the windows of the hotel and shook me bolt upright in the middle of my room, shivering in my bare feet and nightshirt.

"Looking from the hotel window I could see men in the street below, clad in the rough boots, flannel shirts and flat brimmed hats characteristic of the working miner, scurrying from the doors of saloons, boardinghouses, tents, and even scrambling down from the hills above, since such was the strength of the blast that it carried to and re-echoed from the crags above town.

All these men were converging on a wooden building, or hall, at the end of the street. "Thinking some terrible calamity had befallen the village, I hastily drew my trousers over my night dress and hurried downstairs to inquire of the desk clerk what the nature of it might be. But I found that the clerk, too, had responded to the call and there was in his place a lad of about 11 years who shrugged his shoulders indifferently and remarked that the men had answered "the Call" and that "the Clampers would be at it" for "long into the night."

Granddad's "enlightenment" was not long in coming. He was not a drinking man, but noting that Camptonville's many saloons were teeming with what he considered "valuable contacts," he broke a lifelong rule and actually entered one of the liveliest of the "dens of iniquity."

After he had set his prospects up for a round or two of drinks he considered them mellowed enough to broach the subject of his availability for legal services. He was soundly rebuffed. Puzzled, he tried another "gaming house"—with the same result. On the third try he tumbled to the fact that some by-now familiar faces were turning up regularly to enjoy his generosity.

When he questioned them as to why they were willing to accept his "refreshments" but not his services, he was told with mock reluctance that although there was undoubtedly plenty of business in camp to keep a good lawyer going, around these parts it was mandatory that the populace do business only with "the brothers." It was a crying shame, they assured Granddad solemnly; Personally, they had taken a liking to the new "shyster," but they could not break their vows to the Order.

Just when all seemed lost, one grizzled miner came up with the perfect solution.

Why couldn't the lawyer become a brother? His audience waited expectantly around the table while Granddad counted out his remaining cash, by this time shrunk to \$25, and then assured him joyfully that this amount happened to the penny to be the required initiation fee.

Granddad was touched by their solicitude, especially after they declared that he need have no compunction about spending his last dime, since once the barriers were removed the brothers would be able to swing business his way that would amply repay the expenditure. Moreover, they continued, Granddad was in luck.

Meetings of E Clampus Vitus were only held on the Saturday preceding the next rain, but since the coming Saturday happened to qualify, there need be no delay in his "Elevation." And so, like a sheep

being led to the shearing pens, Granddad became a Poor Blind Candidate and as such suffered through several hours of what must have been mental agony for one who took himself and his dignity so seriously. (My ancestor had many talents, but the ability to laugh at himself was definitely not one of them.)

The initiation lasted just as long as the barrels of whiskey that his initiation fee provided. And when it was over, Granddad slunk away humiliated beyond measure. In fact, he could bring himself to face his newfound brothers only after—a week or so later—he had "redeemed" himself by leading an unsuspecting drummer into the fatal trap. True to their word, the miners brought Granddad their business, and what with claim titles to straighten out, partnership agreements and all, it amounted to a substantial haul.

But Granddad never felt comfortable around the earthy and highly uninhibited antics that passed for humor among the brethren. He stayed only long enough to clear his passage back to civilization and then shook the dust of the gold fields off his feet forever. Although Granddad was a prolific letter writer and journalist, he never was able to bring himself to set down on paper the deep humiliation of that awful night, so posterity was never able to share the details.

However, a composite picture emerges from the many fragments of remarks throughout his lifetime, indicating his evening must have gone something like this: As a Poor Blind Candidate he was guided through the process of "coming to Enlightenment" by two muscular hulks of miners who towered, one on either side, above Granddad's six feet, and who clamped his arms in a mighty vise-like grip calculated to discourage his bolting from sheer terror.

These mentors conducted him from station to station where he was "examined" by various officers—via some most excruciatingly embarrassing questions—as to his fitness to dwell in the exalted state of the "true light of brotherhood." To arrive at these various points of instruction it was necessary to negotiate a series of hazards—whatever the whiskey-fired imaginations of the order could cook up on the spur of the moment.

One such was the Cave of Silence (a pitch black interior of a metal pipe just big enough for passage by a man on his hands and knees. The silence was interspersed at intervals by the brothers' clanging on the metal surface with mining shovels.)

He rode the Rocky Road (in which he was divested of his pants, seated in a wheelbarrow cushioned with a wet spongeful of ice water and ridden rapidly over the length of a ladder on the floor). He experienced the Elevation of Man (in which he was hoisted into the air by a block and tackle hooked in his suspenders and dumped into a horsetrough full of water).

