

# **Charles Algernon Sidney Richardson Vivian**

**1842 - 1880**

## **Founder: Benevolent & Protective Order of Elks**

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### **Vivian, An Elk Myth**

(By Caryl Coleman, PER New Rochelle Lodge No. 756, Past District Deputy New York Southeast)  
This is a Myth believed by Coleman. However, earlier research has Elkdom agreeing that Vivian was the founder of Elkdom and very popular among that circle.

It is conceded the world over that every thinking man is not merely interested in all that relates to his fellow-man, but also, as a rule, he is especially interested largely to the exclusion of all else, in some one line of thought or specified human endeavor or specific problem. In other words, that every intelligent man has a hobby. The writer of this article is no exception to the rule, as in very truth history and biography have always, from his earliest youth, been to him of far greater importance than any other subjects of study. It is not surprising, therefore, that upon his joining the Order of Elks that his attention was particularly directed to its history and the biographies of its founders.

After his initiation and upon becoming acquainted with the historical traditions of the Order, his mind was filled with wonder that so much of intrinsic worth could have come out of so slight a beginning, that such an aimless, haphazard convivial club as the "Jolly Corks" could have possibly given birth to the organization, one destined to being sunshine into the lives of hundreds of men, proving to them a veritable elixir of a joyous life. As time went on and becoming more and more familiar with the daily life of earnest Elks and its far - reaching happy results, his wonder increased, but with the wonder came doubt, and finally this distrustfulness, ended in a total misbelief in the truthfulness of the current history. This skepticism was further strengthened by a searchful inquiry among the older members of the Order as to the origin of some of the traditions, and by more careful scrutiny of the so-called documentary evidence in their favor, but above all upon studying the organic structure of the organization, where he found under its

apparent simplicity a subtle governing, compelling and enabling statutory power of great vitality and pregnant force, in union with ethical teachings of the utmost directness and value, accompanied with a sincere spirit of toleration , and all dominated by a generous good fellowship --- a guileless brotherly love. The writer coming to this knowledge very naturally, and of logical necessity, concluded that the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks was an offspring, not of the “Jolly Corks,” but of intellects far above the average of hearts unusually tender and charitable, of men with far-seeing minds; ones while keenly alive to the faults and weaknesses of human nature, nevertheless believing they could make the stumbling - blocks of life stepping-stones to a full, loyal and loving appreciation of the fundamental virtues of Charity, Justice, Brotherly Love and Fidelity.

Traditions said the writer was wrong, that the Order was the creation of one man. His reply was, if this is true, he must indeed have been a veritable genius , a man of consummate ability, whose charity was so great and unusual that he could only write the faults of his brothers on the sand. he then asked the following questions. Who was this remarkable man, this creator of the only fraternity in existence that has succeeded in holding its members together in the sweet bonds of brotherly love in spite of their various beliefs, opinions and racial antipathies? The very things which had heretofore held men apart and often divided the world amid tears and bloodshed. The current tradition answers one “Charles Algeron Sidney Vivian,” and Englishman of good family, the son of a clergyman of the Established Church , born at Exeter , in Devonshire, on the 22nd of October, 1842, and emigrated to the United States at the end of October in 1867, where he remained until his death, in the thirty-eighth year of his age, at Leadville on the 20th of March 1880. This statement sounded well, but the inquirer was in doubt as to its truth, and upon investigation found, brief as it was, that there was very little He was then directed to an amplified biography of the alleged founder of the Order, only to find it bristling with errors --- a pure fiction.

If this avowed founder had any right to his three surnames, the most aristocratic ones in the British peerage and landed gentry, he was at least by descent a gentleman, if he was the son of an Anglican clergyman his boyhood would have been past in an atmosphere of culture and refinement , but in truth he had no right to any one of these patrician names, he was not the son of a clergyman and was devoid of gentleness even in the roughest form. His true name was Charley Richardson, the son of a small shopkeeper, and underbred, a common place, lower class Englishman of very limited education and doubtful morals; a music hall singer of some ability, but devoid of all originality, and whose highest aspirations in life were circumscribed to put it poetically, by “wine, woman and song.” Such, at least, is the testimony of all

knew him. Truly, it is inconceivable that this man could possibly have founded the Order of Elks. A claim he himself never made; moreover he did not even claim membership, but on the contrary, he told his brother that he could have been a member of the Order when it was first established, but did not. There was a reason, which he did not tell, why he failed to be an Elk, for, in fact his application was rejected by New York Lodge No. 1, on Sunday evening , June 14, 1868.

Charley Richardson's relation to Elkdom can be briefly, yet fully stated as follows: In his twenty-fifth year he deserted his wife and family in England, drifted to New York, arriving there on or about the end of October, 1867, and almost at once obtained an engagement at Butler's American Theatre, 472 Broadway. Forming the acquaintance of a number of show people he introduced to their attention and played upon them the now well-known English "Cork Trick". Later on some of the victims of the trick, together with Richardson, agreed to buy their beer in common on Saturday, so that they might have it to drink on Sunday in spite of the excise law, which at that time prohibited the sale of intoxicants on that day. This drinking club, it can be called a club, had no other object, it never had a constitution, by-laws or ritual, no higher aim than mutual amusement, and its members, few in number, by mere chance, not of set purpose, called themselves, among themselves, "Jolly Corks". Among its members there were a few clever men, led by one George F. McDonald, an actor of no mean ability, to whom this little weekly gathering suggested a thought of value, and they were led to believe that upon that thought and their mutual association there might be built something in the way of an organization of permanent and lasting benefit. Richardson, with some of his friends of like, at once opposed the movement, but they were outvoted and McDonald's motion: "We resolve ourselves into a benevolent order, and that a committee be appointed to draft rules and a ritual and to select a name" prevailed.

At a meeting of the Jolly Corks, held on Sunday, February 2, 1868, the committee reported, but the same was laid over until Sunday, February 16th. After a long discussion the report was adopted by a vote of 8 to 7. Vivian voted with the minority. The committee was continued with the same chairman, George McDonald, and directed to prepare a ritual, which he did, and it was approved at the meeting on Sunday, May 31, 1868. Vivian was not at this meeting. From this time the whole matter drifted without any definite action, probably because the membership was about equally divided :one side holding for the change, while the others were satisfied to let things remain as they were , but on Sunday, June 14, 1868, a division took place, those in favor of the new organization held a meeting on that day at 193 Bowery ,with George W. Thompson in the chair , and then and there instituted the Mother Lodge of Elks. On the same day the opposing party held a meeting at their old place, 17 Delancy Street, with Charlie Richardson (alias Charles Vivian) preceding. The above date and these two meetings mark the permanent separation, each set of men thereafter going their own particular way, the "Jolly Corks" to a short and useful life, the Elks to a wonderful future, gathering to its ranks men of the broadest minds and liberal thoughts and everywhere practicing unostentatiously the virtues of Charity, Justice, Brotherly Love and Fidelity until it became a permanent and glorious American fraternity with thousands of members.

The writer, finding he was right in his doubt as to the reliability of many of the traditions of the Order and that Charles Richardson, alias Charles Vivian , was not the founder of Elkdom , but bitterly opposed to its inception , he again asked the question : who was its creator ? On further study he found it was not the creation of

any one mind, but the outcome of a number of minds, an evolution of a composite thought, whose history is yet to be written.

Why this Vivian story should have lived so long in the face of the evidence against its authenticity is hard to understand. It is, indeed, time that this myth was laid in its grave forever.

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