

# Ak-Sar-Ben's Place in Prosperity of Nebraska



THOMAS A. FRY, PRESIDENT.



FRED METZ, VICE PRESIDENT.



MEL UHL, SECRETARY.



H. J. PENFOLD, TREASURER.



W. S. JARDINE.

ORGANIZED in 1895 for the purpose of attracting to Omaha the people of the surrounding country, and to assist in that way the meetings of the Nebraska State fair which was then located in this city, the Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben has come to be one of the most important festival societies in the United States, ranking with the Mardi Gras festival societies of New Orleans and Mobile and surpassing them in many respects, for the Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben are bound down by no traditions and are free to vary the nature of their displays in a manner which is impossible to Rex, Proteus or Comus, which by many years of adherence to one line of display are now expected to follow that line and no innovation would be tolerated. By innovation in parades and other forms of entertainment the Omaha society has preserved its freedom of action and is as free today to introduce novelties as it was the day it was first organized.

It was the retail dealers' organization which conceived the idea of the carnival. It has been the wholesale dealer which has perpetuated it, and today it is looked upon by the jobber as one of his most effective instruments for the purpose of increasing his sales and bringing him into friendly relations with his customers. The novel feature of the Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben is the annual initiations, which, beginning early in the summer, continue until a week or two before the parade and ball. It is these initiations which bring the people together and which give the order its reputation in the larger cities of the country. A parade, be it never so meritorious, is but for a day or night. Those who see it will be pleased, will marvel and will speak of it, but a series of meetings extending over several months affords opportunity for many to enjoy it, and as the plan of admitting visitors to the city free of charge upon the request of a local member of the order was early adopted there are few travelers who make this city who have not made it a point to reach here on Monday night so they could join friends at the den. There are men from New York, Chicago and other cities who visit the den annually and consider it as much a part of their business in Omaha to be present once at least at each annual initiation as it is to visit the trade.

The Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben is a corporation duly chartered by the state. Its stockholders are the Board of Governors, which is the governing power of the order, and who have complete charge of the festival and the work at the den. To keep the board fresh in ideas it has been the practice for a number of the members to retire at the end of each season, and fresh blood would be added, which, in its second year, would have much of the responsibility placed upon it. For four years, beginning with 1895, R. S. Wilcox was president of the board. In 1899 he was succeeded by Thomas A. Fry, who has held the place since that time, and with one exception this office has been changed less frequently than any other. In 1895 Dudley Smith was vice president. He was succeeded by Thomas A. Fry in 1897 and two years later Walter S. Jardine was elected to that position upon the elevation of Mr. Fry to the presidency. This year he was succeeded by Fred Metz. W. Lyle Dickey was the first secretary. He retired at the end of the first year and was succeeded by Clement Chase. The next year H. Vance Lane was elected to that position, and in 1898 was succeeded by A. H. Noyes, who continued there until his removal from the city in 1901, when Mel Uhl was elected and has served since that time.

Through all of the years the difficult position of treasurer has been held by one man, whose devotion to the interests of the order has been exceeded by none and whose enthusiasm has been perennial. Members of the Board of Governors may come and may go. Ideas may change and the scope of the order change, as it did three years ago, but the backbone of the board, the man who has not only planned to secure the sinews of war, but who has been practically the actuary of the public part of the work, has never changed. To the mind of the average knight who has been in the order year after year the strength



J. M. HENDRIE.



GOULD P. DIETZ.



C. M. WILHELM.



EDGAR ALLEN.

of Samson is found in his personal representative, Henry J. Penfold, the treasurer of the society. From his long connection with the order, being one of the three members of the present Board of Governors who were present on that night in the Commercial club rooms when the society was formed, Mr. Penfold has since that time always been the first to get to work on the annual hustle for funds. The other two members of the board who were present and placed in that position the first year are Thomas A. Fry, the president, and Walter S. Jardine, chairman of the carnival committee, who has served several terms as vice president.

But the success of the annual festival is not all due to the Board of Governors, for contributors to the fund for the parade and those who have joined the order from year to year have had occasion to come into contact with a "hustling committee," a band of loyal knights, holding no rank above that of their fellows, who each year devote time and labor to securing from the residents of the city the cash necessary for the annual production of the features of the festival. This committee has been headed since the first by J. D. Weaver, who probably knows as much about the work required in Omaha as any man in the city. The hustling committee consists of twenty-four men, many of whom have served for several years. After the work has been started in the summer they make a canvass of the town and secure funds for the parade and membership for the order. Each year they try to excel the work of the preceding one, but so far 1898, the exposition year, has been the high mark for membership, although it will be closely pressed by the present year. When the initiations closed Monday evening there were more than 900 members present, and, while no more will be initiated, it will be possible to enroll a few between that time and the annual ball, so sanguine members of the hustling committee still hope to exceed the membership of 1898.