He took the Fearful Oaths, endured the Obliterating Obfuscation and received the Staff of Relief—at a point on his anatomy that kept him standing at meals for a couple of days—and finally achieved the Sublimity of Brotherhood.

E Clampus Vitus was born in the fertile minds of lonely Argonauts who saw too much tough luck, too

many hard tussles with raw elements, and were starved for companionship. It was the bond that drew the amalgam that was the Gold Rush into a semblance of togetherness that offered security to men a long way from home.

Once spawned, it caught the fancy of the miners, and skyrocketed across the Sierra foothills, showering flashes of tomfoolery from Columbia "the gem of the Southern mines" north to Sierraville on the saddle of the high pass country. In the end the Clampers, always on the lookout for another sucker, discovered they had out-suckered themselves.

The secrets of their "secret" order had been kept so secret nobody could remember what the whole thing was about. Written records of the organization are rare and confined for the most part to terse two-or-three line paragraphs buried in dusty newspapers of the Mother Lode. The reason is simple. Clamper meetings were, to borrow a current advertising phrase, "wet and wild." After a night-long initiation there was nobody sober enough to set down what happened. And it is probably just as well.

Some of the goings-on would have to be recorded on singe-proof asbestos paper. And so the Ancient and Honorable Order of E Clampus Vitus has developed into the Gold Rush's greatest enigma. Nobody knows who started it. Nobody knows for sure where it started, or when. And although there have been some fanciful interpretations, one of the organization's biggest mysteries is the meaning of the name itself.

An educated guess though, is that the whole thing started as the miners' irrepressible thumb-to-nose gesture at the bluenosed pomposity of the regular lodges—Masonic and others. Things happened fast in the 1850's. "Civilization" in the form of brick stores instead of tents; schools, churches, womenfolk and boiled shirts on Sundays followed hard on the heels of California statehood, and these in turn were followed by chapters of lodges transplanted by settlers from "Back East." The Masons arrived in the gold fields as early as 1852, and the Odd Fellows by 1857.

Whether or not it was just a miners' belly laugh at the seriousness with which the regular lodges regarded themselves and their sacred oaths, or whether somebody was disgruntled at being black balled, somewhere in the '50's the miners came up with a lodge of their own—a lodge to end all lodges, a secret society so secret not even its members were sure what the whole thing was about.

The result was E Clampus Vitus—an order dedicated to the motto "Credo Quia Absurdum," (if it's wild enough I believe it), whose members refused to take themselves or anyone else seriously. The membership didn't bother with anything as stuffy as a hierarchy.

Each member automatically became an officer, as well as Chairman of the Most Important Committee, and one of the tenets of the organization was that "all officers abide in equal indignity." Painful as were his memories of the Clampers, Granddad was able to find some small consolation from news that one of his former schoolmates who had preceded him to the Gold Rush was slickered even sharper than Granddad.

His friend, Jake Fowler, had gone to Yreka, California, to establish a mercantile business, and after an

experience similar to Granddad's, had concluded that his business would improve if he were to become a lodge member. Some of his helpful customers (Clampers) convinced him that for a bargain rate that by coincidence matched what cash he could scrape up— \$98.50—Jake could undergo a triple initiation that would get him into the Masons, the Odd Fellows and E Clampus Vitus all in one fell swoop.

On the night of his initiation Jake was led blindfolded into the Hall of Comparative Ovations, where he overheard an argument between representatives of the Masons (at least that's the impression the 62 Poor Blind Candidate got) and the other two lodges as to which order would have the honor of initiating first.

The argument was finally settled by the suggestion that the lodge oldest in point of origin should have priority. Whereupon the blindfolded Jake overheard the "Odd Fellow" announce that his lodge was created from a charter issued in the form of a golden tablet given by the Emperor Titus to the Jewish Legion in the First Century, A.D. The "Mason" countered that their first Grand Master, Moses, often marshalled the Israelites into the regular and general lodge while in the wilderness, and that King Solomon was known to have been Grand Master of the Lodge at Jerusalem. Both orders, however, agreed to give place to E Clampus Vitus upon hearing that this order was on unimpeachable authority known to have been founded by the venerable Clampatriarch Adam himself in the Garden of Eden.

Futhermore, the Clamper quoted from the unwritten works of St. Vitus, "the final authority in all such matters," that the original Staff of Relief, which figures so greatly in the Clamper ritual, was a branch that Adam broke from the Tree of Knowledge and smuggled out of the Garden with him, hidden beneath his apron, when he was driven from Eden.

