

The Jolly Corks

Compiled by Janneyne L. Gnacinski
Sometime around 1898

When any organization has attained national importance and celebrity, it is natural to conduct an investigation of all attainable facts in the annals of its origin and incipient stages. The unusual name given to one organization at its formation and the lifestyle of the founder have prompted me to share with AFRA readers the data about the organization's early history, which was published in book form in March of 1898.

On a Friday, in the fall of 1867, Charles Algernon Sidney Vivian, the son of an English clergyman, who had been a comic singer in England, landed in New York from an English trading vessel. On the afternoon of the same day he found his way to the old "Star Hotel," a celebrated free and easy, but very respectable chop-house, kept by John Ireland, on Lispenard Street, near Broadway. Richard Steirly was the pianist to this place, and whilst he was engaged for the singing of some parties who were present, Vivian volunteered to sing a song for the company. He sang 'Jimmy Riddle, Who Played A Fiddle,' with which the proprietorship was so much pleased that he pressed him to sing other songs. After Vivian had sung three additional songs, with great success, Ireland sent for Bob Butler, of the American Theater, No. 472 Broadway, who was so delighted with the very superior voice of the stranger that he immediately engaged him for a week.

Steirly invited Vivian to take dinner on Saturday at his boarding house, kept by Mrs. Giesman, at No. Elm 188 Elm Street. Having been introduced to Mrs. Geisman and also meeting W.L. Bowron, whom he knew in England, Vivian was so well impressed with the place that he remained there permanently. Mrs. Giesman's house was at that time a favorite resort with a number of choice spirits, amongst whom were several musicians and others connected with the theatrical profession. At that time the excise laws of New York were very stringent, in consequence of which Vivian and a number of congenial associates were in the habit of assembling in the boarding house parlors on Sunday afternoon for the purpose of spending the time in social intercourse. On one of these occasions, Vivian suggested that their association be given a more permanent and tangible form, which proposition was enthusiastically received, the organization being made early in the winter of 1867-68.

The social society thus formed was termed the 'Jolly Corks' in allusion to a trick which Bros. Vivian and William Lloyd Bowron had learned in England, and which they had practiced, with infinite amusement to all concerned upon their associates in the social gatherings. Vivian was the first 'Imperial Cork,' as the presiding officer was designated. The organization was patterned largely after the 'Buffaloes,' a popular social and benevolent order in England, of which Vivian had been a member. The 'Corks' were not a benevolent society.

Of the fifteen original 'Jolly Corks' the following are not (1898) living. Their business vocations as well as present resident addresses are herewith appended for the information of the brotherhood.

Richard R. Steirly, pianist and teacher, No. 349 Hudson Avenue, West Hoboken,
a member of Hoboken, No. 74.

John T. Kent, clerk, No., 233 Montgomery St., Jersey City, a member of Jersey
City No. 211.

Harry Vandermark, clerk, Mills Hotel, N.Y.

E.W. Platt, clerk, 610 East 138th Street, N.Y.

Harry Bosworth, clothing business, Fourth Avenue and Eighth Street, N.Y.,
residence, Hallett's Point, Astoria, Long Island.

John H. Blume, who was a clerk in Pettingil's Advertising Agency,
residence,
No. 411, North Twenty-seventh Street, N.Y.

Frank Langhorn, photographer, Plainfield, N.J.

William L. Bowron, leader of the Fourteenth Street Theater orchestra, N.Y.
A member of New York No. 1

Thomas G. Riggs, actor, now residing in Australia.

The deceased members are:

Charles Algernon Vivian, comic singer.

M.G. Ashe, Photographer, wh died in New Orleans of yellow fever in 1868.

William Carlton, Irish comedian.

William Sheppard, Negro minstrel.

George F. McDonald, Actor

J.W. Wilton, wood-turner. In Wilton's case there has never been any positive intelligence of death, but he has not been heard from for a period of fifteen years.

It was he who made the original small ebony gavel, which is now in the possession of the G.E.R. for the purpose of being handed over, at New Orleans, to the Grand Lodge for perpetual preservation.

The popularity of the new organization soon caused it to overtax the capacity of the boarding house parlors. Accordingly new quarters were secured in a portion of the building, No. 17 Delancey Street...

Continuing to grow in numbers and financial strength, steps were taken for placing the new society on a more enduring basis than that of the first crude beginning. It seemed necessary to secure a more dignified title than the one first adopted, and the proper selection became a matter of grave consideration. The members of the committee to select a new name were Charles Vivian, Richard Steirly, Thomas G. Riggs, Harry Vandermark and George F. McDonald.

Vivian, mindful of the English society of which he had been a member, favored the name of 'Buffaloes,' but the majority were desirous of a designation purely American in its suggestions, and finally, on Sunday, February 16, 1868, the name of 'Elk' was adopted by a vote of 6 to 7, whereupon Thomas Riggs arose and said, he was glad to be an Elk, as he had been born on Elk Street, in the city of Buffalo. (Note: One can't help but wonder if the name Buffalo was not selected because of its use in England. If any animal was purely American in its suggestion, it was the Buffalo, whose numbers in America have been estimated to be from 30,000,000 to 60,000,000, and in 1870 were approximately 5,000,000.)

There can be no doubt but that the date given above is correct as the natal period of the B.P.O.E. This is shown both by the date upon the original Constitution and also upon the first banner carried by the Order. As a further and complete confirmation, the first certificate given to Devout Elders in 1871 contains this date, likewise the original charters of New York and Philadelphia Lodges.

The first printed copy of the Constitution, rules and regulations adopted (1868) is a little black book of twelve pages, 2 ½ x 3 inches in size...Photographed pages then taken were subsequently published in the Antler. It can be found in the latter publication on page 28 of Vol. 1, NO 3, August 1895...More information about this organization can be found in the following reference for this text: