

First King Ak-Sar-Ben Tells Story of the Order's Founding



OW Ak-Sar-Ben originated and came to be a vital part of the commercial and social life of Omaha is told in detail in the following story by Edmund M. Bartlett, first king of Quivera:

"The movement which led to the founding of Ak-Sar-Ben resulted from the business depression in which this city found itself in 1892, after the real estate bubble had burst. In the first years of the boom Omaha enjoyed unusual prosperity. Real estate prices went sky high—lots several miles from the city were sold at fabulous prices—the people spent their money and the city became independent. Reports were sent out that Omaha had 140,000 inhabitants and that it was the big city of the mid-west.

"Among the merchants of the city was no concerted action to bring small town merchants here to trade. There seemed to be a feeling that each business man would get along by himself if he attended to his own business and did not try to co-operate with other men. So independent an attitude did the people of this city assume that out in the state they became known as the 'Omaha hogs,' and the citizens of the smaller towns did not feel very friendly toward our people.

"When the bottom fell out of things in 1893 the business men of this city were suddenly brought to realize that something would have to be done to encourage trade and instill life into the wholesale and retail business of Omaha. Because of the lack of attention from our business men in other years the merchants of the smaller towns of the state had not come here to buy and now, when the depression was upon us, our leading men came to realize that some means would have to be devised to win back the Nebraska trade. To make plans for winning the favor of the small towns a meeting of the Commercial club was called and the situation which Omaha was up against was gone over carefully. Several ways of promoting trade were suggested and it was finally decided to try to get the state fair, which then was being held at Lincoln, transferred to this city. A committee of the Commercial club members was selected and told to go to Lincoln, see the board of state fair directors and get them to remove the fair here the next September.

"Well, the delegation visited the directors of the fair at Lincoln, argued with them for several hours and secured their promise to give Omaha the fair the next year. The committee came back from the Capital City feeling mighty fine over the success of its trip and believing that Omaha had found a way to deal with the commercial stringency. The fair grounds were located four miles



EDMOND M. BARTLETT, ESQ.,
King Ak-Sar-Ben I.

west of the city and we figured that the small town visitors would come to Omaha, get acquainted with our people and become reconciled to the business men here. Lincoln had each year been filled with the farmers and other people and its merchants had been greatly benefited. But we were to be disappointed in our expectations.

"When the fair opened the state visitors, instead of coming into Omaha, simply took trains that went to the fair grounds, saw the show, ate there and then returned to their homes without coming into Omaha proper. That, of course, was just what we did not want; we wanted the visitors to come into Omaha and see us. We did not care much whether they saw the fair. Our purpose in getting the fair here was to bring the state people to

Omaha, and it had failed. With that situation confronting us we knew we would have to do something else, and we did.

"Another meeting of the Commercial club was called to devise new means of winning back the state people to our city. It was then the spirit that was to make Omaha a very progressive city began to show itself. Men in the meeting said Omaha would forge to the front if they had to spend all their time in working for that end. Before the meeting closed it was resolved to get up some kind of a street pageant to attract visitors to Omaha, and a committee was appointed to visit St. Louis and New Orleans to gather ideas from the parades held in those cities.

"The committee was composed of William R. Bennett, Dudley Smith and myself. Gus Renze, an artist, was selected to accompany us so that he might get some ideas for decorating floats and advise us in matters in case we should decide to make any purchases.

"At St. Louis we saw the system employed for their carnival, the Velled Prophet, and were much impressed. We admired their floats and were greatly attracted by their arrangements. The Commercial club of that city banqueted us and entertained us royally. We decided to go on to New Orleans before making any decision.

"At the Louisiana city we were entertained in a manner to rival our treatment at St. Louis. We saw the parades of Comus, Proteus and Rex, all features of the Mardi Gras carnival. Comus and Proteus are night parades and the Rex a day parade. We were most impressed by Rex and decided to buy the paraphernalia of that parade. The costumes were elegant and we felt much pleased with our selection. When these were brought to Omaha the other members of the club also thought we had made a wise choice.

"On our way home from New Orleans, however, we met a Catholic priest from Kansas City who gave us some very good suggestions for the ritual which we were to adopt for Ak-Sar-Ben. This priest's name was Enright—Father Enright—and to him Dudley Smith explained the purpose of our enterprise and how we planned to carry it out. It was Dudley Smith, by the way, who originated the name Ak-Sar-Ben, which is Nebraska spelled backward. He told Father Enright the name we had decided upon for our carnival and that we had improved over the ritual of the New Orleans carnival by adding a little horseplay to ours. He informed him that we in-

tended to have a kingdom with a king who should reign one year.

"Father Enright was so taken up with our idea that he suggested we follow out a scheme of making Ak-Sar-Ben the Seven Cities of Cibola, and take, in general, other hints from Quivera and Coronado, who sought to discover the Seven Cities. Father Enright's suggestions were accepted and we later adopted the idea of Seven Cities of Cibola for our ritual.

"It was also Father Enright who suggested that the three words in Ak-Sar-Ben each be recognized by its meaning in one of three languages. These three languages were Arabic, Hebrew and Syrian. Ak is Syrian for head of a household, Sar is Arabic for household and Ben is Hebrew for brothers in the household.

"The helpful suggestions of Father Enright were accepted and L. M. Rheem, who then was manager of the local office of the American District Telegraph company and who was prolific in thought, incorporated them into a completed ritual for Ak-Sar-Ben.

"The first meeting of the Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben was held in the old Odd Fellows' hall at Fourteenth and Dodge streets in 1895. I well remember the horseplay we had in the initiation that night. The candidates were marched upon a drawbridge that approached a castle upon a hill. The railing of the bridge was lined with wires connected to a strong battery. When the candidates walked upon the bridge it began to sway and they grabbed hold of the railing to keep from falling off. The minute their hands came in contact with it they received a strong current and had to let go. They then rushed off the bridge and were greeted on the shore by several sir knights with inflated bladders.

"After the bladder treatment the candidates were led before a skeleton and given a moral lecture on the path of life. Then they were taken to a desk to sign the constitution. The desk collapsed and through the bottom of the chair in which the candidate was seated several pins came up, causing the occupant to jump and wriggle.

"The first ball and parade of Ak-Sar-Ben was held in September, 1895. I was the first king of the carnival and rode in the parade on a float. After the parade we drove to the Den, where the coronation ceremonies took place and the ball was held. This custom was followed for two or three years and then abandoned. The king did not ride in the parade after the first three years and the grand ball was set for the night following the electrical parade. The forms and ceremonies adopted then have been maintained now for thirteen years.

"But Ak-Sar-Ben accomplished the purpose for which it was intended. It brought thousands of Nebraska people here for the first parade and started a spirit of good feeling toward Omaha. The state people began to like us and ceased calling us 'Omahogs.'"

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