

Hospital Clown Newsletter

A Publication for Clowns in Community and World Service

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Shrine Clowns

*Who are they?
and
What do they do?*



There are many ways to be a clown in community and world service. Supporting 22 hospitals which are free to children under 18 is certainly a big one.

(Continued on Page 15)

Shrine clowns from Kora Shriners in Lewiston, Maine, and Aleppo Shriners in Wilmington, MA, were on hand to help with the Boston Bruins Professional Hockey Team's fund-raising event for Boston area children's hospitals. This year, burn patient, Shamus, and his father were participants. "*Shamus stole everybody's heart,*" said David "Woe-No" Newcomb. "*Being with our Shriners Hospitals kids is what clowning is all about.*"

Continued on next page →

The Shrine Clowns of my Childhood -Shobi

Sitting on my daddy’s knee one night *“What’s that funny hat doing on your head?”* Later when I tried to put it on, my Dad took it and put it on a top shelf *“That’s not something to play with.”* So the mystery began. Floating in my childhood memories are visions of clowns, circuses and of course the red Shrine Fez. My father was a 32-degree Mason and a Shriner, but not a clown. He was way too serious for that. But my mother became an Eastern Star and so did I when I became of age.

Of course after college as I went through the Civil Rights sit-ins, Ban the Bomb marches and women’s lib, the mystique of the Shriner became as old and odd as the red fez sitting way up on the shelf.

However, memories hang close these days and one is of an incident in Des Moines Iowa. I was a professional dancer on tour in 1954 with a dance group. We played some of the big stage shows (I mean stadiums!) at the major state fairs. Among the other “acts” with us was a clown. He promised my dad to look after his Brother Mason’s little girl (I was 16!). One day President Eisenhower came to address the crowd. I remember being accidentally locked backstage by the secret service with this funny clown. I remember him as being tall, with a German accent, a big plaid colorful clown suit, and a little dog.



Lou Jacobs and Miss Knucklehead

Could it have been one of the greats? Might it have been Lou Jacobs? He certainly was with the circus at that time, and we were playing a very big house with the president and even Gene Autry on the bill. Maybe! But I was a stage-struck teenager and loved the dog and Gene Autry’s horse, and paid little attention to what I called an old clown. I don’t think Lou Jacobs was a Shriner, (but he might have been a Mason) This is how I remember one who became my clown friend.

After dancing, I became a painter, then a writer and many years later, a clown. As a new clown I looked at the Shrine clowns as those old guys with too much makeup. (Of course I am now an old gal but I have learned to be prudent with the makeup!) At that time the Shrine clowns were already well established as those clowns who work with kids in the hospitals. The “professional” clown doc programs were quite annoyed by these guys who did their work for free.

Trying to be nonjudgmental with the newsletter, I have tried to develop a third eye to the world. This year I thought, it’s about time I write an article about Shrine Clowns. This was not such an easy matter. Maybe it’s because it’s summer and people were on vacation or maybe it’s because of the decentralized nature of the organization. After spending what seems like the whole month of July on the internet researching all sorts of websites, the following really caught my attention.

It is from a non-Shrine website from someone called *Slotcar*.

“They [Shriners] are not capitalist retirees; they’ve entered some vaguely Oriental third stage of life — so what if they’re going on that journey in mini-cars? Their spiritual quest embraces a personality-obliterating goofiness that makes them better people. It’s self-mortification with an American spin — it’s fun! They’re an anonymous mass of do-gooders who aren’t after individual recognition.

“The Egyptians built the pyramids, the Shriners build hospitals. It takes [more than] a little group-think to do that, but Shriner group-think glimpsed something about the American psyche . . . A loss of self must be coupled with a funny car if we’re ever to get together on a large-scale project and build a hospital.”

This is what the health/humor community has always been saying *“Things work better with humor.”* This put a different spin on my thoughts. This is selfless service – service done without personal gain. It describes the Shriner as having fun without looking for individual recognition. There may be recognition within their “clubs.” But they are true to their founders who look for a “good time.” Compassion being a bi-product. Often the humblest human beings are the last people to realize they are humble. The Shrine clowns seem to be having a great time and on their way, maybe sometimes in spite of themselves, they are flapping their wings and proving to be angels in disguise doing an incredible amount of good work supporting 22 children’s hospitals at no cost to child or family.