So justified, the Clampers started plying Jake with their worst, until he pled for mercy and, abandoning his three-way fee, bolted from the hall and left the brothers to drink up his initiation money without him. During the course of his initiation he was at one point led in blindfolded silence around the hall. To signal that a new and fearsome trial was to begin the assembled would give out with a sepulchral moan, to which the trembling victim was to reply, "Timbo."

As the evening wore on, Jake's tongue thickened and through his chattering teeth his responses began to sound more and more like "Stembro," or thereabouts. On the spot he became "Steamboat Jake" and was known so in Yreka throughout the rest of his life there. The Clampers did have their good side, though. They carried on an extensive although unobtrusive benevolent work, and many a down-and-out miner or the widow and orphans of a man killed in the mines, owe a fresh start to prompt and practical charity, given simply and without fanfare.

On January 10, 1856 the Mountain Democrat, a Placerville newspaper, carried this letter to the editor: "A few days ago I visited a sick and destitute family living in the suburbs of our city, and accidentally witnessed the noiseless and liberal manner in which some societies perform their mission of charity. "The head of the family in question had been ill for some time and unable to work, and they were greatly distressed and desponding.

A wagon loaded with provisions drove up to the door. Without a word the provisions were transferred

from wagon to house. With tears of gratitude the donors were blessed, but the kindness did not end there. A few days later I again visited the family, and was pleased to learn that clothing had been furnished in the same mysterious manner. "I at length learned that the society of E Clampus Vitus had furnished the provisions and clothing. They have the prayers of the poor for their advancement and prosperity." Although this is typical of Clamper helpfulness, if the truth were known, it is likely that every object of charity could be matched by some disgruntled miser who, like the victims of Robin Hood, was bilked of some wherewithal.

For instance: In 1853 over around Nevada City there lived a miner who, according to members of the Clampers, was a prime candidate for Stinker of the Year. In fact, the Clampers banded together and bestowed on him the name of Glue Pockets because they claimed anything that went into his pockets stuck there and never came out again. The name stuck to the extent that his formal name was lost to history.

Old Pockets was cordially disliked around the new gold camp, because he persisted in violating the two most binding codes of the mines—he was miserly and he didn't socialize. One day Old Pockets went up into the hills by himself and found a rich vein of ore, but he didn't tell anybody else in camp about it until he had made certain that nobody else in camp was going to get in on any of the gravy. He quietly filed on all the claims far enough on either side to assure privacy, and after that he took some pretty drastic means to discourage poachers—like setting bear traps all around in places inconvenient to trespassers, and chaining a live bear to the head of the trail, and always working with guns and knives within reach in case anybody managed to get by the obstacles.

But to add to the insult, every night Old Pockets would come down to camp loaded with bags of ore, have them weighed out and stashed in the Wells Fargo safe, and then he would go into the saloon and sit around all evening at one end of the bar, not spending a dime and not bothering to converse with anybody.

But what really got under the hides of the Clampers was that he would sit sulking at the bar until some more convivial miner offered to stand drinks for the house, at which time Pockets was the first one in line. It didn't take the whole camp long to get enough of that ol' stuff. So as a "civic and charitable duty to the community" the Clampers cooked up a scheme to get redress for the camp—mostly the Clampers since nearly all male citizens were of the fold.

They did this by getting to Pockets through his one vulnerable spot. He had a crush on the saloon girl. Her name was Julie and she couldn't stand the sight of Old Glue Pockets, but after the Clampers chipped in to make it worth her while, she agreed to go along with the gag. So the Clampers sent a delegation to Pockets to indicate to him that Julie was really crazy mad in love with him, but being the sweet, shy sensitive little thing she was, she couldn't bring herself to show it.

So the committee generously offered to act as go-between and to arrange for the wedding—provided Pockets would consent to hold the ceremony in the saloon (it seemed that Julie had a sentimental attachment for the place where she first saw her true love) —and further provided that Pockets would foot the reception costs afterwards]

Pockets didn't think that last was such a good idea, but for once his mating instinct got the better of his pocketbook and he agreed—churlishly. The Clampers went all out over the "wedding." Julie was the only female attached to that particular saloon, so the grizzled miners themselves went out into the hills to pick wild-flowers to decorate the saloon to the hilt.

They also sent down river for a Clamper from Marysville who was known to own a stovepipe hat and the semblance of a frock coat and who agreed to come up and "officiate" in the guise of a minister. Naturally the Clampers were foresighted enough to collect in advance from Pockets for the reception and, they laid in a couple of barrels of whiskey, which they figured should about do them for the night. It's a good thing they did collect in advance, because after the "ceremony" was over and Pockets figured he had Julie sewed up, the reaction set in.