Since the beginning of the order the practical execution of the plans of the society at the den and in the electrical parades has been entrusted to one man, Gus A. Renze, whose artistic ability has developed with the passing of time until he stands unrivaled as a designer of floats and of paraphernalia in the United States. Of the subjects for the parades and the text of the initiatory ceremonies suggestions have been made by a number of persons, but the author par excellence of the Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben is George H. West, who has brought to the work a trained mind and an originality of thought which has won the plaudits of the multitude.

It is impossible at this time to give a statement of the annual cost of the fall festivities and few care to know what it has been, as all who have contributed are



M. A. HALL.



R. C. HOWE.



L. L. KOUNTZE.

satisfied with the investment; but the expense of the festival has increased as its scope broadened. With but parades and the ball the expense was comparatively light, but two years ago the board conceived the idea of holding an annual carnival and secured temporary possession of Douglas street between Seventh and Twentieth streets. Here were brought together amusement features of various kinds and a nominal admission fee of 19 cents was charged, while on the inside a large number of free attractions were given and concessions were made to other entertainment companies, so that the grounds rivaled the midway of a fair. While not undertaken as an enterprise for profit, and the admission fee being charged only to provide for the expense of the features, the board was surprised at the close of the first carnival year—that of 1900—to find that it had on hand a surplus of about \$8,000. This gave them an opportunity of securing much needed improvements in the way of foundations for floats and permanent investments of other sorts. A larger and finer carnival for the following year was planned and the plans were carried into execution when the assassination of President McKinley cast a gloom over the country which materially decreased the attendance at the carnival, while his death during the festivities destroyed the hope of the board for the financial success of the enterprise. The second carnival practically wiped out the surplus of the board, but they had demonstrated the feasibility of the idea, and this year their plans are on a grander scale than ever, with every hope of the

success which they failed to score last season.

Speaking of the financial side of the proposition Treasurer Penfold said, "When the knights first began their work we had no idea that it would become a feature of the city's social and business life and, therefore, no attempt was made to preserve the records. We have no complete record of the financial affairs of the order previous to 1897. It is not only the financial statements which are lost, but much which would have been of great interest now has been destroyed. If we had known that the society was to have continued there would have been several things done differently."

As to the management of the financial part of the affair, there are two funds which are kept distinct on the books of the treasurer. All money to be used in the parade fund is raised as such, while the money raised from initiations is devoted exclusively to maintaining the den and the annual ball. The Board of Governors never goes in debt. If the cash is not on hand the enterprise is not undertaken and the expenditures in the annual festivities are strictly regulated by the actual cash on hand. The result of this policy has been that when the carnival grounds produced a net revenue it was all profit and turned into the general fund of the order. The order gives employment to a small force of men practically all the year and while the floats are under construction a large force of skilled workmen are engaged.

The Board of Governors since the or-

ganization of the society have been:

1895—R. S. Wilcox, W. S. Jardine, H. J. Penfold, Dudley Smith, Clement Chase, W. Lyle Dickey, T. A. Fry, E. E. Bryson, E. M. Bartlett, H. Vance Lane, W. R. Bennett, J. E. Utt.

1896—E. M. Bartlett, T. A. Fry, W. S. Jardine, O. D. Kiplinger, H. Vance Lane, E. E. Bryson, H. J. Penfold, R. S. Wilcox, Clement Chase, W. R. Bennett, Dudley Smith, W. H. McCord.

1897—E. M. Bartlett, T. A. Fry, W. S. Jardine, O. D. Kiplinger, H. Vance Lane, E. E. Bryson, H. J. Penfold, R. S. Wilcox, Clement Chase, W. R. Bennett, Dudley Smith, W. H. McCord.

1898—E. E. Bryson, W. S. Jardine, H. J. Penfold, R. S. Wilcox, T. A. Fry, A. H. Noyes, H. Vance Lane, W. R. Bennett, E. P. Peck, O. D. Kiplinger, Fred Metz, W. M. Glass.

1899—H. Vance Lane, W. M. Glass, E. P. Peck, O. D. Kiplinger, Fred Metz, J. G. Martin, H. J. Penfold, W. S. Jardine, E. E. Bryson, R. S. Wilcox, T. A. Fry, A. H. Noyes.

1900—W. S. Jardine, H. J. Penfold, T. A. Fry, R. S. Wilcox, J. G. Martin, H. Vance Lane, Fred Metz, M. C. Peters, Edgar Allen, Mel Uhl, George Cronk, A. H. Noyes.

1901—T. A. Fry, Mel Uhl, W. S. Jardine, J. G. Martin, R. S. Wilcox, Fred Metz, George Cronk, H. Vance Lane, Gould Dietz, M. C. Peters, Edgar Allen.

1902—H. J. Penfold, Fred Metz, Gould Dietz, Edgar Allen, C. M. Wilhelm, M. A. Hall, Mel Uhl, T. A. Fry, W. S. Jardine, J. M. Hendrie, R. C. Howe, L. L. Kountze.