

A Short History of E Clampus Vitus

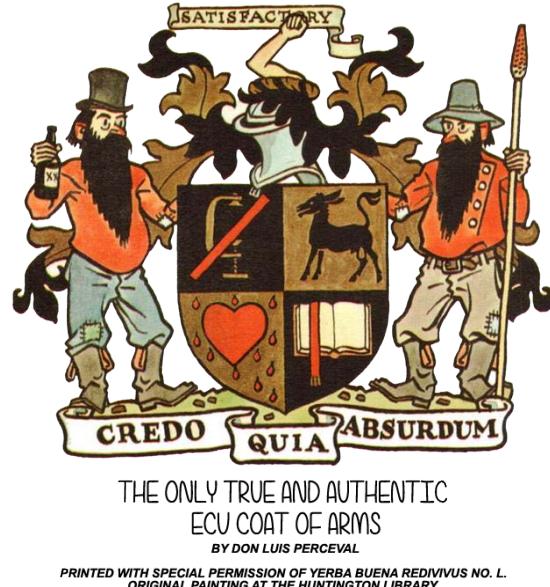
E Clampus Vitus has been a men-only organization since its inception. Although the exact date of ECV's birth is lost (and for that very reason a source of much lively debate), it is known to have been active in the United States since the 1800's, and probably much earlier. Unfortunately, no records survive from earlier times.

In 1845, in Lewisport, West Virginia, one Ephriam Bee, a tavern, hotel, and stable owner, received a commission authorizing him to extend the work and influence of the Ancient and Honorable Order of E Clampus Vitus.

As more and more people came west, many fraternal organizations such as the Masons, Elks, and Oddfellows came along, too. They were apt to be clannish and somewhat disapproving of the rowdy miners they encountered, for they took themselves and their pomp and ceremony quite seriously. To make fun of the fancy sashes and bejeweled vests the others wore, the Clampers took to cutting tin can lids into odd shapes and pinning them to their own simple vests, most often worn over a bright red union suit. They called this "wearing your tin," a practice continued to this day, although badges, ribbons, and enameled pins have taken the place of tin can lids.

Entertainment was a cherished commodity in the diggin's., for life was hard, often brutal, and just as often short. Rather than add to life's burdens, Brothers of E Clampus Vitus sought to lighten the load. They looked on the absurdity of life as something to be cherished. With tongues set firmly in cheek, they hailed each other as "Noble Grand Humbug," "Roisterous Iscutis," "Grand Imperturbable Hangman," "Clamps Vitrix," and "Royal Gyascutis." Flowery oratory, ribald songs, and practical jokes were much admired. Yet the group was a highly respected, benevolent organization. For example, when a miner fell ill or died, the group would collect food, money and other items, take them to the widow and any orphans who had been left behind, and comfort them - especially the widow. Numerous newspaper accounts attest to the Brothers' generosity, such as the time when they braved swollen rivers, snowstorms, and treacherous trails to deliver Christmas gifts to some poor unfortunates who otherwise would have had nothing.

The organization all but died out around the turn of the century, but was revitalized in 1931 by a San Francisco historian by the name of Carl Wheat, along with his friends George Ezra Dane and Leon O. Whitsell. (Dane, who most often wrote his signature as "G. Ezra Dane," often claimed the "G" stood for "GeeHosaphat." According to Wheat, the "O" in Whitsell's name was for "Obstreperous.") Wheat had



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found many references to ECV in his historical research, and thought it would be a fitting vehicle for the commemoration and preservation of a segment of California and U.S. History he feared was being lost. He also thought it just might be fun...

In both California and Nevada they are the largest historical organization dedicated to preserving western and mining history. ECV's "serious" side consists of finding, researching, and dedicating plaques to sites, incidents, and people in Western history that might otherwise be overlooked. They have plaqued hundreds of locations from ghost towns to saloons, from bordellos to ranchos, from heroes to madmen. After the dedications, they traditionally have a party, known as a "doin's." This partying is where the organization got its reputation as a "historical drinking society," or a "drinking historical society." Although they do not deny that copious amounts of fermented, distilled, and fortified beverages are occasionally consumed at a doin's, they are vehemently opposed to public displays of intoxication, and insist that members who imbibe have "a Brother of sobriety holding the reins" on the ride home.

The prime requisites to becoming a Clamper are a sense of humor, an interest in Western history, an open mind, and a cast iron stomach. If a man has those qualities, and strikes up a friendship with a Clamper or two, he may find himself taken in to (and by) the Ancient and Honorable Order. But one can't simply walk up and say, "Can I be a Clamper?" It is for the Brethren of ECV to invite prospective members to join. And if a man is asked, he should know that the invitation is only given once. If it is refused, it is never tendered again. But a man of any intelligence and character so invited would hardly be likely to turn down such a signal honor. And remember, as the Brethren of E Clampus Vitus maintain, Clampers are not made, they're born. Like gold, they just have to be discovered.

The community of Bouse in Arizona has welcomed this group on numerous occasions now ... in each instance they have built and dedicated plaques and memorials in remembrance of those who served at Camp Bouse. The mission of Camp Bouse was to train troops to use the British-developed Canal Defence Light or CDL. The bright, rapidly flashing light attached to the tanks' modified turrets and aimed through a 2-inch wide slot with the intent of disorienting enemy troops as they approached. Everyone at camp referred to it as "the Gizmo." All of the 9,000-plus troops who spent time at Camp Bouse were sworn to secrecy about the project. Soldiers weren't allowed to be transferred out of the camp, their movements were restricted and any soldier caught leaking information was guaranteed imprisonment. All that's left of Camp Bouse today are several concrete building foundations and walkways, a large reservoir and stone markers left in the desert by units that were stationed there.

The Clampers (or red shirts), as they are referred to, also placed a marker at the Historical A&C Mercantile