

THE SCOTTISH SOCIETY OF SAN ANTONIO: FORTY YEARS OF INCORPORATION

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Incorporation of the Scottish Society of San Antonio occurred on April 5, 1968. Ellis Buchanan, president of the Scottish Society, felt that it would be desirable to have a review of our history at the Annual General Membership meeting of the Society in February, 2008, marking 40 years of incorporation. As one of the few who were there and are currently active, I was asked to present such review. This led to an engrossing tour through a lot of documents and a lot of memories. Most issues of our newsletter, the *Crann Tara*, were available from 1965 through the present, with the exception of the period 1974 through 1977. Also available was a loose leaf binder, prepared by Jack Cunningham, containing several pieces of important information. To my knowledge there have been some compilations of SSSA historical information, but I am not aware of a continuing comprehensive, orderly accumulation of Scottish Society documentation, so a big part of preparation was a tour of the memory banks. The highlights discussed here include the membership and events associated with our incorporation, our participation in Hemisfair '68, and our participation in the Texas Folklife Festival.

THE EARLY YEARS

There was clear evidence of the Scottish Society of San Antonio beginnings in 1962. However, my family did not become part of the society until late in 1967. We do have recollections of descriptions of society activities prior to that time. It seems that the society was somewhat informal in structure and met about four times a year. My memory banks have the notion that the society met on special occasions, probably Hogmanay, Burns Night, Bannockburn Day, and St. Andrew's Day. This was not really clear even though there are newsletters through that period.

A monumental change in the Society began with the approach of Hemisfair '68. A relatively new group of officers saw Hemisfair as an opportunity to get the society on the map, so to speak. The basic plan that emerged was to sponsor three days of Highland Games and a Grand Tartan Ball as part of Hemisfair. Not surprisingly, a number of members had serious reservations about such involvement, and it appears that a significant number even discontinued participation in the society. Interestingly enough, it is reported that all members present at a meeting voted in favor of participation in Hemisfair '68.

Preparation for the Highland Games and the Tartan Ball were at fever pitch literally until and through the three big days. Early in the preparation effort there was concern about liability and the idea of incorporation surfaced. The incorporation procedures moved smoothly and resulted in a meeting at which there was final approval and signatures of charter members obtained. Unfortunately, a copy of these signatures could not be located. However, one of my vivid memories is that there were 32 signatures. Interestingly enough, a roster of dues paying society members in 1967 showed 60 members. This seems to reflect the drop in membership that went with incorporation.

My family was not aware of the Scottish Society until sometime in 1967. I was working at Brooks AFB and went into the medical illustrations office to get some drafting done. A man, Ralph Watson, behind the counter looked at my name tag and said "Sutherland, you should be in our Scottish Society." Shortly after that, we went to the Highland Games in Austin and quickly became caught up in Society doings. Our family is listed as new members in the December 1967 *Crann Tara*. At that time we were thoroughly caught up in preparations for Hemisfair '68.

HEMISFAIR '68, HIGHLAND GAMES AND GRAND TARTAN BALL

If a single-word description of Hemisfair'68 were called for, the word would be FANTASTIC. Our three days of Highland Games and the Grand Tartan Ball were the 21st, 22nd, and 23rd of August 1968. We had wonderful piping and dancing competitions with world class judges. We had the caber toss and tug of war for volunteer participants. We had two big, great pipe bands from Canada. The Wilkinson Sword Razor Blade Company donated a Claymore sword for presentation to the champion highland dancer and had it delivered personally. A sign of how times have changed is that the company representative carried the sword with him on the airliner. The final event was the Grand Tartan Ball at the convention center with seating for 2,000. We had the Jimmy Dorsey Band from Chicago to play for the evening and the two pipe bands from Canada performed. The place was decorated to the hilt including 50 beautiful heraldic banners from the British Embassy in Houston. This summary barely touches the surface, making it most difficult to sit here and not start detailing the multitude of events and incidents that are racing through the mind.

Back to the high, or maybe some low, points – we planned to sell 2,000 tickets for the 2,000 seats, but instead we sold 200. The plan was for proceeds from the Tartan Ball to pay all the costs of the three days and have enough left over to look into a “home” for the society. Unfortunately, our costs were about \$15,000, and records show that we were only able to cover about half of that amount. That would be a lot of money right now, but in 1968 it was all but totally overwhelming, particularly to those of us on the Board of Directors. As you can imagine, things got pretty stirred up. The Society embarked on a monumentally vigorous campaign to raise money to off-set costs. Incidentally, we heard that our outcome had an international impact as dancing judges in Highland Games competitions began to ask for payment in advance.

