



1868-1878

From Corks to Elks

A GREAT VOYAGE of a century and a half that has been shared by millions of members of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks began with the arrival in Manhattan in November 1867 of a young Englishman named Charles Vivian, who could hardly have guessed what the future had in store for him. Vivian was a talented singer and performer who quickly found a place for himself in New York's theatrical scene. His charm, generosity, and good humor helped establish him as the leader of a loosely organized group of performers who came to be known as the Jolly Corks. The lighthearted name reflected their merry demeanor in the city's taverns and their requirement that each member carry a cork on his person at all times.



Unfortunately, Vivian and the Jolly Corks found themselves with no place to spend their Sundays, thanks to New York's excise laws, which dictated that all pubs, bars, and other

Charles Vivian was a talented singer and performer whose charisma helped him found the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks.

places of entertainment be closed that day. For this reason, they decided to meet each Sunday in the attic above Vivian's place of residence—Mrs. Giesman's boarding

house on Elm Street. The first few meetings were such a rousing and loud success that Mrs. Giesman asked Vivian to take his group elsewhere; consequently, the Jolly Corks found a room to rent and kept the fun going.

As they met and shared their good company, the Jolly Corks also looked out for each other. If it turned out that one of their number was missing because he was sick or out of work, the others would take up a collection and send a few dollars around to help the absent

member in his troubles. In short order, some of the Jolly Corks decided that they should make this benevolence more formal, and they put forth the suggestion that they should change their group to form “a benevolent order, and that a committee be appointed to draft rules and a ritual and to select a name.”

Vivian approved of the suggestion and asked the committee to consider the name of “Buffaloes,” after the Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes, into which he had been initiated in England. However, other Corks preferred that an original and uniquely American animal be chosen to serve as the group’s name and symbol and settled on the elk, which was known for its peaceful but valiant nature and the beauty of its antlers. On February 16, 1868, the assembled Jolly Corks elected by the margin of a single vote to name themselves after the elk, and the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks was officially born.



This photo shows ten of the fifteen Jolly Corks who voted to create the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks. They are (from left) E. W. Platt, Frank Langhorne, William Carleton, William Sheppard, Richard Steirly, Charles Vivian, John Kent, Henry Vandemark, Harry Bosworth, and M. G. Ash.

The new Order would be familiar to a modern Elk in some particulars—the Eleven O’Clock Toast and the singing of “Auld Lang Syne” were both quickly established as traditions, and the first Lodge of Sorrows was held in 1870—but the organization was also somewhat different than it is today. For example, Vivian’s title as the first leader of the lodge was right honorable primo, not exalted ruler (although the current titles of exalted ruler, esteemed loyal knight, and so forth were soon adopted). Also, instead of a single initiation, the new Order had two degrees of membership, and only the second-degree members were allowed to propose new members or decide on the disbursement of the Order’s funds. Finally, instead of a membership card, a secret password that changed on a regular basis was used to allow members admission to the lodge.

Vivian himself was never initiated into the second degree of membership. A simmering argument within the Order over whether it should be open to anyone desiring to join (Vivian’s position) or more narrowly focused on the needs of performing artists came to a head after the Elks’ first major fund-raiser, which was organized while

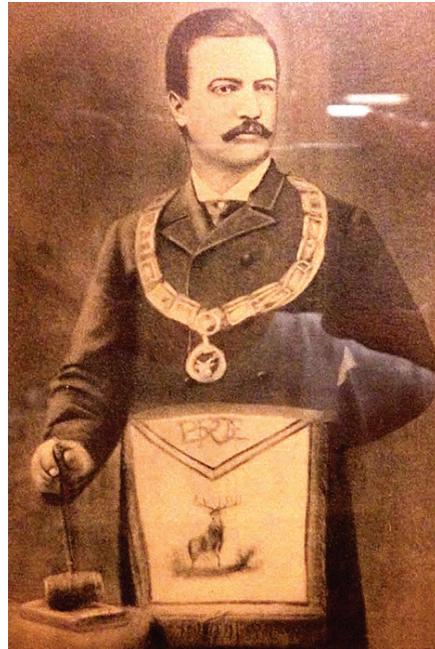
Vivian was out of town and did not include his name on the publicity notices. A rowdy meeting during which some members threatened to expel Vivian broke up with no resolution, but when Vivian and those who had supported him attempted to enter the lodge the following week, they found that the password had been changed and they had been frozen out of the Order.

Some of the original Jolly Corks were later readmitted to the Order and apologies were made to them for the injustice that this expulsion represented, but there is no record of Vivian himself returning to the New York Lodge. He was, however, welcomed by Elks elsewhere once the Order spread; a biography written by Vivian's widow mentions more than one visit to the Chicago Lodge, and when the Boston Lodge was established, Vivian was invited to be the headline performer for the lodge's first fund-raiser.

Despite this early controversy, the original lodge in New York continued to grow and develop. The first set of officers' jewels was issued in 1870, and the lodge eventually had to relocate to a larger building. During this time, friendly relations were established between the New York Elks and the Jolly Corks chapter in Philadelphia, which Vivian had established while touring that city. Eventually, the Philadelphia Jolly Corks applied to form their own lodge of Elks.

This required the reorganization of the fledgling Order, and an "Exalted Grand Lodge" was created on March 10, 1871, with George Green as the first Exalted Grand Ruler, which was the highest office in the Grand Lodge at that time. The New York Lodge was issued the first charter as a subordinate lodge of the Order the same day, and the Philadelphia Lodge was issued charter number two on March 12.

The theatrical performers who made up the backbone of the new Order were widely traveled folk, particularly along the corridor stretching from New York and Boston in the northeast to San Francisco on the West Coast, and it didn't take long for Elks far away from home to desire a lodge of their own in the West. In 1873, a letter was sent by a group of Elks in San Francisco to the Grand Lodge requesting a charter for their city. The problem was that the existing rules specified that seven second-degree members needed to be present at the formation of a new lodge. While travel across the continent was immeasurably easier since the opening of



George Thompson, the first man to bear the title of "exalted ruler," is shown in his Elks regalia, which starting in 1876 included an official apron.

the transcontinental railroad in 1869, it still proved too difficult to get that many second-degree members to make the trip. In 1875, the Grand Lodge removed this roadblock by reducing the requirement to three members, and on April 11, 1876, San Francisco Lodge No. 3 was instituted, and the Order now stretched from coast to coast.

Following close on the heels of the San Francisco Lodge's institution was the organization of several more lodges along the primary east-west transportation corridor, and by 1878, at the end of the Order's first decade, there were lodges in ten cities, including Chicago, Cincinnati, Baltimore, Louisville, Saint Louis, Boston, and Pittsburgh. In a single decade, the Order's membership had grown to 820 members, and a small band of Sunday revelers had become a national organization, which was poised for even more dramatic growth over the coming decades. ■