Not all the Shrine clowns work as hospital clowns. Many do parade and public functions to raise money for their hospitals. Often they start as Shrine Clowns and then join COAI or WCA and do their hospital clowning with those groups.

On the following pages I will try to summarize my research. Hopefully you will find this as interesting as I did. But before I do here is one of our all time favor clowns - and I remember this act from childhood. Do you?

Red Skelton

Red Skelton appearing as “Honest Red, the Used Camel Dealer”

. . . seen here at the Shrine’s Imperial Council Session Parade in 1950. He also enjoyed visiting patients at Shriners’ Hospitals.

As a Shriner and a big supporter of Shriners Hospitals his donations of clown artwork, books, memorabilia and music, were auctioned off to help raise more than \$250,000 every year for Shriners’ Hospitals through the International Shrine Clown Association’s Sneaker Fund.



In St. Louis, 1996, in one of his last public appearances, he filmed a segment for the Shrine Hospitals 75th Anniversary TV special.

What is Freemasonry

Today to become a Shriner a man must be a 3rd degree mason first. This takes about a year to accomplish and consists of going through the first three levels of masonry. The realistic beginnings of modern Freemasonry can be found in the crafts of working masons in medieval times. They adapted a system of signs and passwords which served the purpose of a union card. It is easy to understand the appeal of freemasonry if we look at the time in which it arrived in the USA in the 17th and 18th centuries As an organization that transcended religion, it appealed to men who believed in and fought for religious freedom. Twelve United States Presidents have been Freemasons: Washington, Jackson, Monroe, Polk, A. Johnson, Garfield, McKinley, T. Roosevelt, Taft, Harding, F.D. Roosevelt, and Truman.

How did the Shrine Organization Start?

In 1870, a few of the several thousand Masons in New York City made it a point to lunch regularly at the Knickerbocker Cottage, a restaurant at 426 Sixth Avenue. These Masons were noted for their good humor and wit. Often they discussed starting a new group in which fun and fellowship would be stressed more than ritual. Two of these lunch regulars were a prominent physician - Walter M. Fleming, M.D., and William J. Florence, an actor.

During the Civil War, Dr. Fleming was a surgeon with the 13th New York Infantry Brigade of the National Guard. Billy Florence, an Irish/American actor, comedian, and a star of the New York stage toured London, Europe and Middle Eastern countries. Once at an elaborate party at an Arabian diplomat's home in Marseilles, France, Florence was treated to an elaborately staged musical comedy. At its conclusion, the guests became members of a secret society. He attended the production at several other occasions and began to take notes, taking the inspiration back to New York and shared it with the Knickerbocker Cottage regulars. Dr. Fleming drafted the ritual, designed the emblem and ritual costumes, formulated a salutation, and declared that members would wear a red fez. This would become the Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine (A.A.O.N.M.S.). [For more information on these the history see: www.shrinershq.org]

Mark Twain referred to Billy Florence as "*the sweet old comedian Billy Florence*" So how can an organization started by a prominent doctor and a sweet comedian not fail to sent up an huge network of children's hospitals with the latest in scientific research and a swelling army of clowns. It did!

The organization was primarily social but philanthropic work became more frequent during an 1888 Yellow Fever epidemic and the 1889 Johnstown Flood victims.



Shrine Clowns are known for their parade gags. At the Shriner sponsored East/West Football Game, a football clown character has a football at the end of an elastic band. When he tosses it to you, it comes back about the time you are trying to catch it.

Shriners Hospitals are part of the National Disaster Medical System, a first-response network of hospitals across the U.S. pre-identified to help in crisis situations. They waived their age limit during Disaster. Because of their expert burn medical personal they assisted during the Rhode Island Nightclub tragedy and sent medical personal to New York City After 9/11.

By 1898, there were 50,000 Shriners, and 90% were engaged in some sort of philanthropic work.

The turn of the century brought in th parades with the popular Shrine bands. The first Shrine circus is said to have opened in 1906 in Detroit.