This is where it gets even more personal with me and my family. Without being asked, I was nominated and elected president of the Society in 1969. We did our best to continue efforts to retire the debt, and this proceeded very slowly although we were working at top speed. Our fundraising efforts included a big “garage” sale, sale of Christmas candles, magnetic signs on vehicles, clan stationery and anything else we could come up with.

Our membership had two general categories of interest. One group wanted to focus on “education” related to our Scottish culture whereas the other group wanted to have a party. To serve the whole membership we had two meetings per month, one for education and the other for a party. My wife, Nell, was constantly on the phone looking for venues for two meetings per month. Remember, we had no money. A fascinating aspect of this is that while we expected separate groups for the meetings, it seems that virtually all our members came to both meetings. By the way, we had grown to about 60 members at that time. This is amazing in that we started the corporation with 32 and grew to about 60 in the face of a monumental debt. It is thought-provoking realizing that we now have about 230 members and rarely have more than about 30 or 40 at a gathering.

THE TIDE TURNS – TEXAS FOLKLIFE FESTIVAL

My wife Nell answered the phone one day and heard O.T. Baker ask what the Scots could do for them. He was putting together a festival to celebrate the multitude of cultures in Texas. This became the Texas Folklife Festival of the Institute of Texan Cultures, located on the old Hemisfair '68 grounds. We showed up with kilts and bagpipes and set up a booth to sell drinks. Our flagship drink was Dr. Pepper which had become a fad drink, and we were the only booth on the grounds with that available. The result was a profit of about \$800, providing the final resolution of the Hemisfair debt. In subsequent years our participation in Folklife grew to a phenomenal level and was most financially rewarding. We continue to

this day although at this time the financial profits are more on a plane with the first festival. This is a “whole ‘nother story”.

ACTIVE FOUNDERS

We made an effort to determine who of the current Scottish Society of San Antonio membership were members at the time of the incorporation. We are sure about some but not sure that we know all. First off, all of my family was in the membership and Nell and I were signers of the Charter membership list. Our three children, David, Kent, and Margie were very deeply involved in participation in Hemisfair '68. We actually turned them loose and let them roam the grounds. David and Margie and their families are currently members of SSSA and participate regularly. Kent and family moved off to Georgia and are no longer members.

Florence Bunten, current SSSA Secretary, is a daughter of Bob and Mary Helen Bunten who were instrumental in the Society's origin in 1962. Mary Helen's father, a MacDonald, appears to have been the single most significant figure in establishment of what became the SSSA. Florence's sister Allynid (Lynnie) lives in the San Antonio area but has limited participation in the SSSA as she is intensely involved in work with canines. Florence and Lynnie were deeply involved in Hemisfair'68.

Jim Stimson was the president of the SSSA throughout the planning and carrying out of SSSA involvement with Hemisfair '68. His daughter, Bonnie Stimson, still lives in San Antonio. She is not a current member but is in close contact through her friend Florence Bunten. Bonnie gave the society a big bag of Hemisfair '68 buttons that she found and brought a very nice collection of memorabilia to one of our picnics.

Another current member of the society is Jeanne Dixon who, I think, is on the 1967 roster and may have been a signer of the incorporation.

Jack Cunningham and family were in San Antonio in the 1968 time frame, and Jack was very much involved in bagpipe band activity that was associated with the SSSA. The June 1968 *Crann Tara* has an item saying “On Sunday, the 12th (of May), the band said goodbye to one of our founding fathers (of the Alamo City Highlanders) in the person of Drum Sgt. Jack Cunningham.” Thus, Jack was in Vietnam at the time of Hemisfair and not able to participate. Jack and Ruth Cunningham are listed as new members in the February 1978 *Crann Tara*. Subsequently, Jack served a number of terms as president and as vice president over the years and is currently an active member.

Nell and I were just flat tired when the Hemisfair debt was finally retired, and we backed off after a year or so. We do not remember for sure whether or not we let our membership lapse, but we were inactive for a period. We do know that we returned to active participation in the early years of Betty Lange's 10-year, 1977-1987, presidency and have been up to our ears in it ever since. Betty was instrumental in the Society's participation in the Texas Folklife Festival, and led the Society in growth and to a fat bank account.