After about a half hour of sitting around watching everybody drink up his profits, the groom jumped up, sulkily declared to all and sundry that they had had enough celebrating at his expense, grabbed Julie roughly by the arm and announced they were going home. That's when the Clampers let him in on the gag, and after he stormed out in a rage they had accomplished two things for the membership. They were rid of an obnoxious character (Pockets left camp that night and never returned) and were left with two barrels of free whiskey to boot.

E Clampus Vitus chapters sometimes went to some ingenious lengths to "better the community" by getting back at "outsiders" who tried to feather their own nest by bilking the brothers. Like the time in 1867 on the Tuolumne River over beyond Mokolumne Hill when the Clampers got even with a sharpster who tried to sucker them into an evening of theater with "Madame Edith, the thrush of the Southern Mines."

Miners out in the hills were starved for entertainment, so much so that they put out huge chunks of their intake to see singers, dancers, or just any type of outside diversion. But it didn't set so well when a swarthy skinned little weasel tried to capitalize on this by setting up a tent and announcing that his "theater" was open for a concert that very night.

The catch was that he was too tight to hire any really good talent so he engaged the cheapest diversion he could get, a broken down has-been who was supposed to be a singer but was really more like a hog caller. She was past her prime, and her looks never had been much to brag about. Her voice was cracked and her figure bulged in all the wrong places, but the handbills the entrepreneur passed out failed to mention these little details.

Naturally when word got around to the lonely miners that there was a woman in camp, and not knowing what they were up against, they flocked in droves clamoring and fighting for the privilege of buying tickets. After the first number they were clamoring just as hard for their money back, but needless to say, they didn't get it. The theater owner indicated that without Madame Edith they would be going without entertainment in any form, so they could just take it or leave it.

The miners retired to the nearest saloon to nurse their bruised ears and feelings, and in a public spirited

gesture for the good of the community, the Clampers put their heads together to cook up a revenge. The following evening all the men turned out again—led by the Clampers who had even rounded up some fellow lodge members from neighboring camps to swell the gate.

They stood in line to get into the tent just as they had the previous evening, and the theater manager was overjoyed. This, to him, indicated that these rubes would go for anything, and he began to calculate a long and profitable run with his broken-down diva. The minute Madame Edith came on stage the tentful broke into a cheer. They whooped and hollered—they stomped and whistled. And every time she would wheeze through a number, they would yell for an encore. And every time they encored, they tossed gold nuggets on stage. This went on and on into the night. The Madame was going out of her mind with joy, and the theater owner was going out of his mind with anguish. All this gold slipping under his nose and he wasn't getting even a smell of it.

At the end of a long evening, the Madame gathered up the nuggets into her skirt, and stood there, tears streaming down her cheeks, and announced that at long last her fondest dream had come true—she had enough to retire on and was bidding goodbye to show business. This meant the theater owner was also out of business. On the very next stage Madame Edith departed for Sacramento taking with her his talent and his gate. He got the message. Mok Hill never heard of him again.

As inventive as they were in putting something over, the Clampers were just as ingenious, if not more so, in the structure of their own organization. Their elaborately outlandish ritual was presided over by a ruling elder, the Noble Grand Humbug, followed by such officers (not necessarily in order of their rank or importance) as Clampus Petrix, Clampus Vatrix, Clampus Matrix, Royal Platrix, Great Mountageon, High and Mighty Hangman, Grand Gyascutis, plus other offices and titles invented as needed.

Meetings were held in the Hall of Comparative Ovations and were called, as already indicated, by the sound of the Hew-gag, a fearsome instrument somewhat loosely resembling a bugle, approximately four feet long and flared widely at the end. Other ritualistic paraphernalia included a monumental scattergun titled a Blunderbasket, the Sword of Justice Tempered with Mercy, and the Staff of Relief. As culmination to the initiation ritual, this last was implanted as a seal of membership on the rump of the initiate, which may or may not account for the reason that members wore aprons, not to the fore as do the Masons, but to the rear.

Although there is very little published material to serve as reference for today's researchers, (for the before mentioned reasons), word-of-mouth legends about the prodigious hokum and hijinks of the Clampers abound throughout the gold country. One of the more persistent of these is purported to be the only case of a Clamper initiation conducted "in the field," or outside the Hall of Comparative Ovations. Old-timers say this took place over in the area around Mariposa, somewhere in the early 1860's. It seems greenhorns were considered pests in the gold fields— about on a par with mosquitos.

