

Birth and History of the Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben

Photographs Specialty for The Bee—
By Louis R. Bostwick.



ALTHOUGH it has recently passed its fifth birthday anniversary and is hardly, therefore, entitled to claim attention because of novelty, much less on the pretense of antiquity, the order of the Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben has attained such prominence in the social, commercial and civic affairs of Omaha that a brief sketch of its birth and career is entitled to place in the archives of Omaha. It was in the winter of 1894-5 that this city through the efforts of the Omaha Fair and Speed association succeeded in wresting the location of the state fair from the capital city and fixing it in the metropolis for the following five years. Omaha's participation in the contest was surrounded by conditions that awakened great local enthusiasm and the people of the city were so elated that they set out to do everything in their power to make the fair a great success if possible. The grounds selected were located a considerable distance from the central sections of the city, but while it was at that time thought that this fact would be of great disadvantage to the city, it was not suspected that it would prove so great a disadvantage to the fair as subsequent events proved it to be.

Hardly had the location of the state fair in Omaha for five years been announced when, carrying out a promise made to local business men to induce them to subscribe the funds needed to secure it, the Fair and Speed association appointed a committee, with John E. Utt, secretary of the Commercial club, as its chairman, to devise a series of evening entertainments in Omaha for the amusement of visitors attending the fair.

It appears to have been Mr. Utt who conceived the idea of giving a series of evening parades similar to those presented in St. Louis and Memphis. He presented this idea at one of the preliminary meetings, and when Frank Colpetzer suggested that it might be possible to purchase the floats and paraphernalia used at some carnival city for that purpose he at once inspired J. O. Phillippi of the Missouri Pacific railway to take the matter up with officials at New Orleans and ascertain whether or not this could be effected, and if so, upon what terms. The result of the negotiations was that within a short time a proposition was received from H. M. Isaacson of New Orleans for the sale of the floats used in that city.

Date of Birth Uncertain.

On what date the order of Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben as such was born appears to be not a matter of authentic history, for it did not acquire the name for some time after its organization. Its records, however, extend back to March 28, 1895, on which date a meeting of retailers of the city was held at the Commercial club rooms and the necessity of providing evening entertainments to hold the crowds in Omaha was discussed and the mystic carnival was suggested as the most attractive plan.

At the original meeting, the records show, discussion of the plan was participated in by J. E. Utt, R. S. Wilcox, W. R. Bennett, H. H. Hardy, E. E. Bryson, Frank Wilcox, Walter Jardine, H. J. Penfold, Clement Chase, A. Hospe, William Lisle Dickey, Dudley Smith, Gus Renze and Matt Daugherty, the latter of Ogallala. R. S. Wilcox was chairman and Mr. Dickey secretary of the meeting. At that meeting it was decided to offer prizes for competition among Nebraska women for a suitable name for the fall festivities, and a committee, with H. J. Penfold as its chairman, was appointed to solicit the assistance of business men generally. At this meeting the proposition of Mr. Isaacson was read contemplating the sale of the New Orleans floats to Omaha.

Another meeting was held three days later, by which time great interest had been aroused and the attendance was large. It was reported by Dudley Smith that the railways had agreed to give \$2,500 to the project, and that the banks had expressed a readiness to assist. At this meeting steps were instituted to secure concessions from the gas and electric light companies for

the illumination of streets during the festivities and it was decided to have four parades during the last week in September. At the suggestion of Mr. Utt a committee was appointed to devise social attractions to be given in connection with the parades. The committee comprised Messrs. Clement C. Chase, John E. Utt, W. R. Bennett and O. S. Davenport. The great annual Ak-Sar-Ben ball was the conception of this committee. To Mr. and Mrs. Chase and the committee belongs the creation of the pretty and imposing ceremonies of the crowning of the queen, the appointment of the many ladies of the court and maids of honor and, in fact, all the courtly ceremonies attending the ball and coronation.