Most Temples had individual philanthropies, and sometimes the Shrine as an organization gave aid. But neither the individual projects nor the special one-time contributions satisfied the membership, who wanted to do more. So there was growing member support for establishing an official Shrine charity.

Egyptians Built the Pyramids, Shriners Build Hospitals

In 1919, there was proposal to establish "The Mystic Shriners Peace Memorial for Friendless, Orphaned and Crippled Children, and in June 1920 a resolution was established as the "Shriners Hospital for Crippled Children," to be supported by a \$2 yearly assessment from each Shriner.

Conservative Shriners expressed doubts about the Shrine assuming this kind of responsibility. Prospects for approval were dimming when Noble Forrest Adair (Yaarab Temple, Atlanta) rose to speak:

"I was lying in bed yesterday morning, about four o'clock . . . and some poor fellow who had strayed from the rest of the band . . . stood down there under the window for 25 minutes playing 'I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles.' I thought of the wandering minstrel, and I wondered if there were not a deep significance in the tune that he was playing for Shriners, 'I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles.' While we have spent money for songs and spent money for bands, it's time for the Shrine to spend money for humanity. I want to see this thing started. Let's get rid of all the technical objections. And if there is a Shriner in North America," he continued, "who objects to having paid the two dollars after he has seen the first crippled child helped, I will give him a check back for it myself."

The resolution was passed unanimously. The first Shriners' Hospital for Children was opened in Shreveport, LA in 1922.

The first patient to be admitted was a little girl with a club foot who had learned to walk on the top of her foot rather than the sole. The first child to be admitted in Minneapolis was a Blackfoot Indian boy suffering from the deformities of polio.

Now, there are approximately 500,000 Shriners. They gather in Temples, or chapters, throughout the United States, Canada, Mexico and the Republic of Panama. There are 22 Shriners Hospitals for Children — 18 orthopaedic hospitals, three burn hospitals, and one hospital that provides orthopaedic, burn and spinal cord injury care in Sacramento. These hospitals have cured or substantially helped more than 700,000 children — at no cost to parent or child — since the first Shriners Hospital opened in 1922.

Orthopaedic Experts

Surgical techniques developed in Shriners Hospitals have become standard in the orthopaedic world. Thousands of children have been fitted with arm and leg braces and artificial limbs, most of them made in special labs in the hospitals by expert technicians.

Shriners Hospitals had always engaged in clinical research, and in the early 1960s, the Shrine aggressively entered the structured research field and began earmarking funds for research projects. By 1967, Shriners were spending \$20,000 on orthopaedic research. Today, the annual research budget totals approximately \$25 million. Shrine researchers are working on a vast variety of projects, including studies of bone and joint diseases, such as juvenile rheumatoid arthritis; increasing basic knowledge of the structure and function of connective tissue; and refining functional electrical stimulation, which is enabling children with spinal cord injuries to have limited use of their arms and legs.

Burn Units

Thousands of children suffer burn-related accidents. It is one of the greatest hazards of childhood. In the 1960s, recognizing the lack of medical expertise in the burn care field, the Shrine of North America opened three Shriners Hospitals with the three-fold purpose of treating severely burned children; conducting research and improving methods of burn treatment; and training and educating medical personnel in the care and treatment of burn injuries.

Today, Shriners Hospitals remain pioneers in burn treatment and provide excellent medical care to severely burned children. These institutes are actively involved in research, and

many of the advances in burn care have been the result of Shrine investigations. Since the Shriners Hospitals specializing in burn care first opened, the survival rate for children with burns over 50 percent of their total body surface area has doubled. Today, these specialized hospitals are saving the lives of children with burns over more than 90 percent of body surface area.

The Shriners Hospitals in Boston, Cincinnati, Galveston and Sacramento are staffed and equipped to treat children with acute, fresh burns; children needing plastic reconstructive or restorative surgery as a result of healed burns; children with severe scarring, resulting in contractures or interference with proper movement of the limbs; and patients with scarring and deformity of the face.

A physician treating a burned child can telephone a Shriners Hospital that specializes in burn treatment, and refer a child.

International Shrine Clown Association.

The first Shrine circus was said to be in 1906, but soon the pageantry loving Shrine instituted the Shrine Circus to raise funds for their hospitals. For these men who loved pageantry and to dress up, the clown was a perfect outlet.

