



# Sagas of the Early Elks

## Vivian & The Jolly Corks



Charles Vivian

The Jolly Corks, and their role in founding the Elks is well-known to most Elks, but not always in much detail. Here then, it is, along with some rare photos.

Charles Vivian was a twenty-five year old singer from England who arrived in New York on November 15, 1867. He rapidly attained some measure of success as a variety performer. He also struck up a large and boisterous number of acquaintances in the performing world, the nucleus of what would become the Elks.

### The Jolly Gork Trick



Richard Steirly

In 1922, William T. Phillips wrote the following account of the cork trick by which Vivian and his friends used to trick new acquaintances into buying them a drink. In a way, it was the first Elks initiation! Note the colorful names of the nineteenth century performers:

*On November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1867, Dick Steirly went to the American Theatre to take notes for the purpose of orchestrating some of Vivian's songs. After the matinee, Vivian took Steirly over to 'Sandy' Spencer's place at Broadway and Fulton Street. There they met Hugh Dougherty, Cool Burgess and Henry Vandemark. The latter suggested that the party shake dice for the refreshments.*



Hugh Dougherty

*Vivian replied that he never handled the cubes, but would show them a new game. Calling for three corks he gave one each to Steirly and Vandemark, keeping the other for himself. He asked Cool Burgess to be the judge, and Dougherty to count '1-2-3.' They rehearsed the trick of each dropping his cork on the bar and picking it up as rapidly as possible, several time, the idea conveyed to the initiated being that the last man to lift his cork was to buy.*



Vandemark  
stuck for the round

*Vivian then gave the word of command, Dougherty counted. He and Steirly passed their hands over their corks while Vandemark, eager to lift his cork from the bar, was both first and last to pick it up, and consequently was 'stuck' for the round.*



Cool Burgess

### How It Worked

Ellis reports that "The prospective victim would be asked would he like to join the 'Corks,' and they being such a 'jolly' set of fellows, the candidate for admission to their circle readily assented. He would give his name to Vivian, the 'Imperial Cork,' and pay a fee of fifty cents, which amount Vivian set down in a little book he carried in his pocket for that purpose.

Each one present then produced a cork and placed it in front of him upon the bar or table; a fresh cork (generally a champagne cork) was given to the candidate, and to him was then explained that the 'Imperial Cork' would 'count three,' whereupon each one present was to seize his cork, and 'the last one to lift his cork' was to pay for the drinks for the rest of the party.

At the count of 'three' the ones in the secret would simply jump their open palms over their corks, but allowing them to remain on the bar or table; the candidate would eagerly seize his cork in haste, resolved not to be 'the last one to lift his cork,' much to his surprise to find he was the only one who had 'lifted his cork,' hence the 'last one.' So he was 'stuck for the drinks.' The 'rules' then were, now that he had become 'one of us,' that he must always carry his cork in his pocket, and whenever he met another 'Cork,' if he was asked to produce his cork at any time or place, he must do so, under the penalty of buying the challenger a drink, should he be unable to do so."



In 1868, the scene painter (and clown!) "Bob" Fraser illustrated the cork trick this way

—W. Hedges, Lodge #944, Ashland OR 2005. For more on the Jolly Corks, visit the history section of our web page: [ashlandelks.org](http://ashlandelks.org)



10 of the 15 Original Jolly Corks

L to R: EW Platt, Frank Langhorne, William Carleton, William Sheppard, Richard Steirly, Charles A Vivian, John Kent, Henry Vandemark, Harry Bosworth, & MG Ash

### The Corks Circumvent the Blue Laws

As described in *What It Means To Be An Elk*, Vivian went on to found a drinking and performance society with other theater folk: Sunday, November 17, Charlie awoke at Mrs. Giesman's Boarding House where piano player Dick Steirly had secured him lodging, only to find that the Star was closed all day Sunday, along with every single music hall, saloon, restaurant, theater and gathering place within the city limits of New York, courtesy of a strictly enforced Blue Law.

*This brand of forced idleness was not to Vivian's liking ... Over the next few weeks he began planning a solution to this predicament with his friends. He succeeded in getting the message out to a dozen other entertainers from his new circle of friends to meet at the boarding house on Sunday, December 15th. With the half dozen who already lived at Mrs. Giesman's, they proceeded that evening—one month to day after he set foot in America—to have the first real meeting of the Jolly Corks, with each of the talented attendees adding a large share of merriment to produce an impromptu variety show.*

William T. Phillips provides additional details: *At about this time the excise law was being strictly enforced, and Sunday in New York City was a very dry day. Devotees of the cork trip formed the habit of congregating at Mrs. Giesman's on this day to hold social conventions under the inspiring influence of a stock of beer laid in the night before. This little coterie styled itself the 'Corks' with Vivian as the 'Imperial Cork.' The revels of the jolly crew meeting at Mrs. Giesman's became disturbing to the other boarders and she finally required them to forego their Sunday gatherings at her house. Quarters were found at 17 Delancey Street, over a saloon kept by one Paul Sommers, where the meetings were continued. The object of the 'Corks' at this time was entirely convivial. Its membership was composed of professional and semi-professional entertainers with a sprinkling of legitimate actors. .... When the cork trick was tried upon McDonald [an actor] it amused him so that he called the coterie the 'Jolly Corks,' and as such it has gone down upon the pages of history.*

### The Funeral

Nicholson reports that "In the latter part of December—just before the holidays—Charles Vivian [and fellow corks] returning one afternoon from a funeral of a friend—Ted Quinn, of local concert hall fame—



G. F. McDonald

dropped into Tony Pastor's. There they found Billy Gray, Tony and 'Dody' Pastor, John Fielding and William Sheppard, who became interested in the story of the 'Jolly Corks,' and all of them strolled over from Pastor's to 'Sandy' Spencer's, where they found George F. McDonald and others. After hearing the story of the funeral the 'Jolly Corks' had attended, McDonald suggested that the organization should become a 'protective and benevolent society.' During the next week or ten days McDonald broached the idea to a number of Jolly Corks"



### From Corks to Elks

"At the meeting held on the 2nd of February, 1868, presided over by Charles A. Vivian, George F. McDonald offered a motion to organize 'The Jolly Corks' as a lodge along benevolent and fraternal lines and providing that a committee be appointed to formulate rules and regulations for its government, prepare a suitable ritual, and select a new name."