At a meeting of the association April 5 an executive committee was elected, comprising R. S. Wilcox, president; Dudley Smith, vice president; William Lisle Dickey, secretary; H. J. Penfold, treasurer; C. C. Belden, Thomas A. Fry, Clement C. Chase, L. M. Rheem and E. E. Bryson. The official list, known then as the executive committee, came afterward to be known as the Board of Governors of Ak-Sar-Ben, and at some period during the year three additional names were added, increasing the number to twelve, as it has ever since remained. The added names were those of John E. Utt, Walter Jardine and E. M. Bartlett. In fact, these names appear to have been chosen at the start, but the records of the order do not show it, nor is there any note of how or when these persons became a part of the executive committee.

A PROCLAMATION

BY THE KING: To our loyal subjects of Quivera; to the strangers within our gates—Greeting most courteous and kindly. It is our royal pleasure, following the goodly custom of our predecessors in kingly rule, to mark the event of our Coronation by festivities, gorgeous and prolonged:

And we by these presents do set apart the 24th until the 30th days inclusive of the 9th month, as the time for our dizzy Oriental Carnival—the 26th day thereof for our parade by daylight—the 27th day thereof, at 8 o'clock of the evening, for our entry in state into our City of Omaha, with our Loyal Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben and our entire court, at which time we will receive the keys of the city, at the hands of our trusted Mayor, in token of our undisputed sway—and on the evening of the 28th day, we, and our royal consort, will be present at the Ak-Sar-Ben Den when will be held the solemn ceremonies of Coronation and Mystic Revelries:

Now, therefore, We, Ak-Sar-Ben VI, King of Quivera, Duke of the Seven Cities of Cibola, Grand Master of the Corn Belt, and in the coarse language of the unregenerate "The Whole Push," do command and enjoin all peoples to attend with joy unlimited and ecstasy without bounds. Let everywhere the erstwhile staid and busy citizen caper wildly on one leg and carol forth the glad-some yip and let the atmosphere be rent into thousands of splinters. For behold, it is timely! See on every side the plethoric dinner pail; the great multitude of unpunched meal tickets, and the vast harvested crops which can only be expressed in bushels, with a massive figure followed by ciphers to the end of the chapter!!!!!!

Done at our castle of Tinnivelly Panipat in the year MDCCCC of Quivera VI. **AK-SAR-BEN VI.**
Attest, SAMSON. "Curfew shall NOT ring tonight."

At the same meeting it was decided to adopt as a name for the fall festivities "The Feast of Mondamin," suggested by the Indian legends assigning to the god of that name control of the corn or the harvest. This name was proposed by Miss McDonough of Omaha, who won the prize offered by the association for the suggestion of the happiest theme for the feast and received the reward of \$10 therefor.

Given a Mystic Name.

At this meeting also the association was given a name. It had been called the Retailers' committee and Retailers' association, but on motion of Mr. Penfold it was decided to call it thereafter the Omaha Business Men's association. It was shortly after this that Dudley Smith proposed as a name for a secret organization for the enactment of a mystic ritual, which, it was urged, would intensify interest in the project and the annual festivities of the association, the Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben, and such were the mystic and mythical rites and ceremonies woven around the organization that it was long before the general public grasped the fact that the name proposed was but the name of the state spelled backward.

Before the plan for the mysticisms to be practiced had borne fruit the organization appointed a committee to go to New Orleans and complete the purchase of the floats needed in the Mondamin parade. This committee, which comprised E. M. Bartlett, Dudley Smith, W. R. Bennett and Gus Renze, left Omaha Sunday evening, April 28.

These gentlemen stopped at Kansas City and St. Louis on their way south to learn what they could concerning the mystic organizations and ceremonies of those cities. At St. Louis they were shown the den in which were being constructed the floats of the Veiled Prophets and were made the recipients of many distinguished courtesies during their short stay, acquiring at the same time much useful information of the character they most sought. Upon reaching New Orleans they were shown every courtesy by the people of that city. Captain Isaacson explained to them the details of the various parades in the annual festivities of that city. It appears that there were three, each conducted by a separate organization. They were known as the Rex, the Comus and the Proteus parades, and their inspection convinced them that the Rex parade was the only available one