Every Shrine Club has many "Units" Besides a clown unit there came drum and bugle corps, bands, keystone cops etc. A Shriener can only belong to one unit at a time, and must commit for a year.

Shrine Clown Units from several areas around a hospital support the hospital For example The Sacramento Shrine Hospital is supported by clown units from as far away as Reno, Nevada. Each of the 22 hospitals has several clown units doing the same sort of support for parades, health fairs, and special occasions.



Pictured above are clowns from San Mateo, California - a two hour drive from Sacramento. Asiya Clowns at Sacramento Shiner's Hospital are: Front row: Fran "Dohno" Lewis, Jimmy "Jimbo" Fulks, Bob "Umpa" Laidlaw, Gordon "Sunny" Markley, Middle row: Joe "Gillie" Gilchrist, Daivd "Emes" Fisher, Leonard "Label" Green, Sam "Mik-Mas" Kim, Earl "Sugar" Hisks; Top row: James "Sunshine" Foster, Pat "PDinger" Moore, Gary "Clumsy" Morin, Steve "Giddy-Up-Whoa" Greene.

If you know of a child Shriners Hospital might be able to help call: 800/237-5055 in Canada 800/361-7245. The hospitals are open to all children under the age of 18, if there is a reasonable possibility the child's condition can be helped.

The Happiest Clown I've Ever Seen

It was known that here in St. Louis
 when the circus came to town,
 the Shriners Hospital for Children
 would be visited by the clowns.

Little Mary couldn't move her legs,
 but that never kept her down.
 Her favorite thing in the whole wide world
 was to see the circus clowns.

With horns and drums and clanging bells,
 they brought their circus tunes;
 with dogs that jumped through wire hoops,
 and funny-faced balloons.

That's when I saw those painted eyes
 and their mysterious magical gleam.
 As I watched him, I then realized
 he was the happiest clown I've ever seen.

Mary watched him from her wheelchair
 with her new pink ribbon on.
 He did flips and flops and somersaults,
 and cartwheels on the lawn.

Then the happiest clown I've ever seen,
 in his funny colored clothes,
 walked up to Mary's wheelchair
 and kissed her on the nose.

She looked into his painted eyes
 and giggled bright and gay.
 Then asked if she could be a clown
 when she might walk someday.

Underneath the paint I saw a tear,
 but he smiled with warmth and love.
 He stretched out his hand to Mary
 with his funny colored glove.

She held the hand with eagerness
 and slowly began to pull,
 and right before our very eyes
 we saw a miracle.

She stood next to the happiest clown
 and then let go of his hand.
 For the first time ever in her life
 little Mary could stand.

I think back about those painted eyes
 and their mysterious magical gleam,
 and now I know what made him
 the happiest clown I've ever seen.

-John T. Williams

[http:// www.shrinershq.org](http://www.shrinershq.org)

***Shrine Clowns who are International
 Clown Hall of Fame
 Inductees***

1989
Emmett Kelly Sr.
 "Weary Willie"
 (1898 - 1979)

His first career was in cartooning. His circus career,
 which spanned 55 years, began as a trapeze performer

He was a Masonic Lodge member,
 and belonged to the Scottish Rite and Egypt Shrine temple of Tampa,
 Florida.



1993
Al Ross (1907 - 1981)

Alphonse Helwig took the professional name *Al Ross* in 1930 when he was part of the Ross acrobatic troupe. A tramp clown, he provided training for Shrine clowns in proper clowning skills and etiquette.

He was a member of the Aladdin Temple Shrine unit and was seen in many shrine and other circuses in the U.S.



1999
Bob Hamilton
 (1929-1998)

"**Hambone**" entered the clowning work in 1974 after becoming a Shriner. He maintained a strong association with the Shriners, being the first Education Director for ISCA

He was a member of Orak and Murat Shrine Clown Units, and active in the International Shrine Clown Association, the Great Lakes Shrine Clown Unit Association, COAI, Midwest Clown Association, Calumet Clowns and Clown Camp. He also made regular visits to Hammond's Saint Margaret's Pediatric Ward and the Emergency room.