Many of the miners who had recently staked legitimate claims had themselves so lately arrived that they had barely had time to learn which end of the pick was the handle. But once they got toughened up and got the hang of it—enough so they were beginning to pull color—they had little, patience for the greenhorn who wandered into camp wanting the "old timers" to show him where and how to dig.

In this particular camp a group of Clampers were supposed to have formed a partnership, and Clamper-like, had cooked up a corker of a scheme to get the greenhorns out of their hair and on up the creek^ Whenever a newcomer would arrive in camp and ask where to dig for gold, they would tell him the best way to find gold was to go up the creek until he could no longer see another human being—that way he'd be sure of new territory—and then he should climb the tallest tree he could find.

The kindly explanation was that around these parts the water got pretty high in the winter and whenever a flood would come it would wash down gold ore from the Sierras, the best of which would lodge in the crotch of the trees in the wake of the flood. So if a prospector could find gold in the high branches it meant the waters must have been loaded with gold and this was a sure-fire indication that it was a profitable place to locate.

One greenhorn came along who took them at their word. He went dutifully upstream and shinnied up the tallest tree he could find, which happened to be a pine tree growing along the bank where the water had undercut the roots to such an extent that just the added weight of the lad was enough to topple the tree and start a whopper of a landslide. The falling tree deposited him none too gently at the edge of the ravine and there he sat with tree branches, rocks, bank, gravel and gold nuggets trickling over his shoulders.

The landslide had opened up the biggest pocket of pay dirt on the river. When the party of Clampers discovered his good fortune they inducted him on the spot, even dispensing with the Staff of Relief (the only time in the history of the Order, it is said) on the premise that he had already been dealt that honor by Mother Nature and her pine. The party was very generous in helping their newfound "brother" to celebrate his good luck.

The rollicking order, like the pay dirt in the gravel bars, began to play out around the turn of the century. New amusements, a new social structure, a new generation not so patient with the whims of the grey-haired old-timers that were left, all contributed to its quiet demise.

Where the order had burst like fireworks across the Sierra foothills half a century ago, it now sputtered and burned itself out. One of the last of its Big Splashes was a party the Clampers threw in Marysville in January of 1896, when they took in one of the most prominent in its long line of suckers, the English Lord Sholto Douglas, younger son of the Marquis of Queensbury, the same Marquis who gave his name to the prize fighting rules.

Back in England this young gentleman had married a London dance hall girl, a fact not at all pleasing to his father—who cut him off without a penny. Faced with the prospect of earning their own way in life, the couple set out for America, the land of milk and honey, hoping to capitalize on his name and her stage ability. Neither turned out to be the drawing card they had hoped for, and their tour was less than successful.

On January 24, when they played the Marysville Theater, crowds were just as conspicuous for their absence as usual, but it happened that their dwindling funds chose this point to give out entirely and the

erstwhile Lord and his lady found themselves flat broke.

This was when the waning Clampers, like the over-the-hill mob of movie fame, saw their chance for one more fling for old times' sake. They sent a committee to the young Lord with the message that if he would consent to become a "brother" immediately following the show, they would guarantee for the following night's performance enough ticket sales to insure his expenses and a stake big enough to carry him through to his next appointment.

The performers bubbled their gratitude, and true to their word, the members combed Marysville selling tickets.

They packed the hall solidly enough, performance night, to come through with the promised expenses, plus the real entertainment—the spectacle of a staid English dandy experiencing the graceless Elevation of Man. But for the Clampers the shindig was like the coda to an already finished symphony. It just wasn't the same. For one thing, with the introduction shortly before of the telegraph into Marysville, the affair attracted the unaccustomed glare of publicity. Because of the prominent name of their victim, the story was picked up and circulated by wire service across the country in articles not at all sympathetic to such "Wild West barbarism."

One of the mildest of the reports was a three-line item carried by Marysville's own Appeal Democrat, which noted that "Lord Sholto Douglas let the Marysville people make a fool out of him last week when he joined a secret society, and the next night he made fools out of the people when they crowded his house and paid him \$300."

It was an innocuous obituary for a pioneer incursion into hilarity that had, perhaps, outlived its usefulness. An ironic epitaph was written to the old Order around 1930, when historians, nostalgic for the roistering old days, resurrected and reorganized the organization.

But, while today's politely veneered and varnished version of the red-flannel shirted Argonaut makes a colorful addition to parades in the Mother Lode, the old Clampers, somewhere in their graves, are having the last belly laugh. The irony is that today's Clampers are devoted to preserving the history of the Mother Lode which, due to the scarcity of recorded events, may be more fond recollection than history!

And So Recorded!